



A Systematic Expository Study of the Word of God

Study 12 : THE TRIUMPHANT DEFENDER OF THE FAITH RECEIVED IN HEAVEN

Acts 7:54-60

Stephen came to the end of his Spirit-inspired message, to the end of his sanctified life, to the end of his spectacular ministry, to the end of his Spirit-directed pilgrimage on earth, triumphantly. **“Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing on the right Hand of God.”** Nothing is so comforting to dying saints or so encouraging to suffering saints as to see Jesus at the right Hand of God. In life, sanctified Stephen saw the Lord strengthening and standing by him; at death, he saw the Lord assuring him and standing to welcome him into heaven. Living, he saw the Lord; dying, he saw the Lord. If this be our commitment while we live, it will be our comfort when we die. In life, Stephen was faithful in living for and defending the faith; at death, he was assured of a place and a prize in heaven. As his spirit went to heaven to be with Christ whom he loved and served, his body fell asleep, waiting to be raised on the day of resurrection. Though the persecutors stoned him to death, he did not die in anger, agony or bitter hatred, with a curse on his lips; he died praying for his persecutors, with abiding peace and fullness of joy in his heart as he was received into heaven by Jesus Christ, to share in heaven's pleasures at God's right Hand for evermore.

THE SPIRIT-ENDUED MINISTER SAW HIS SAVIOUR STANDING IN HEAVEN

Acts 7:54-56; 1:9-11; Mark 16:19; Hebrews 10:12-14; 12:2,22-24; Colossians 3:1-4,14-24; Titus 2:11-14; John 14:1-3,27; 17:22-24; 1Peter 1:3-5; 3:22; 2 Peter 3:12-14.

“When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart.” Stephen's accusers **“were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake”** and now the Sanhedrin who sat to judge him could not withstand the power of the sword of the Spirit. But instead of repenting of their sin, **“they gnashed on him with their teeth”**, further hardening their hearts against the truth.

“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.” Stephen's experience is proof that it is possible to be continually full of the Holy Ghost (Acts 6:3,5,8; 7:55). **“Full of the Holy Ghost”**, he was full of the love, the joy, the peace, the comfort, the counsel, the wisdom, the holiness, the power and the unction of the Spirit. He **“looked up steadfastly into heaven”** – his eyes and heart were lifted up to heaven, where his only hope and confidence were placed. His affections had always been set on things above and the glory of God had always been his goal. Looking up, he saw Jesus in the highest splendour, majesty and greatness, standing, ready to receive him. Nothing but the possession of Stephen's virtues and devotion can entitle us to his consolation and revelation. To enjoy a similar experience of a glorious eternity, our affections and ambition, our whole heart and our whole treasure must be in heaven. The Lord who had promised His presence was with him at the critical hour of death. He saw his Saviour and Lord in heaven, standing, ready to receive him into his eternal home.

THE SATAN-EMBITTERED MESSENGERS STONED STEPHEN IN THEIR HATRED

Acts 7: 57,58,51-53; Deuteronomy 31:27; Jeremiah 6:10, 16,17; 9:25,26; Zechariah 7:11,12; 2 Chronicles 24:19-21; Matthew 23:31-35; 13:40-43; 25:41,46; Mark 9:42-48; Revelation 14:10-12; 20:11-15.

After hearing Stephen declare, **“Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing on the right Hand of God”**, these devotees of religious tradition broke out into the most open rage, fury and madness. It was not lawful for them to put any accused person to death. **“The Jews therefore said unto him, It is not lawful for us to put any man to death”** (John 18:31). But they were so blinded and embittered by Satan that they broke the law in defence of their tradition. They were determined not to allow Stephen to live any longer because he declared that he saw heaven's glory and Jesus at the right Hand of God. How great was their devotion to Satan on earth and how great their damnation and suffering in hell would be except they repented. Our Lord, Jesus Christ, predicted their murderous acts as well as their eternal damnation in hell. **“Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill.” “Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?”** (Matthew 23:34,33).

THE SPIRIT-EMPOWERED MARTYR, SANCTIFIED STEPHEN RECEIVED INTO HEAVEN

Acts 7:59,60; Luke 16:22-26; 2 Corinthians 5:1,8; Philippians 1:21-23; Luke 23:39-43; 10:20; Philippians 4:3; Hebrews 12:22,23; Ephesians 3:14,15; Revelation 7:9-17; 14:13; 19:1,6-8.

“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Stephen’s spirit was immediately taken to heaven at death. The Scriptures make it abundantly clear that the spirit immediately returns to God without waiting for the burial of the body before ascending to heaven, the eternal home of the righteous (Ecclesiastes 12:7; Philippians 1:21,23). ***“Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord. We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord”*** (2 Corinthians 5:6,8).

“And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.” This prayer, ‘**Lord, forgive them,**’ strikingly resembles the dying prayer of the Lord, Jesus. Only Christian faith, Christ’s salvation in the heart with surpassing assurance and hope of heaven will enable a man to utter such prayer in his dying moment. In answer to Stephen’s prayer, the Lord granted Saul repentance, mercy, forgiveness, salvation and grace to lead many souls to hope in Christ, holiness and heaven. Stephen’s dying prayer reached Saul and he became an effective preacher of ***“the faith which he once destroyed.”***

“And when he had said this, he fell asleep.” To sleep like Stephen, when the long night shall close our eyes, we must, as he did, commit our spirit into the Hands of the Lord Jesus, be perfectly content to leave the world at any time, in any manner He sees fit for us, devote ourselves entirely to His service, and be desirous of nothing, but that ***“whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord”*** (Romans 14:8).

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