

THE MAN WHO LOOKED INTO HEAVEN

BIBLE TEXT : Acts 6:8-15; 7:1-60.

LESSON 289 Junior Course

MEMORY VERSE: "I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18).

BIBLE TEXT in King James Version

Acts 6:8-15

⁸ And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.

⁹ Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called *the synagogue* of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen.

¹⁰ And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.

¹¹ Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and *against* God.

¹² And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon *him*, and caught him, and brought *him* to the council,

¹³ And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law:

¹⁴ For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.

¹⁵ And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.

Acts 7:1-60

¹ Then said the high priest, Are these things so?

² And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran,

³ And said unto him, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall shew thee.

⁴ Then came he out of the land of the Chaldaeans, and dwelt in Charran: and from thence, when his father was dead, he removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell.

⁵ And he gave him none inheritance in it, no, not *so much as* to set his foot on: yet he promised that he would give it to him for a possession, and to his seed after him, when *as yet* he had no child.

⁶ And God spake on this wise, That his seed should sojourn in a strange land; and that they should bring them into bondage, and entreat *them* evil four

BIBLE REFERENCES:

NOTES:

The First Martyr

The first martyr for the Christian faith was a young man named Stephen. Stephen had been appointed to be a deacon in the early Church, and he took his work very seriously. He was not too busy helping the poor and giving food to the hungry to take time to pray.

God expects His people to help those in need of food and clothing and other physical needs. An even greater blessing will attend our gifts if we pray that God's blessing will accompany them. More than that, the good works we do will not alone win salvation for us. We must pray much to keep the Spirit of God on our lives so that we will be ready to meet Jesus ourselves, and be an inspiration to others.

The Spirit of God was upon Stephen's life; and through his faith in God, he performed great wonders and miracles among the people. But the religious people of Stephen's day did not appreciate his good works, because those works were done in the name of Jesus. They treated Stephen much as they had treated Jesus. The Pharisees were jealous of him, and thought that the teachings of Jesus were contrary to the Law of Moses. They had carefully studied the Law of Moses, and prided themselves on their zealous keeping of many ordinances and rules. Had not generations of their priests and scribes interpreted the Law for them to their satisfaction? Why should they listen to something different, told to them by someone they did not know?

Faith in the Lord

Stephen, however, had learned to know Jesus. Stephen had been saved from his sins, and had perfect faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God. He was so sure that Jesus was the Son of God that he was willing to die for his faith. His faith made him strong to stand against those who ridiculed Jesus.

The people who did not like to listen to Stephen's preaching called him before the council, or court, and hired false witnesses to testify against him. The false witnesses said he had blasphemed, but he had said only the things that Jesus had said. He was not worried about the lies that were told about him. His faith was in Jesus, and the glory of the Lord came upon him in such a way that the people said he looked like an angel.

Finally the high priest, who was the judge, asked Stephen if the accusations made against him were true. Had he said things against Moses, and against God? Had he spoken evil of their holy Temple? Why had Stephen spoken of the Temple's being torn down?

Stephen's Answer

Stephen began his defence, "Men, brethren, and fathers." Perhaps most of the men of the council were older than he, and he had respect for them because of their age and also because of their position. Stephen then went on to prove that he was not blasphemous. He had the greatest respect for Abraham, just as

hundred years.

⁷ And the nation to whom they shall be in bondage will I judge, said God: and after that shall they come forth, and serve me in this place.

⁸ And he gave him the covenant of circumcision: and so *Abraham* begat Isaac, and circumcised him the eighth day; and Isaac *begat* Jacob; and Jacob *begat* the twelve patriarchs.

⁹ And the patriarchs, moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt: but God was with him,

¹⁰ And delivered him out of all his afflictions, and gave him favour and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house.

¹¹ Now there came a dearth over all the land of Egypt and Chanaan, and great affliction: and our fathers found no sustenance.

¹² But when Jacob heard that there was corn in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first.

¹³ And at the second *time* Joseph was made known to his brethren; and Joseph's kindred was made known unto Pharaoh.

¹⁴ Then sent Joseph, and called his father Jacob to *him*, and all his kindred, threescore and fifteen souls.

¹⁵ So Jacob went down into Egypt, and died, he, and our fathers,

¹⁶ And were carried over into Sychem, and laid in the sepulchre that Abraham bought for a sum of money of the sons of Emmor *the father* of Sychem.

¹⁷ But when the time of the promise drew nigh, which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt,

¹⁸ Till another king arose, which knew not Joseph.

¹⁹ The same dealt subtilly with our kindred, and evil entreated our fathers, so that they cast out their young children, to the end they might not live.

²⁰ In which time Moses was born, and was exceeding fair, and nourished up in his father's house three months:

²¹ And when he was cast out, Pharaoh's daughter took him up, and nourished him for her own son.

²² And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds.

²³ And when he was full forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren the children of Israel.

²⁴ And seeing one *of them* suffer wrong, he defended *him*, and avenged him that

the scribes and Pharisees had. The Jews called Abraham the father of their religion, but they had overlooked the fact that it was by faith (and not by his works) that Abraham had been saved. "Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness."

Jesus had said, "Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad" (John 8:56). Abraham had lived by faith — faith in Jesus who was not yet born on the earth — and through that faith he had been made righteous. And yet these descendants of Father Abraham had not believed in Jesus when He had stood right in their midst; and they had crucified Him in their rage.

Abraham had been righteous long before the Law was ever given. The principles of right and wrong had been from the beginning, and Abraham had had a heart to understand them. He had lived by the Gospel truth: "The just shall live by faith."

God had told Abraham what would happen to his children. First He had made a covenant with Abraham that through his posterity all the nations of the earth would be blessed. That pointed down to the time when Jesus would come to give salvation to all men. If the Jews had studied the life of Abraham so carefully, how had they overlooked that fact? Stephen had found it when he read the Scriptures; and he was honest enough that when he saw Jesus he recognized Him as the fulfilment of the prophecy made by Abraham.

The History of the Jews

Stephen went on to give the whole Jewish history, down to the time of the building of Solomon's Temple. He told all about the Israelites in bondage in Egypt, and he emphasized the fact that God had sent Moses to be the deliverer. Stephen was being accused of dishonouring the Law of Moses, hence Moses himself, but he proved that he understood more about Moses than they did.

Stephen pointed out that Moses had been called of God early in life to be Israel's deliverer, but the Israelites had not understood. Moses had waited until he was forty years old before he had tried to help his people, and in the meantime had received the best education at the court of Egypt that could be had. When his own people refused him, he escaped into another country where he lived for another forty years, while the Israelites, who had refused his help, suffered as slaves in Egypt. God had said that Moses was to be the leader of Israel, and that call stood.

Moses' Greatness

As Stephen recited the history of Israel, he emphasized the greatness of Moses. It was to Moses that God had given the Law. God had called upon Moses to be His representative to the people. And Moses had promised the Israelites: "A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear."

All this Stephen told his accusers. That Prophet whom Moses had promised was Jesus, and Stephen had believed in Him. But these self-righteous Pharisees had not, and they were accusing Stephen of dishonouring Moses by preaching Jesus.

The Temple

After Canaan had been occupied, Solomon had built a magnificent Temple in Jerusalem for the worship of God. This had become the centre of the true religion. But on the day that the Temple was dedicated, Solomon had prayed: "Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less

was oppressed, and smote the Egyptian:

²⁵ For he supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them: but they understood not.

²⁶ And the next day he shewed himself unto them as they strove, and would have set them at one again, saying, Sirs, ye are brethren; why do ye wrong one to another?

²⁷ But he that did his neighbour wrong thrust him away, saying, Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us?

²⁸ Wilt thou kill me, as thou diddest the Egyptian yesterday?

²⁹ Then fled Moses at this saying, and was a stranger in the land of Madian, where he begat two sons.

³⁰ And when forty years were expired, there appeared to him in the wilderness of mount Sina an angel of the Lord in a flame of fire in a bush.

³¹ When Moses saw *it*, he wondered at the sight: and as he drew near to behold *it*, the voice of the Lord came unto him,

³² *Saying, I am the God of thy fathers, the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Then Moses trembled, and durst not behold.*

³³ Then said the Lord to him, Put off thy shoes from thy feet: for the place where thou standest is holy ground.

³⁴ I have seen, I have seen the affliction of my people which is in Egypt, and I have heard their groaning, and am come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send thee into Egypt.

³⁵ This Moses whom they refused, saying, Who made thee a ruler and a judge? the same did God send *to be* a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the angel which appeared to him in the bush.

³⁶ He brought them out, after that he had shewed wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red sea, and in the wilderness forty years.

³⁷ This is that Moses, which said unto the children of Israel, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear.

³⁸ This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and *with* our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us:

³⁹ To whom our fathers would not obey, but thrust *him* from them, and in their hearts turned back again into Egypt,

⁴⁰ *Saying unto Aaron, Make us gods to go before us: for as for this Moses, which brought us out of the land of Egypt, we*

this house which I have built!" (II Chronicles 6:18). The God to whom Solomon had prayed was so much greater than the Temple that even the heavens could not contain Him.

And God had spoken through the mouth of the Prophet Isaiah: "The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me? And where is the place of my rest? For all those things hath mine hand made" (Isaiah 66:1, 2). God was greater than the Temple. Jesus was equal with God in the creation, and as great in power as the Father. So was not Jesus greater than the Temple? How could the Pharisees say that Stephen was blaspheming God by preaching the word of Jesus?

A Stiffnecked People

When Stephen came to this part of his story, he was so much stirred by the hypocrisy of his accusers that he could no longer restrain himself. He could see that they were not being persuaded by his explanation of the Gospel, and he said to them: "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost." The Spirit of God had tried to reason with them to show them the truth of the Gospel, to show them that Jesus was the Son of God. But just as their ancestors had persecuted the prophets, so were they doing. They had climaxed their sin by crucifying Jesus, the Just One.

How angry those words made the self-righteous Jews! They were guilty of all that Stephen said, and their guilt made them more furious. They began to pick up stones to hurl at that pure and holy servant of God. But Stephen never flinched. The Spirit of God was upon him, and as he looked up he saw a vision of his wonderful Lord. The Saviour he believed in and had preached about was truly the Son of God, and was waiting to welcome Stephen into the Glory Land. Stephen said to the people: "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God." Standing! When Jesus went to Heaven, He sat down at the right hand of God (Hebrews 10:12), to make intercession for us. But when Stephen was about to leave this world as a martyr, Jesus stood to honour him for his steadfast faith to the end.

The Jews were so angry that they tried to drown his words with their own shouting, and they stopped their ears so they could not hear what they supposed were words of blasphemy. Out of the city they cast Stephen, and there they hurled great stones upon him until he was dead.

Stephen's Reward

Stephen did not beg for mercy, nor try to run from his enemies. He just looked up to God and prayed: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." His last words were words of forgiveness: "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge," and he fell asleep to awaken in Heaven. It was just one step to the Throne of God, where Jesus was waiting to welcome him. The price Stephen paid was not too great for the reward he received. "The toils of the road will seem nothing when I get to the end of the way."

Suffering never daunted the faith of the true Christians. Later, when they were tortured under the cruel Caesars, their faith and courage caused many of the hard Roman guards to give their hearts to Jesus. They said that if these mistreated Christians could sing of Heaven and their Saviour when sent to the stake or into the arena to be eaten by the lions, surely there must be a God who sustained them; Heaven must be a real place for them to go to. The hard hearts of Roman soldiers were melted by the love of Jesus, and they, too, gave their lives for the cause of Christ.

wot not what is become of him.

⁴¹ And they made a calf in those days, and offered sacrifice unto the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands.

⁴² Then God turned, and gave them up to worship the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, O ye house of Israel, have ye offered to me slain beasts and sacrifices *by the space of* forty years in the wilderness?

⁴³ Yea, ye took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your god Remphan, figures which ye made to worship them: and I will carry you away beyond Babylon.

⁴⁴ Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as he had appointed, speaking unto Moses, that he should make it according to the fashion that he had seen.

⁴⁵ Which also our fathers that came after brought in with Jesus into the possession of the Gentiles, whom God drave out before the face of our fathers, unto the days of David;

⁴⁶ Who found favour before God, and desired to find a tabernacle for the God of Jacob.

⁴⁷ But Solomon built him an house.

⁴⁸ Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet,

⁴⁹ Heaven *is* my throne, and earth *is* my footstool: what house will ye build me? saith the Lord: or what *is* the place of my rest?

⁵⁰ Hath not my hand made all these things?

⁵¹ Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers *did*, so *do* ye.

⁵² Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers:

⁵³ Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept *it*.

⁵⁴ When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with *their* teeth.

⁵⁵ But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God,

⁵⁶ And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.

⁵⁷ Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him

May God put that spirit in us that will keep us true to our Lord even though we must have to lay down our lives for our faith! Many people even in this modern day have proved their love for Jesus by dying rather than denying Him. Surely their reward will be great in Heaven. They have that love of God in their hearts which helps them to forgive their persecutors just as Stephen did, and as the Lord Himself did: "Father, forgive them; for they now not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

Paul's Consent

Among the cruel men who stoned Stephen was a young man who had spent much time studying the Law but had persecuted the Christian Church because he thought the followers of Jesus were dishonouring that Law. He held the coats of those who killed Stephen, and agreed that Stephen should die. This young man's name was Saul, who was afterward known as the great Apostle Paul. Saul had never met Jesus up to this time, but the time would come when he, too, would be a believer and would suffer and die for the same Jesus for whom Stephen gave his life.

QUESTIONS

1. Who was Stephen?
2. Why did not the Pharisees like to hear Stephen preach?
3. How was Abraham saved?
4. How do we know that Abraham believed in Jesus?
5. What did Stephen know about Moses?
6. What had Moses said about Jesus?
7. What did Stephen call the scribes and Pharisees?
8. What did the Jews do to Stephen?
9. What did Stephen see before he died?
10. What were Stephen's last words?

with one accord,

⁵⁸ And cast *him* out of the city, and stoned *him*: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.

⁵⁹ And they stoned Stephen, calling upon *God*, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

⁶⁰ And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.