

"STEPHEN'S STORY"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

To me the most interesting stories in the world are stories about people - real people, made of common clay and yet lifted by life often in strange and unpredictable ways above the level of the average and the ordinary. Some of these interesting people lived a long time ago. Often we're amazed when we stop to consider the impact these people made upon our way of life, the vibrations of which we can still feel even today.

The Bible is full of stories about people. We hear their names mentioned occasionally in a church service. We know one or two things about them and that's about all. From time to time I enjoy taking one of these lives and holding it up for you to see - in brief - so that you can know it and enjoy it and let it breathe into you some of its energy and life and courage.

Last month we looked at the story of Paul. We called it "The Rebirth of a Man" and I was grateful for your response to that sermon. We turn today to the story of Stephen, told in the Books of Acts, chapters six and seven. His life was brief - not only in the number of pages it takes to tell it in the Bible, but also in the number of years it took to live it. I've divided his story into three chapters and the first one is: How He Got His Start.

HOW HE GOT HIS START

It all started with a complaint - not a particularly promising place to begin. This was the complaint. It seems that the widows of the Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem were not getting as much attention as the widows of the native, Jerusalem-born Jews.

These Greek-speaking Jewish widows belonged to a group of Jews who had been brought up abroad and had come back to Jerusalem to live. In all probability they were more cultivated and cosmopolitan than their less traveled neighbors. Anyway, they were complaining because they were not getting as much attention as the other widows. They sent their complaint to the leaders of the Church.

Their complaint probably had to do with the distribution of relief funds that the early Christians were making available to people in need. The time was around 32 or 33 A. D. - two or three years after the crucifixion. Now the Disciples did exactly what the clergy of any Church would do. They set up a committee to explore the matter and to make a survey of the situation and in so doing they came to the conclusion that they could not assume any more responsibilities than they already had. They said something like this to themselves.

"Our task is growing from day to day and we need more people to help us...especially some people who can tend to these important but secondary tasks of our work. The preaching and the teaching must not be neglected in the interest of these less important concerns. It's not right that we should give up preaching the Word of God to serve the tables."

And so they picked out seven young men and assigned them to these tasks and to see to it that the relief funds were distributed equally among all the widows. Stephen was one of the seven young men chosen by the Disciples. This is where he first enters the picture.

It was this rather unpropitious human situation that gave Stephen his start. He appeared "out of the blue", so far as we know, to meet a critical need...and emergency created by this situation.

Apparently he had all of the qualifications that were needed. He was young. He was full of enthusiasm. He could also speak their language. He himself was a Greek-speaking Jew. This was a plus in his favor. He's described to us in the Acts of the Apostles as "a man full of grace and spiritual power".

In other words, this man who appeared to meet this emergency was a man of some skill and some stature. And the amazing thing is that if the situation had never arisen, we would probably not be talking about Stephen this morning.

If the American Revolution had not come to a head in 1776, we might not be celebrating George Washington's birthday this weekend. Or, if a door had not opened, an accident occurred, a depression set in, a parent died, a teacher said the right word, a war fought - you might not be where you are today. For a person you see is not only the result of what he himself does, but also a result of this other side of life - a result, if you will, of what God does to him.

All of us, whether we're prominent in the galleries of the world like Stephen or not are the result of these component factors - the action of God calling us out from the wings of life to the center of the stage to meet some emergency or situation and our own capacity to respond to God's call. The lesson, therefore, of this first chapter in Stephen's story would be this:

"A person is the product of the times he helps to produce."
And the moral would be something like this, "When the time comes, when the emergency arises which calls for you, don't hang back in the wings and shadows of life's stage...but come forward to the front. Do your part. Risk a bit. Trust. Believe. God will give you the necessary strength to rise to meet the occasion."

WHY HE GOT INTO TROUBLE

The second chapter is: Why He Got Into Trouble. Why did this young man with so much talent, so much grace and power and tact get into trouble. For he did. And finally he got into some very serious trouble which eventually cost him his life.

Two reasons will help to answer this question. First of all, Stephen wanted above everything else to see Christianity succeed. He had seen it begin. Whether he ever saw Jesus or not, we do not know. But he had been very close to the beginnings of Christianity and had felt the throbbing of its life. This he was convinced was the spirit of God at work in the affairs of the world. The future, he felt, belonged to this new way of life and he did not hesitate to say what he thought about it and felt about it. He was "on fire" with this new life. He saw it stirring people; he saw it changing lives. He wanted it to grow and in order to grow, everything that might obstruct it must therefore be removed. This leads to the second reason why he got into serious trouble.

As you might suspect, there were some in Jerusalem who did not share his enthusiasm for this new way of life. To be more direct, they wanted it to die. They were working just as hard to suppress it as he was in promoting it.

When you stop to think about it, I suppose there never has been a forward movement in the history of mankind that has not been opposed by the masses, by large number of people. We tend to like things the way they are and challenging the status quo is difficult. We pay a price for progress.

BACK TO STEPHEN

But getting back to Stephen and why he got into trouble. Here you see in Jerusalem at this time were two strong-minded, irresistible bodies - a young, passionate man convinced that in this little seed of life was to be found the life of future ages and on the other hand - a group of sturdy, stubborn men and women who refused to let that new movement grow. Sooner or later they were bound to clash and eventually they did.

First, quite informally in debates between Stephen and the Rabbis in the synagogues. It made matters worse for Stephen always came out the winner in these debates. He was more clever than they were. This didn't enhance his popularity and the jealousy they felt for him was fanned and intensified by his success. Finally, they brought him to the council chamber which we might call a court room and put him on trial, or gave him a hearing...so to speak.

DRAMATIC SCENE

It's a dramatic scene! Standing there...all alone...was Stephen. Remember all that we have said about him...the kind of man he was, the quality of life he had led. Every eye was focused on him. Finally, when he was invited to speak a few words, he did. The account in the Book of Acts gives us a long speech; some scholars suggest that this was not his original speech. Nevertheless, it carries the essence of what he probably had to say. I think we have little reason to question it.

Toward the end of this lengthy speech, he said some thing that really convinced them that he was a dangerous man. The thrust that really convinced them was something like this.

"You always resist the spirit of God. You resisted Moses, or your forefathers did. You have resisted others along the line. The prophets you resisted consistently. Now you are resisting Jesus. You are resisting Him in whom we see a new life for our world, a new order for society, a new hope for all people...in whom we find an expression of the love of God such as we have never known before. You are resisting Him."

Well, you can imagine how they took to that. They didn't like what he was saying to them. People don't like to be told things like that. It's not popular, and it's not going to make new friends. Their eyes were filled with anger that turned to hate, but Stephen didn't notice it. He wasn't looking at them. When he finished speaking, he looked up and without giving them an opportunity to say anything, he went on to add:

"Look the heavens are opened and I can see
the son of Man sitting at the right hand of
God."

What did he mean? What did he see? In one sense, he saw nothing, but in another sense he saw everything. Jesus - not dimmed by the mist of confusion into which He had been plunged, but made brighter than ever before, over and above the smallness of humanity with all of its resistance and obstruction to the life of God, over and above and through that the heavens were opened for Stephen and he somehow saw the greatness of God, calling men to keep moving forward to a larger and more inclusive humanity.

There isn't anything more uplifting than to be in the presence of such a person who in spite of all obstacles, still goes on his way and looks up and sees the "heavens opening"...more assured than ever before, more confirmed in the things he believes than ever before!

HOW HE DIED \ They quickly led him out of the court room and this brings us to the final chapter which is brief. How He Died. They stoned him to death on the spot. No attempt was made to hide the fact of mob violence. No attempt or pretense was made at justice. It was a demonstration of organized passion and rage. Physical action, directed by prejudice and self-interest, took the place of learning and thinking and praying.

Somehow all of this carries with it a question we need to consider. What is your most characteristic reaction in the presence of a new and disturbing idea? Do you keep your ears open, or do you stop them up? We can all be complacent about our open-mindedness to new ideas and gospels which do not upset our particular interests, but the new ideas and new gospels which come close to our neat and cozy arrangements are the ones which test us. They can be painful.

While they stoned Stephen, he prayed. This was the real thing with Stephen. He followed through. No pose. No pretense. He was saying what was in his heart and on his mind and what he believed in his soul. This is what he said:

"Lord Jesus. Receive my spirit. Lord, lay not this sin to their charge..."

What they did to him makes you feel mean and small and then somehow when you take into account the whole picture, it makes you feel great and proud to belong to a race that can emerge from the lower instincts of the animal which are in every one of us....so as to reach heights like this from time to time and as you stand in the presence of that life you begin to feel the currents of air from other worlds blowing through our cramped, crowded way of life and you begin to realize more and more that the final verdict of history does not belong to the stones that crush life but rather to the spiritual forces represented in this prayer of Stephen. Truth crushed to earth has a way of rising again.

FINAL WORD: Now it isn't any wonder then that a young intellectual Jew named Saul who had come to Jerusalem from Tarsus and who was standing there watching Stephen die could never quite forget that face and that prayer and could never rid himself of that scene. First, it haunted him, and then one day it changed him into the man who later turned the world of his day upside down for Christ. For Saul who later became Paul was a witness to Stephen's death that day and this was the first reference in the Scripture we have to Saul who later was to become Paul.

"The witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named, Saul. "Lord...do not hold this sin against them".

And when he had said this, he died. And Saul was there...consenting to his death."

PRAYER

We are thankful, O God, for the lives of those who have gone before us...lighting the path and marking the way, setting a high example.

Help us to strike out into the world with draring, with honesty and with courage as did Stephen, the First Martyr of our Faith. Help us also to evaluate carefully the forward movements of life for all thy children so that we will not find ourselves on the wrong side, resisting growth, resisting the creative outreach of Your Love - a love for all mankind. In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen