

## THE STORY OF STEPHEN

### INTRODUCTION

I think that 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. Sometimes we're amazed when we stop to consider the impact that some of these people made upon our way of life, the vibrations of which we can still feel even today.

The Bible, of course, is full of stories about interesting people. You might call it the Gallery of Great Biographies. Most of these people we hear about only occasionally. We hear their names from time to time on Sundays. We know one or two things about them and that's about all. What I would like to do from time to time is to take one of these great lives from the gallery of the Bible and hold 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 surplus energy and life. We begin today with Stephen. Stephen's 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 have divided the story of his life into three chapters and the first one is this:  
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 complaining because they were not getting as much attention as the widows of the native, Jerusalem born Jews. Just a word here to tell you more about these Greek speaking Jewish widows. They belonged to a group of Jews who had been brought up abroad and had only recently come back to Jerusalem to live; in all probability they were more cultivated and more cosmopolitan than their less traveled neighbors. Anyway they were complaining because they were not getting as much attention as the other widows. They sent this complaint to the leaders of the church. It probably had to do with the distribution of the relief funds that the early Christians always made available for the people who needed them. The time was around the year 32 or 33 AD, two or three years after Jesus had been crucified. The disciples did exactly what the clergy of any church today would do. They made a survey of the situation and in so doing came to the realization 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 the important but secondary tasks of the work. The preaching and the teaching must not be neglected in the interest of these other relatively unimportant matters." And so they picked out seven young men and assigned them to these secondary tasks and to see to it that the relief funds were distributed equally among all the widows not slighting any of them. Stephen was one of these seven young men chosen by the disciples. This is where he first enters into the picture.

It was this rather unpropitious human situation that gave Stephen his start. We pause momentarily to reflect upon this observation: what great things in life often have small and insignificant beginnings. Stephen appeared almost out of the blue, so far as we

know, to meet an emergency created by this situation. Apparently he had all of the qualifications that were needed. He was young to begin with; he was full of enthusiasm, and above all he could speak their language. He himself was a Greek speaking Jew and therefore he could communicate with these neglected widows and please them more perhaps than another person could. He is described to us in the Book of Acts as "A man full of grace and spiritual power. In other words, this man who appeared to meet the emergency was a man of some stature, a man of considerable dimensions. And the amazing thing is that if the situation had never arisen, we would probably not be talking about Stephen here this morning.

If the conflict between the states had not come to a head in 1860, Lincoln might never have been heard of outside the city of Springfield, Illinois. Or if a door had not opened, a parent died, an accident occurred, a depression set in, a war begun, a teacher made the right move, 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 of what God does to him. We ought never to forget that. 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 and will to respond to God's call. The lesson therefore of this first chapter in Stephen's life would be this: a man is the product of the times he helps to produce. And the moral would be this: when the time comes, when the emergency arises which calls for you, don't hang back in the wings and the shadows of life's stage, but come forward to the front and do your part. God will give you the necessary strength to rise to the occasion.

#### WHY HE GOT INTO TROUBLE

The second chapter is this: why he got into trouble. Why did this young man with so much talent, so much grace and power and tact get into almost immediate trouble. For he did. And finally he got into some very serious trouble which as some of you know eventually cost him his life.

I think we got point out two reasons in order to answer this question. Perhaps these will suggest something of an oversimplification but remember this is a great life in brief. 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 how he felt concerning it. He was on fire with this new life. He saw it stirring men; he saw it changing lives. Oh...how he wanted it to grow and in order to grow, everything that might possibly obstruct it must therefore be removed. And this leads us on to the second reason why he got into trouble.

As you might suspect, there was some people in Jerusalem at that time who did not share in his enthusiasm for this new way of life. To be a little more direct, they wanted it to die. And they were working just as hard to suppress it as he was to promote it. It's appalling as we sit here now and look back quite objectively at the situation to realize that that was true, and yet it shouldn't surprise us too much. When you stop to think about it, I suppose there never has been a forward

movement in the history of mankind that the masses of people have not opposed. I would say that again. There never has been a forward movement that has not been resisted by great numbers of people. Have you ever stopped to think about that and wonder why, or have you ever stopped to wonder whether you yourself might not be one of the resisting forces in the way of life's forward movements right now. It's interesting to think about. For instance, the movement to free the slaves, a movement which I suppose every person in this country would now acclaim and take for granted, that very movement was resisted for generations as you well know by enlightened men and woman like you and me. The movement to pay labor a fair wage was resisted decade after decade by some of the finest people in the world and yet we now take it for granted. I could go on and give you countless illustrations. And perhaps I should point this out to you that the church has not been exempt from this weakness, for the church resisted the movement to know the truth about the stars and the moon and the rocks and the earth; it resisted that movement for decades. Indeed in some quarters it is still, I fear, resisting it. /

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 the life of the world for future ages and on the other hand - a group of sturdy stubborn men and women who refused to let that new movement grow. They were bound to clash sooner or later and they eventually did. First quite informally in debates between Stephen and the Rabbis in the synagogues. It made matters worse too because Stephen always won the debates. He was more clever than they were. This didn't enhance his popularity and the jealousy that they felt for him was fanned and intensified by his success in argumentation. 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.

It's a dramatic scene and not easy for us to reproduce. Standing there all alone, or perhaps he was sitting, was Stephen. Remember all that we've said about him - the kind of person he was, the quality of life he had led. The whole court room fastened their eyes on him. Finally when they asked him to speak, he did speak. And the account in the book of Acts gives a very long speech and some scholars suggest that this was not his original speech. Very likely it wasn't the exact speech, but the essence of what he said is made plain in the account, and I think we have no reason to question it. Towards the end he said some things that convinced the opposition that he was a dangerous man. The thrust that really convinced them was 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, he said, you are resisting Jesus. You are resisting Him in whom we see a new life for the world, a new order for society, a new hope for men and women, in whom we find an expression of the love of God such as we have never known before. You are resisting him.

You can imagine how they reacted. People don't like to be told things like that. It's not popular preaching. Their eyes were filled with hate, but Stephen didn't notice that because 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 say: "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 obstructions 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 standing still calling men to keep moving forward. There isn't anything more uplifting than to be in the presence of a person who in spite of all the obstacles and all the opposition and all the pain that one has to encounter, still goes on his way and still at the end looks up and sees the heavens open, more assured than ever before, more confirmed in the thing he believed in - his ideal, brighter and more alluring than ever before.

HOW HE DIED. They quickly led him out of the court room and this bring us to the final chapter which is very 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. They ceased to think above the ears and began thinking below the neck. Physical action, directed by prejudice and self-interest, took the place of learning and thinking. Somehow all of this carries with it a question that we need to consider: what is your most characteristic reaction in the presence of new and disturbing ideas? Do you keep your ears open, or do you stop them up. I'm afraid we're not always on the side of the angels in regard to this matter. We need some humble self examination. We can all be complacent about our open mindedness to new ideas and gospels which do not upset our particular interests, but new ideas and new gospels which come close to our neat and cozy arrangement or views of the world are the ones which test us.

While they were stoning him, he prayed. This was the real thing with Stephen. There are people we see all along through life who have what we think is the real thing, but when the actual test comes, they do not have it. But this was the real thing, 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 blow through your cramped and crowded way of life and you begin to realize more and more than the final verdict of history does not belong to the stones that crushed out his life but rather to the spiritual forces represented in this prayer of Stephen. For truth crushed to earth has a way of rising again.

It isn't any wonder then is it, that a young intellectual Jew named Saul who had come to Jerusalem from the city of Tarsus and who was standing there watching Stephen die could never forget that face and that prayer and never could get that scene out of his mind. First it haunted him, and then it changed him into the man who later turned the world upside down for Christ.

PRAYER: We are thankful our Father for the lives of those who have gone before us marking the way and setting the example. Help us to strike out into the world with as much daring, honesty and courage as did the apostles

in the early days of the church. Help us too to evaluate tarefully  
the forward movements of life so that we shall not be found resisting  
thy spirit. Amen