

Acts Series #8 — “Look! I See . . .” Acts 7:54-60

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *A Long History of Martyrs*

1. The Church has a long history of men and women who died for the Faith
 - a. men and women, young and old, rich and poor
 - b. they were given the chance to either deny Christ or die
 - c. and while many gave in to the pressure and denied their faith in Jesus,
 - d. millions more held fast their confession to the end and endured the pains of martyrdom
2. Even today, in many places of the world, people are dying for the Name of Christ
 - a. in many Muslim countries, to convert from Islam to Christianity is illegal
 - b. the penalty for doing so, is death
 - c. there has recently been a number of missionaries working in South America who were killed because of their work
3. We tend to look on martyrs as being people *different* from ourselves
 - a. we think of them possessing some extra measure of faith and courage that normal people don't have
 - b. we make them out to be cut from different cloth and made from stronger stuff than we are
4. But as you read their stories, you realize they are just like us
 - a. they are normal, everyday people
 - b. there is nothing in their lives before their death that marked them as special or heroic
 - c. it just happens that they, for some reason known only to God, lived at a time and in a place where persecution came
 - d. and in that critical moment of decision on whether to deny the Lord or die,
 - e. God gave them the grace, faith, and courage to look past the pains of death to the glory that was theirs
5. If you haven't read *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, let me encourage you to get a copy and read it

B. *Today*

1. In our study today, we'll take a look at the first martyr of Church history
2. His name was Stephen, and he was one of the deacons we saw last week, who was picked by the church to distribute the relief of the church to the needy

II. TEXT

A. *Setting The Scene*

1. We're going to pick up the story at the end of Ch. 7
2. But before we do, we need to set the scene
3. Stephen had been faithful in his duties as deacon, and as he proved himself trustworthy, God expanded his sphere of ministry
4. We read that he was a man full of the Holy Spirit and power and that he worked many signs and wonders
5. Some of the Jewish teachers and scholars tried to debate him at different times
 - a. but the debates always ended up making them look like fools
 - b. Stephen was given such great wisdom that his answers silenced them and threw them into confusion
6. Finally, not able to defeat him in debate, they conspired to accuse him of blasphemy; a crime punishable by death
7. So they convinced some guys to make false charges against Stephen, saying they had heard him blaspheme
8. Stephen was arrested and hauled before the Jewish High Council - Sanhedrin
9. Stephen then preached a sermon to them that takes the bulk of Ch. 7's 60 vs.
 - a. in it he recounted their history and showed how all along the Jews had resisted and opposed God
 - b. he concluded by saying that the Sanhedrin, as the leaders of Israel who had murdered Jesus were walking in the same shoes as those who had murdered the prophets
10. Needless to say, this didn't sit real well with the council

B. Vs. 54

{54} When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth.

1. They were cut to the heart because they were convicted by the Holy Spirit
2. What Stephen had said was utterly true and they saw the truth of it
3. This was another critical moment for them as they were convicted by God of their sin
 - a. they could have turned toward God in repentance and faith
 - b. or they could turn from Him in rejection and hatred
 - c. they chose the latter
4. And so they began to gnash their teeth
 - a. they turned into a pack of wild and ravenous animals
 - b. they bared their teeth and made a biting motion to express their intense anger and hatred of Stephen and all he stood for
5. Truly, these men were acting like wild animals
 - a. for you see, that is what happens to a person when they reject God
 - b. God created men and women to have a love relationship with Him
 - c. Our humanity is made real and full only when we are *in* that relationship with our Creator
 - d. if we reject Him and that relationship, we lose the real source and motivation of what makes us human

- e. our lives are reduced to the animal level of mere survival
- 6. The proof of this can be seen by looking at our society
 - a. as our culture has rejected God and thrown Him from public life
 - b. our world has become brutal and predatory
 - c. gangs roam the streets like packs of wild animals, preying on the weak
 - d. we hear story after story of parents who turn on their own children in the most hideous ways imaginable
 - e. no, much of what we hear is beyond imagination
 - f. couple on drugs who abused their children with cigarettes
 - 1) gave them all kinds of drugs
 - 2) fed them rats and cockroaches
 - 3) and left them to fend for themselves in utter squalor
 - g. for the most part, animals treat their young better than that!
- 7. To reject Christ, is really to reject one's own humanity because we were created by and for Him

C. Vs. 55-60

{55} But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God,

{56} and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

{57} Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord;

{58} and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

{59} And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

{60} Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

- 1. And so we see the death of the first martyr of the Church
- 2. You know what made the council so furious?
- 3. Look at Stephen's words in v. 56

I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

- 4. This is what enraged them
- 5. You see, it had been just a short time before, probably just a few months, that Jesus had stood before these same men, in this same room and said this
...

(Mat 26:64) "I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven."

- 6. When Jesus spoke these words, they had flown into a rage and ended his trial in a unanimous vote of blasphemy
- 7. Little did they know then that just a few days after His execution His followers would begin to fill the streets of Jerusalem with the message that he had risen from the dead
- 8. And now, standing there in front of them, almost in the exact spot where

- Jesus had stood, is one of His followers
9. And he is saying that just as Jesus had told them, he could see Him at the right hand of God
 10. It was a nightmare case of *deja vu*
 11. And rather than admit their first error of killing Jesus, they decide to get rid of Stephen as well
 12. So they dragged him out of the council chamber, down a few streets, out the city gate and dropped him off a ledge
 13. Then they picked up stones and began to hurl them down on him
 14. As the stones took their toll and Stephen knew he was not long for this world, he followed the example of the Lord to the end
 15. It was to Jesus as God that he committed his spirit and he died with the words of forgiveness for his killers

D. “Look! I See . . .”

1. There is so much that is rich in this passage
2. But in the time remaining to us this morning, I’d like to take a close look at Stephen’s words in v. 56
3. I’ve read this passage dozens of times, but until this week, I had never seen the power and truth conveyed by this verse
4. Stephen finished his sermon to the Sanhedrin with a pointed rebuke of their stubborn rebellion against God
5. They, in a furious rage cried out in hatred against him
6. But Stephen didn’t even see them
7. Like standing in the eye of a hurricane, he was at peace in the midst of a storm of hate
8. Rather, for Stephen, the veil between heaven and earth was drawn aside
9. The things of earth grew strangely dim, and he beheld the throne room of heaven
10. To Stephen it was utterly real, so out loud he said, “LOOK!”
11. But the council could not see because they were blinded by rage and hate

E. What Stephen Saw

1. What did Stephen see when the heavens were opened to him?
2. He says he saw the “Son of Man”
 - a. this was a title for the Messiah
 - b. and one Jesus had used of Himself
 - c. but it is meant to convey something to us that is vitally important
 - d. Stephen said he saw the Jesus, Son of Man, in heaven
 - e. when Jesus ascended into heaven, He did not shed His humanity
 - f. He did not merely play act at being a man during the Incarnation
 - g. no, the Son of God became a man, and now retains His humanity in heaven
 - h. let me quote from that great Scottish preacher Alexander MacLaren “Whatever had dropped from Him as he ascended, His manhood had not fallen away, and whatever changes had taken place in His body so as to fit it for its enthronement in the heavens, all that had knit Him to His humble friends on earth

was still His. The bond that united Him and them had not snapped by being stretched to span the distance between the council chamber and the right hand of God. His sympathy still continued. All that had won their hearts was still in Him, and every tender remembrance of His love and leading was transformed into the assurance of a present possession. He was still the Son of Man.”

- i. we are all too apt to feel as though the manhood of Jesus is now but a memory
- j. the resurrection and ascension seem to remove Him from us
- k. we stretch out groping fingers in the dark and find no warm human hand to grasp
- l. what Stephen saw was for him and it was for us
 - 1) the vision of the Son of Man gave him the comfort and courage he needed to remain steadfast in the midst of their anger and hatred
 - 2) but his vision and words remind us that our God is not merely some far-off distant deity who is untouched by our trials and difficulties
 - 3) He is still a man, and He lives to bring aid and comfort to His own in the time of their distress
3. Notice where Stephen saw Jesus; he was at the *right hand of God!*
 - a. Jesus was in the place of favor and power
 - b. in the ancient world, kings would often place a smaller throne to their right
 - c. on this throne would sit a special envoy or chief lieutenant
 - d. we get our term ‘right-hand man’ from this ancient custom
 - e. whoever was set at the king’s right hand was shown special favor and was delegated special power to act in behalf of the king
 - f. what it means when it says Stephen saw Jesus at the right hand of God is that Jesus was in the place of favor and power
 - g. just as Jesus said in Matthew 28:18 “All power is given to Me in heaven and on earth.”
 - h. what a comfort this would have been to Stephen at this moment, surrounded as he was with the Jewish high priest and the council, all crying out for his blood
 - i. in a flash, Stephen was reminded that power did not lie with these men; it lay with his Savior
 - j. these men were not in control, Jesus was
 - k. may this be a reminder to us as well
 - 1) all power still lies with Jesus
 - 2) the rulers of this world can pass their laws and make their decrees
 - 3) the world can rise up in hostile hatred and persecution against us
 - 4) but ultimately, they can do nothing unless God lets them
 - 5) And if God lets them, then he has some unseen and perfect purpose for it
 - 6) as the Psalmist says, God makes even the wrath of man to praise Him
4. And finally, notice the posture of Jesus
 - a. Stephen said that he saw Jesus *standing* at the right hand of God
 - b. now, that’s unusual, because all the other verses which speak of Jesus at

God's right hand refer to Him *sitting down* ^[1].

- c. He sits because His work is finished - the sacrifice for sins is complete
- d. but Stephen sees Him standing; Why?
- e. I think because Jesus has risen to welcome Stephen into the glories of his reward for his faithful confession
- f. it's as though God Himself is honoring the faith and courage of this first martyr
- g. again, what a source of comfort and strength this would be to Stephen
- h. to see Jesus rise as though coming to his aid
- i. for you see, that is precisely what Jesus has promised to do
- j. He said that he would not leave us nor forsake us but would be our help

III. CONCLUSION

A. *Look!*

1. Hopefully, by God's grace, none of us will have to endure what Stephen endured
2. But still we all face opposition in one form or another in our walk with Christ
3. Whether it's from our family, our friends, kids at school, people we work with, whoever
4. Sometimes that opposition becomes downright hard and we get hurt
5. During those times, remember what Stephen saw
6. And remember what you will one day see when you finally get to leave this tired and worn out planet

B. *Tragic? No Way!*

1. Some people might think the death of Stephen was a horrible tragedy
2. They might think it a terrible waste of a good man
3. But if you were to ask Stephen, I'll bet his opinion would be quite different
4. When he stepped out of that body being crushed and bruised by stones, he stepped immediately into the arms of Jesus and the incredible comfort and bliss of heaven
5. That's quite a trip,
6. Even though the journey was rough, Stephen was glad for it
7. And so shall we be, if we faithfully endure, keeping our eyes fixed on Him who is unseen

[1] Matthew 26:64 Psalm 110:1 Hebrews 1:3 Ephesians 1:20 2:6