

Christian Response to the Rage & Wrath of Man: Examples from the Book of Acts – Part 2

Scripture Reading: Acts 6:1-15

Stephen had a brilliant but very short career serving the Lord. There was a need to get some faithful and spiritual people to handle some practical problems in the church. Among others, the church looked to Stephen to serve as, what would later be called, a deacon. He is described as a man *“full of faith and of the Holy Spirit”* (Acts 6:5). Thankfully, a potentially divisive issue was handled well. The church maintained its peace and the work of the gospel prospered. Stephen did not just handle administration. He also was a preacher and evangelist. It is here that the birds of prey circled and made an attack. When someone stands out as a bold and faithful leader, it seems that others will single them out, charge them with evil, and try to make an example of them. With this introduction, let’s look at Stephen’s example.

Forces unite to fight the Gospel – Acts 6:9-15

People from various synagogues, separated culturally and linguistically, came together to have a formal debate with Stephen. They wanted to challenge and decimate his teachings. They were unable to do this, so they had to cheat. They persuaded or perhaps bribed some people to make false statements, accusing the character and teaching of Stephen. While they were at it, they attacked the character and statements of Jesus, too. So, Stephen was in good company! Stephen was calm and in possession of his emotions. He showed no malice or anger. It was as if an angel had spoken. See John 15:18-27 cp. 1 Samuel 8:7-8.

Faithful teaching with application will be punished – Acts 7:1-60

In this study, we cannot do a detailed examination of this marvelous sermon. Suffice it to say that Stephen carefully told the narrative of Israel’s history, including the nation’s tendency to wander from God and follow other gods and to persecute God’s faithful messengers. He spoke to them as representatives of Israel, yet he made the application to them as individuals – that they are guilty of the blood of the Messiah and need to repent. See Acts 7:1-53; Matthew 15:12-14; 21:28-46 cp Acts 2:14-40.

The wrath of man was unleashed. They bare their teeth, grinding them in frustration. The formal debate was over. Stephen did not react to their frightening / childish behavior. His consciousness of God increased. He was allowed a vision of the Father, and of His Son standing up to receive him. Stephen declared this vision. That was the last straw. Plugging their ears, and yelling / growling, they killed him with stones – fulfilling everything that Stephen said about Israel’s patterns. Stephen, so full of Christ’s Spirit, spoke as Christ had spoken on the cross. He did not curse them, he asked God to forgive them. Acts 7:54-60 cp. Luke 23:34,46; 1 Peter 2:21-25.

Fearless, faithful, truth, spoken in love, will have fruit – Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-16

Acts 7:58 introduces us to a man named Saul, who seemed to be in charge of the debate and of the murder of Stephen. Acts 8:1-3 tells us that Saul was systematically organizing the capture and conviction of Christians. It is to be noted that God was using this persecution to not just scatter the believers, but to send them out everywhere, preaching the word (Acts 8:4). Chapter eight will show fruitful ministry by men like Philip, Peter, and John.

We earlier mentioned that Stephen had spoken to his audience, not only as individuals, but also as representatives of Israel. It appears that this is the way God was seeing it, also. Chapter eight begins the spread of the gospel to the regions beyond, eventually reaching the Gentiles (Acts 1:8; 13:46-47). And who will lead the advancement of Christ's kingdom to the Gentiles? – None other than Saul, who will be called Paul the rest of his life. God used the stunning testimony of Stephen to bring conviction to Saul. Christ personally confronted him, in the middle of his mission to destroy Christianity, and brought Saul to faith, and called him to serve. See Acts 9:1-16; 26:1-23 cp. Galatians 1:11 – 2:9; Philippians 3:3-19; I Timothy 1:12-17.

Finding application today – II Timothy 1:5-14

As Paul was passing on the torch to one of his apprentices, Timothy, he shared some important principles for all of us to ponder.

- Find tears as you petition for the faith, strength, and fruitfulness of Christ's servants (II Timothy 1:4 cp. Ephesians 6:18-20; Hebrews 13:3).
- Remember the legacy of our faith – how it has been faithfully delivered to us (II Timothy 1:5 cp. Jude 1:3).
- Do not yield to fear and confusion, which Satan and the world hope to use to control you. Discipline your mind (II Timothy 1:7-8 cp. Philippians 1:20-21,27-29; 4:4-9).
- Remember the greatness of the gospel of Christ (II Timothy 1:9-11 cp. Romans 1:1-6,14-17)
- Remember that we serve a risen, victorious, living Savior (II Timothy 1:12; 2:1-10 cp. Matthew 28:18-20; John 11:25-26; Romans 8:31-39; Revelation 1:9-18).
- Depend on God's Spirit. Don't deviate from the time-tested truths of God's Word. The message must not be altered. Beware of human logic, cleverness and creativity (II Timothy 1:6,13-14 cp. John 6:63; Colossians 2:8; Galatians 1:6-10; I Corinthians 2:1-16; II Corinthians 2:14-17; II Timothy 2:14-16; 3:10-17).