

STEPHEN'S MARTYRDOM

NO. 740

A SERMON
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 AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.

“But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, and said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God.”
Acts 7:55-56.

TRUE Christian zeal will seek to do the highest work of which sanctified humanity is capable. Stephen is first heard of as a distributor of the alms of the church to needy widows. He exercised what was virtually, if not nominally, the deacon's office. Being grave, and not double-tongued, and holding the mystery of the faith in a good conscience, he was well fitted for his work. Doubtless he used the office of a deacon well, and so purchased to himself a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.

Although the burdensome duty of serving tables might well have excused him from other service, we soon find him, full of faith and power, doing great wonders and miracles among the people. And not even content with that, we see him defending the faith against a synagogue of subtle philosophical deniers of the truth. These, with their allies, made the valiant deacon the object of their attack, and he at once rose to be an irresistible witness for the Gospel. Stephen the deacon became Stephen the preacher. This holy man not only used such gifts as he had in one department, but having abilities for a more spiritual form of service, he laid them at once upon the altar of Christ.

Nor is this all, he had a higher promotion yet—when he had thus become Stephen the wise apologist and brave defender of the faith, he did not stop there, but he mounted to the highest rank of the Christian army. He gained the peerless dignity, the foremost nobility, the brightest glory—I mean the martyr's name and honor. Stephen the deacon is first Stephen the preacher, and afterwards Stephen, God's faithful and true witness, laying down his life that he may seal his testimony with his blood.

Put a man without zeal into the front, and he will gradually recede into his native insignificance, or only linger in the front to be an impediment and a nuisance. But put a man into the rear of the army of God's elect, and if his soul be full of holy fire, you will soon hear of the unknown Samson in the camps of Dan, and ere long he will dash into the vanguard and make the enemies of God's church know that the Holy Spirit still dwells in the midst of Zion in the men whom He has chosen.

If there be any of my brothers and sisters here whose abilities are as yet dormant, I trust that, without ambitiously seeking the chief places of the synagogue, if they have been useful in any one walk of life, they will inquire whether they may not have talents for a yet wider sphere. Since, in these evil days, we have need to use every soldier in the army to the utmost of his capacity. When the world is so dark, we had need that every lamp should give some light, and that each lamp should burn as much oil as it will carry, that its light may be of the brightest possible kind.

Stephen, as a martyr, is set before us in the words of our text. I shall not so much look upon him as witnessing for the truth, as ask you to look, first, *at the power of the Holy Ghost in him, that you may learn to rely upon that divine power.* Secondly, I shall *ask you to look at the source of his dying comfort, that you may learn to gaze upon the same ravishing vision.* And thirdly, I shall *bid you notice the effect of this heavenly comfort upon him in the hope that we may live in peace and fall asleep in ease, by faith in the same great sight which cheered his dying eyes.*

I. First, then, this morning, I shall want every devout mind to OBSERVE THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AS DEVELOPED IN STEPHEN'S DEATH, IN ORDER THAT WE MAY LEARN TO RELY UPON THAT POWER.

Here our grapes hang in clusters, and we would have you note them one by one. I would have you observe, first, that although Stephen was surrounded by bitter enemies, no doubt railing and caviling, and muttering their observations to disturb him and distract his mind, *yet his defense is wonderfully logical, clear, consecutive, and forcible*. If you read the seventh chapter through, you might think it was delivered from this pulpit to an audience as affectionate, appreciating, and attentive as you may be—it does not read like an address delivered to a furious mob of bigots, gnashing their teeth at the lone, brave man.

In calm, cool, deliberate, bold, stinging language, he deals with them fearlessly and without reserve. He takes the sharp knife of the Word and rips up the sins of the people, laying open the inward parts of their hearts, and the secrets of their souls—between the joints and the marrow he deliberately inserts the two-edged sword, and discovers the thoughts and intents of their hearts. He could not have delivered that searching address with greater fearlessness had he been assured that they would thank him for the operation. The fact that his death was certain had no other effect upon him than to make him yet more zealous.

What secret spirit helped him thus to speak? Had he prepared that speech with long elaboration and forethought? Had that oration been carefully composed, revised, and learned by heart? Far from it. He was not unmindful of our Savior's words, "But when they deliver you up, take no thought how or what you shall speak: for it shall be given you in that same hour what you shall speak. For it is not you that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaks in you." Seized upon, doubtless, without previous notice, and dragged before the council without being allowed a moment for deliberation, Stephen stood up and defended himself with the truth as it is in Jesus, with all the skill of a practiced debater, with all the deliberation of one laboriously prepared, and with all the vigor of one whose zeal was like a fire in his bones.

To what do we trace this mouth and wisdom which his enemies could not gainsay? To what, indeed, but to the Holy Spirit? The Holy Ghost exerts such a power over the human mind that when it is His will, He can enable His servants to collect their scattered thoughts, to concentrate all their powers upon one topic, and to speak the words of truth and soberness with unaccustomed power. Moreover, the Lord can also touch the stammering tongue, and make it as eloquent as the tongue of Isaiah of old, to proclaim the truth in the name of the Lord.

I will not argue, my brethren, that a minister, when called to speak for Christ, ought at all times to speak extemporaneously. I am so far removed from that opinion that I conscientiously believe that when we have the opportunity for studying the Word, if we waste it in idleness, it is mere presumption to trust to the immediate inspiration of the moment. But I will say as much as this, that if the Christian minister, or if any one of you are called to speak for your Master when you can have had no preparation, you may confidently depend upon the Spirit of God to help you in your hour of difficulty—ay, and I will go farther, and say that if more of our ministers believed in the power of the Spirit of God to help them in their preaching, their preaching would be more effective, and God would acknowledge it more greatly to the conversion of souls.

It seems to me a curious piece of absurdity, if not a specimen of blasphemy, for a preacher to ask the help of the Holy Spirit in his preaching, and then to pull his manuscript out of his pocket. Where is the room for the Holy Ghost to work? Have they not bolted and barred the door against Him? What thoughts can He suggest? What emotions can He excite? The paper is the guide of the hour. Why, then, should they mock the Holy Spirit by asking for His assistance—an assistance which they will not follow?

Or if I shall have committed every word to memory, and prepared every sentence, and then shall come into the pulpit and ask to have an anointing from the Holy One to help me to speak, what do I but

ask Him to do what I do not want Him to do, since I can do quite as well without Him as with Him, and would be thrown off my course if He did assist me?

It seems to me that after due study of the Word, if the preacher—if you, dear friend, the teacher—will cast yourself upon the teaching of the Spirit of God, though distractions may occur, though in the congregation or in the Sabbath school class there may be much to throw you off track, and to make you lose the thread of your discourse, if you can rest upon the Spirit of God, He will enable you to speak with power, point, propriety, and personality. It is better to be taught of the Holy Spirit than to learn eloquence from the rules of oratory, or at the feet of masters of rhetoric.

The Spirit of God needs to be honored in the church in this respect. I am quite sure that if He were more glorified we should find more who spoke with power, because we would find more who spoke with the Holy Spirit. Let this first remark stand with you for what it is worth, and I am persuaded that there is far more in it than some will care to see.

Notice next, *the energy of the Holy Spirit conspicuously displayed in the manner and bearing of the martyr*. What a right royal and triumphant bearing the man has! He does not stand in the midst of the raging multitude with his eyes fixed upon the ground as though, humbly patient, and doggedly resigned, he felt crushed and overwhelmed. Neither does he cast his eyes around to observe a gap in the dense ring of cruel persecutors. He has no wish to elude the penalty of witness-bearing. He gazes steadfastly up into heaven. They may gnash their teeth, but they cannot disturb that settled gaze. Their noise and vehemence may roar like the raging waves of the sea, but from the serene depth of his inward peace, his soul looks upward to the eternal throne, and is ravished with unutterable delight.

He despises the tumult of the people, not because he is contemptuous towards *them*, but because his whole soul is swallowed up in blissful adoration of his God. He looks up to heaven, and what he beholds through its opened portals makes him careless of the bloodthirsty foes below. Wondrous picture! Behold the man of shining countenance steadfastly looking up, as though he tracked the road through which his soul would soon wing its way. As though he saw the angelic bands ascending and descending to minister to him. As though he held perpetual and abiding fellowship with the great Father of spirits, and was not to be disturbed or distracted by the rage of men. The bearing of many of the martyrs has been singularly heroic. You will be struck, in reading *Foxe's Acts and Monuments*, to find how many of the most humble men and women acted as if they were of noblest blood. In every age the line of martyrs has been a line of true nobility.

When the King of France told Bernard Palissy that if he did not change his sentiments, he would be compelled to surrender him to the Inquisition, the brave potter said to the king, "You say I shall be compelled, and yet you are a king. But I, though only a poor potter, cannot be compelled to do other than I think to be right." Surely the potter was more royal than the king. The cases are numberless, and should be as household words among you, in which humble men, feeble women, and little children have shown a heroism which chivalry could not equal.

The Spirit of God has taken the wise in their own craftiness, and answered the learned out of the mouths of babes. The answers of uneducated persons among the martyrs were frequently so pat to the point, and hit the nail so well on the head, that you might almost suppose they had been composed by an assembly of divines. They came from a better source than that, for they were given by the Holy Spirit. The bearing of the bleeding witnesses for our Lord has been worthy of their office, and right well have they earned the title, "The *noble* army of martyrs."

Now, my brethren, if you and I desire to walk among the sons of men without pride, but yet with a bearing that is worthy of our calling and adoption as princes of the blood royal of heaven, we must be trained by the Holy Ghost. Those men who are cowardly, whose profession of religion is so timid that you scarce know whether they have made it or not, those men who go cap-in-hand to the world, asking leave to live, know nothing of the Holy Ghost.

But when the Holy Spirit dwells in a man, he knows the right and holds the right, and is not the servant of men. Humblest among the humble in all things else, when it comes to a matter of conscience,

he owns no master but his Master who is in heaven. No child of God need fear the face of the great, for he is greater than they. He is God's true aristocrat—God has put within him a spirit of uprightness and sternness for the right which the world cannot bend, let its blasts howl as they will.

I pray God we may learn the manliness of Christianity, for much injury has been done to the faith by professors adopting another mode of procedure, and fawning and cringing before the mighty. That upward glance seems to say to us: "Eyes up, Christian! Eyes up! Let your heart go up to heaven. Let the desires mount. Let the whole soul fly towards heaven." With heaven in our eye, we may walk through the crowds of men as a lion walks through a flock of sheep, and our fellow-men shall involuntarily own our power.

The power of the Spirit was also very conspicuously seen in the case of Stephen in another respect, namely, in *the calm and happy spirit which he manifested*. I see no fear, I mark no sign of trepidation. He wipes no hot sweat from his brow. He faints not, much less does he offer any plea by which he may escape from their cruel hands. He never walked out of that gate of Jerusalem with a more joyous and tranquil spirit, on the brightest day of summer, than on that occasion when they dragged him out to die—still, resigned, calm, and happy.

It is a great thing for a Christian to keep himself quiet within when turmoil rules outside. When the mind gets distracted, we are not able to judge of what is wise. A disturbed and distracted spirit generally rushes in foolish haste to escape from the difficulty, and so falls into sin in some form or other. To be calm 'mid the bewildering cry, confident of victory, to be still and know that God is God, to stand still with the children of Israel at the Red Sea, and see the salvation of God, this is hard, so hard that only the divine dove, the Comforter, can bring us from above the power to be so. But when once the art of being still is fully learned, what strength and bliss is in it!

How many of us, in the face of death, could return death's stony gaze? If it were now decreed that at this moment you must lay down your life, could you smile? Why, the mere thought of it disturbs you, but the fact would alarm you beyond degree. But not so Stephen, his soul rests at anchor in an unruffled haven. Oh! it is in these solemn test-moments, when we are not merely talking of death and vaingloriously boasting of our love to Christ, but when death actually comes, and our love is sternly put to the trial—it is then that the omnipotence of the Holy Ghost is seen, when He gives to His servants that sweet peace which none can know but the man who enjoys it.

I have not yet declared all the glorious works of the Holy Spirit upon this first Christian martyr. In addition to the accuracy of his defense, and the royalty of his manner, and the happiness of his spirit, the Spirit of God was even more clearly seen in *his holy and forgiving temper*. In his dying prayer he imitates his Lord, "Lay not this sin to their charge." He stood erect when he prayed for himself, and I know not that he spoke aloud, but when it came to praying for the multitude around him, his spirit acquired a greater vehemence and earnestness.

We are told in the first place, that he knelt down, as if to make them see how he prayed, and then he prayed with a loud voice, that they might hear as well as see. He spent his last expiring breath in a loud cry to heaven, that his murder might not be laid at the door of his persecutors. O sweet Spirit of the Son of Man lingering still on earth! "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," has been the pattern and the forerunner of ten thousand of prayers of a similar heavenly character. It has been the mark of a Christian to die patiently, with forgiveness on his lips. Thousands of those who wear the ruby crown this day, and are—

*"Foremost of the sons of light,
'Midst the bright ones doubly bright,"*

passed away from earth with just those very words upon their lips.

Surely, this is a work of the Holy Spirit indeed! We can scarce forgive those who offend us but a little. We find it not altogether easy to live at peace with all men, but to *die* at peace with them, and to

die at peace with our murderers, what shall I say of it? Surely, this is what the world cannot understand—a celestial, a divine virtue, which must be implanted in human hearts by God Himself.

Note once more, the power of the Spirit was seen in enabling Stephen, at such a juncture, when the stones were rattling about his ears, and his body was bruised and mangled by them, *to pray one of the most prevalent prayers that ever went up to heaven*. The prayer we have just mentioned did not die in the air outside Jerusalem's gate. It passed through the gate of pearl, it reached the heart of God, and it obtained an answer.

See that eager, impetuous, young man yonder, about thirty years of age. The clothes of the witnesses are laid down at his feet. He desires to have a prominent part in stoning the hated Nazarene. He is one of the most fiery of those ferocious bigots. He belongs to the synagogue of Cilicia, and having been defeated in argument, he rejoices that harder weapons are at hand. He is glad to see the heretic die. He gloats his eyes with the spectacle, for he feels that Moses and the law, and the rabbis, and the traditions, are this day avenged.

Mark that young man well, for Stephen's prayer is meant for him, though he knows it not. It may be that he heard the plaintive petition and despised it. It is just possible that having heard it, he went away to sneer at it, and to remark upon the hypocritical character of those disciples of Jesus who could lisp their leader's dying words as if they were their own. Yet I think that blessed petition must have rankled in his heart. He must have felt that there was a spirit there far better than his own. Whether or not that prayer remained with him just then, in later years he must have looked upon Stephen as being, if anyone was, his spiritual father, by whose dying prayer he was begotten unto God. In speaking of his conversion, surely Paul must have thought within himself it was the prayer of Stephen that was the means of changing Saul the persecutor into Paul, the apostle of the crucified Son of God.

Ah! well, my friends, you and I cannot always prevail in prayer, even in sunny weather, but what a grand Spirit must that be who could help Stephen unlock heaven's gates in the dreary article of death. To have power with God to pluck the Savior by the sleeve, and to bring Him to save this guilty, raving persecutor, just when the stones were falling upon him, and his flesh was being battered and bruised. O blessed Spirit, though the outward man decays, You do renew the inner man day by day.

Behold, beloved, how independent of outward circumstances the Holy Ghost can make the Christian! See what a bright light may shine within us when it is all dark without! See how firm, how happy, how calm, how peaceful we may be when the world shakes to and fro, and the pillars of the earth are removed! See how even death itself, with all its terrible influences, has no power to suspend the music of a Christian's heart, but rather makes that music become more sweet, more clear, more heavenly, till the last kind act which death can do is to let the earthly strain melt into the heavenly chorus, the temporal joy into the eternal bliss! Let us have confidence, then, in the blessed Spirit.

Are you looking forward, my dear friend, to poverty? Does your business decline? Do you see clearly before you that you will have to put up with the woes of poverty? Fear not. The divine Spirit can give you, in your want, a greater plenty than the rich have in their abundance. You know not what joys may be stored up for you in the cottage which grace will make the cottage of content.

Are you conscious of a growing failure of your bodily powers? Do you expect to suffer long nights of languishing and days of pain? Oh, be not sad! That bed may become a throne to you. You little know how every pang that shoots through your body may be a refining fire to consume your dross—a beam of glory to light up the secret parts of your soul. Are the eyes failing? Do you expect blindness? Jesus will be your light. Do the ears fail you? Do you hear but few sounds? Jesus' name will be your soul's best music, and His person your dear delight. Socrates used to say—"Philosophers can be happy without music," and we Christians can be happier than philosophers when all outward causes of rejoicing are withdrawn. In You, my God, my heart shall triumph, come what may of ills without! By Your power, O blessed Spirit, my heart shall be exceeding glad, even should all things fail me here below.

May this first point be practically serviceable to you! Trust the Holy Spirit. Rely firmly upon Him, and He will not suffer you to be confounded.

II. THE SOURCE OF RICHEST COMFORT WILL NEXT BE INDICATED, WITH THE HOPE THAT WE MAY LEARN TO LOOK THERE.

It was the end and aim of the Holy Spirit to make Stephen happy. How could this be done? By revealing to him the living and reigning Savior at the right hand of God. Whether or not Stephen saw literally with his eyes the Lord Jesus standing at the right hand of God we do not know. It is possible that what is meant here is that his faith became so unusually strong that he had the most clear and vivid sense of Christ's reigning in heaven, so much so that it might be fitly said that he actually saw the Lord Jesus standing at the right hand of God. If it were really a supernatural vision, you and I have no ground to expect a repetition of it, but if it were a vision of faith, as I think it was, there is no sort of reason why we should not enjoy it even now. If we have like precious faith with Stephen, since it is a great fact that Christ is there, there is no reason why our faith should not see what Stephen's faith saw, and this day our soul's eyes may see Jesus, and our souls may receive the same joy and gladness of a sight of Christ which Stephen obtained therefrom.

What, then, did Stephen see? He saw first, that *Jesus was alive*. This is no small thing.

*“He lives, the great Redeemer lives—
What joy the blest assurance gives!”*

Alive, too, after the crucifixion! Stephen knew that Christ had died upon the cross. In that fact was the confidence of his soul. But he saw that, though once dead and buried, Jesus still lived. Herein was great comfort for Stephen. He was not serving a dead Christ. He was not defending the honor of a departed prophet. He was speaking for a friend who still existed to hear his pleadings and to accept his testimony.

Stephen argued within himself, “If Christ lives after crucifixion, why should not Stephen live, through Christ, after stoning? If the nails of the cross sufficed not to leave the Savior dead, neither shall the stones from the Jews avail to rob Stephen of resurrection. Jesus rises from His grave, and Stephen shall rise also. No mean assurance this. It is a rich source of comfort for you and me this day, if conscious of our frailty and of the near approach of mortality, because Jesus lives we shall live also.

Moreover, Stephen not only saw Jesus living, but he knew that *Jesus saw him and sympathized with him*. Is not that the meaning of the attitude which the Lord assumed? We are told that our Lord sits at the right hand of God, “expecting till his enemies are made his footstool,” and yet in the text He is not seen as sitting, but as standing. Why standing? One of the old fathers says it was as though the Lord Jesus stood up in horror at the deed which was being done. As though He were about to interpose to help His servant die, or to deliver him out of their hands. He stands up, actively sympathizing with His suffering witness.

Well, beloved, this is just what we see in heaven. The Man of sorrows is alive, and sympathizes with His people still. Though raised to the throne of glory, He is not forgetful of our shame and sorrow. Think not, O child of earth, that the Son of Man has forgotten what temptation means, and is now a stranger to human weakness and infirmity. “In all your affliction he is afflicted.” He deeply sympathizes with every one of His tried brethren, and in His measure feels afresh what every member bears.

Suppose not that He is an unthoughtful, uncaring spectator of your grief. I tell you, child of God, Christ has risen from His throne to succor you. He stands at this moment in the hour of your extremity, ready to help you. He will send you comforts when you need them, and He will see that your strength shall be to your day. What a sight was this for the dying Stephen! Jesus is living, and living with the same love in His heart which He showed on earth, with the same tender sympathy which He manifested among the twelve when He lingered amongst the sons of men.

The brightest point in the vision was this—he saw *Jesus standing at the right hand of God*. That was the point in dispute. The Jews said the Nazarene was an impostor. “No,” said Stephen, “there He is: He stands at the right hand of God.” To Stephen's mind the point was settled by what he saw. This was the main thing—the only thing, indeed, that Stephen cared for. He craved to have his Lord exalted, and he

saw Him exalted. The people rage, the rulers take counsel together, but yonder is the King upon the holy hill of God. Beyond a doubt He is a reigning monarch, and to Stephen's heart this was all he wished.

If any fear had been felt by Stephen, it was not for himself, it was for the church. He thought, "These wolves tear me first: what will become of the rest of the sheep? How will any escape from their fangs?" He looked up, and there stood the Shepherd looking down upon the wolves, and saying to His dearly-purchased sheep, "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." That seems to me to be the grandest part of the vision—Christ living, Christ loving, and Christ reigning, the triumphant Savior, at the right hand of God.

My brethren and sisters, this doctrine has been to my own soul the only one which has cheered me in times of extremely deep depression of spirit. As I have told you before, so I tell you now—I have known what it is to be brought so low in heart, that no promise of God's Word gave me a ray of light, nor a single doctrine afforded me a gleam of comfort, and yet so often as I have come across this text, "Wherefore God also has highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name," I have always found a flood of joy bursting into my soul, for I have said, "Well, it is of no consequence what may become of me if my name is cast out as evil, and if I myself am left in darkness, if pains should multiply, if sorrows should increase beyond number, it does not matter—I will not lift up a finger so long as my Lord Jesus is exalted."

I believe that every genuine Christian heart that loves the Savior feels just that. Like the dying soldier in the hour of battle, who is cheered with the thought, "The general is safe. The victory is on our side. My blood is well spent, my life well lost, to win the victory." Let Christ reign, and I will make no bargain with God as to myself. Let Jesus be King the whole world over, I care for nothing else. Let Him wear the crown. Let the pleasure of the Lord prosper in His hands. Let His covenant purposes be fulfilled. Let His elect be saved. Let the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, why, what matters it even though ten thousand of us should go pining through the valley of the shadow of death!—our lives and deaths were all well spent to earn so great a reward as to see Jesus glorified.

I would like to put this telescope then to the eye of every sorrowing Christian here, because having had so sweet an influence upon my own heart, surely it might comfort theirs. Dear friend, you are troubled this morning, you are cast down, you do not prosper as you could wish in heavenly things. Well, but Christ is not troubled, He is not cast down. And the great fight, after all, goes rightly enough. God's great purposes are subserved. Christ is glorified. Here are two or three pearls for you, gaze upon them, and prize them.

First, remember that your exalted Savior is exalted to *intercede* for you. If He has power, He uses it in prayer for you. Christ has no merit which He does not plead for you. Jesus has received no reward, in consequence of His death, which He will withhold from you. Dear to the Father He is, but He uses that influence on your behalf. Joseph said to the butler, "Speak for me when it shall be well with you," but the butler forgot him. It is well with Jesus today, and depend upon it, it is well with you also, for the Well-beloved cannot forget you. And as He always has the Father's ear, He will pray the Father for you, and whatsoever you need shall surely be given you.

Recollect too, that Christ has this power not only to intercede for you, but to *prepare a place for you*. Christian, if Christ be a King of boundless wealth, yet He disdains not to use the wealth of His royal treasury to furnish that mansion of yours most richly, so as to make it worthy of the giver who shall bestow it upon you.

Moreover, Jesus is in heaven *as your representative*. You are virtually in heaven at this very moment in God's esteem. Your representative is there. My head is in heaven, wherefore should I fear? How can God give heaven to the head and hell to the foot? As sure as Christ is there, every one of those who are virtually united to Him shall be there also. Only prove that Christ is in heaven and you have proven that every believer must be there. Christ's body cannot be mangled. You cannot cut the spiritual body of Jesus into pieces, and throw one limb of it into hell, while the head goes up to heaven. Because He lives,

we shall live also. And it is His will that where He is, there should also His people be. Jesus is in heaven full of power—there to intercede, to represent, to prepare. But that far-reaching power darts its rays down to earth.

The keys of *providence* swing at the girdle of Christ. Believe it, Christian, nothing occurs here without the permit or the decree of your Savior, who loved you and gave Himself for you. Does the enemy rage? Jesus will put a bit between his jaws and turn him back. “Surely the wrath of man shall praise you: the remainder of wrath shall you restrain.” Your Lord Jesus Christ has all power in heaven and in earth, and all this power He will exert to bring every one, even the weakest of His children, into His bosom.

Blessed be the sweet love of God which has given us an omnipotent Shepherd to watch over us by night and by day. His head is crowned because He has conquered all His foes. Surely, we may see in that crown of victory the indication that no foe shall ever be able to conquer us. I wish that I could bring out to you the sweetness of the thought of Jesus glorified as I have enjoyed it in my own heart. But it does charm me to think sometimes, that as surely as sin, death, and hell, are under the feet of the Son of Man, so surely shall these very feet of mine be set upon the dragon's neck. If I am in Christ, as certainly as Jesus is a conqueror, so shall I be more than a conqueror through Him who has loved me.

What sweeter sight could Stephen see than this, when the enemy was at his worst, still Christ was unconquered! And Stephen could read in that the fact that Stephen would be unconquered too. The stones that felled and crushed him would not destroy him. The voice of his blood would cry from the ground and the spiritual Stephen would become the victor over the hosts of error. The truth would spring out of the dust, and blossom like a sweet flower, and God would be glorified when His servant was slain. Thus I have indicated to you the delightful vision which can give us comfort. Lord, open our eyes to see it.

III. Finally, THE COMFORT ITSELF is worth a moment's consideration.

We do not find that the appearance of Jesus in the heavens stopped the stones. When the Son of Man came into the furnace with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the fire did not burn the three holy children, but on this occasion, though the Son of Man was there, the fire did burn Stephen. Stephen's life is not spared. He dies as certainly as if Jesus had not been there.

That is the plan of the present dispensation. The Lord Jesus does not come to us to forbid our suffering, nor to remove our griefs, but He sustains us under them. We beseech the Lord three times that this or that may depart from us. It does not depart—that is not the general way with God—but we get the answer, “My strength is sufficient for you; my strength shall be perfect in weakness.” It was so with Stephen. The stones fell. They beat about his head. They stopped his eloquent tongue. They dashed into his heaving lungs. They bruised his tender heart. There lay his mangled corpse, an object of love and of lamentation to the saints that were at Jerusalem. The love of Christ had not preserved the flesh.

And who ought to expect it? We have heard it said, “If Christ died for His people, how is it that *they* die?” Such questioners forget that the people of God must die because Jesus died. The death of the flesh is no ill, but a blessing. It behooves us to tread in the Savior's steps, that we also may die unto the flesh, but be quickened in the Spirit. The death of Stephen we do not look upon as a calamity. The death of the flesh was but a necessary fellowship with the crucified Redeemer, for he did not die as to his spirit—that enjoyed immortality which the rugged masses of rock which were heaved upon him could not injure. Stephen's glorious comfort was in being sustained within, though not shielded from without—in being preserved as to his inner man, though the outer man was bruised and battered. This is the comfort you and I may expect.

Through the darts we must go, and they must stick in our flesh, but they shall not poison the blood of our soul. Beneath the pitiless storm of hail we must stand, and yet no hailstones shall be able to strike our heart to injure it. Through the furnace we must go, and the smell of fire must pass upon us, but yet we shall come out of the flaming heat uninjured by the blazing fire. 'Tis ours to suffer and yet to conquer, to die and yet to live, to be buried and yet to rise again.

How sweetly is Stephen's triumph pictured in those last words, "He fell asleep." This is the life as well as the death of a Christian. When the world has been most in arms against a believer, it is wonderful how God has given to His beloved sleep, how the saint has rested with perfect composure in the sight of his enemies, and his cup has run over in the time of drought. Calmly on the bosom of his God he has lain his head, and left his troubles for his God to bear.

This shall be the death of the Christian. Let his death be as painful as that of Stephen, it shall be quite as composed. He shall shut his eyes to earth and open them to heaven. His body shall but sleep in that royal sepulcher where Christ Himself once reposed, to be awakened by that heavenly trumpeter who shall bring the tidings of resurrection to the sleeping myriads of the saints. Courage, brethren and sisters, because the Holy Spirit dwells in us, and because Christ up yonder is triumphant for us. Let our tribulations abound, our consolations also shall abound by Jesus Christ, and we shall be more than conquerors through Him that has loved us.

I wish you all had a share in these precious things. If you had, it would not matter how badly I spoke of them, they would charm your souls. But if you do not understand them, I pray that you may. May the Spirit of the Lord open your eyes to see the power of the Spirit and the glory of Christ, and may you and I ere long see Him face to face in paradise. Amen.

PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—ACTS 6. 7:54-60.

Taken from The C. H. Spurgeon Collection, Version 1.0, Ages Software. Only necessary changes have been made, such as correcting spelling errors, some punctuation usage, capitalization of deity pronouns, and minimal updating of a few archaic words. The content is unabridged. Additional Bible-based resources are available at www.spurgeongems.org.