

CHAPTER 7

When our Lord Jesus called his apostles out to be employed in services and sufferings for him, he told them that yet the last should be first, and the first last, which was remarkably fulfilled in St. Stephen and St. Paul, who were both of them late converts, in comparison of the apostles, and yet got the start of them both in services and sufferings; for God, in conferring honours and favours, often crosses hands. In this chapter we have the martyrdom of Stephen, the first martyr of the Christian church, who led the van in the noble army. And therefore his sufferings and death are more largely related than those of any other, for direction and encouragement to all those who are called out to resist unto blood, as he did. Here is,

I. His defence of himself before the council, in answer to the matters and things he stood charged with, the scope of which is to show that it was no blasphemy against God, nor any injury at all to the glory of his name, to say that the temple should be destroyed and the customs of the ceremonial law changed. And,

1. He shows this by going over the history of the Old Testament, and observing that God never intended to confine his favours to that place, or that ceremonial law; and that they had no reason to expect he should, for the people of the Jews had always been a provoking people, and had forfeited the privileges of their peculiarity: nay, that that holy place and that law were but figures of good things to come, and it was no disparagement at all to them to say that they must give place to better things (v. 1-50). And then,

2. He applies this to those that prosecuted him, and sat in judgment upon him, sharply reproving them for their wickedness, by which they had brought upon themselves the ruin of their place and nation, and then could not bear to hear of it (v. 51-53).

II. The putting of him to death by stoning him, and his patient, cheerful, pious submission to it (v. 54-60).

~~400~~ ACTS 7:1-16

STEPHEN'S ADDRESS

Stephen is now at the bar before the great council of the nation, indicted for blasphemy: what the witnesses swore against him we had an account of in the foregoing chapter, that he spoke blasphemous words against Moses and God; for he spoke against this holy place and the law. Now here,

I. The high priest calls upon him to answer for himself, v. 1. He was president, and, as such, the mouth of the court, and therefore he saith, “You, the prisoner at the bar, you hear what is sworn against you; what do you say to it? *Are these things so?* Have you ever spoken any words to this purport? If you have, will you recant them, or will you stand to them? *Guilty or not guilty?*” This carried a show of fairness, and yet seems to have been spoken with an air of haughtiness; and thus far he seems to have prejudged the cause, that, if it were so, that he had spoken such and such words, he shall certainly be adjudged a blasphemer, whatever he may offer in justification or explanation of them.

II. He begins his defence, and it is long; but it should seem by his breaking off abruptly, just when he came to the main point (v. 50), that it would have been much longer if his enemies would have given him leave to say all he had to say. In general we may observe,

1. That in this discourse he appears to be a man ready and mighty in the scriptures, and thereby thoroughly furnished for every good word and work. He can relate scripture stories, and such as were very pertinent to his purpose, off-hand without looking in his Bible. He was *filled with the Holy Ghost*, not so much to reveal to him new things, or open to him the secret counsels and decrees of God concerning the Jewish nation, with them to convict these gainsayers; no, but to bring to his remembrance the scriptures of the Old Testament, and to teach him how to make use of them for their conviction. Those that are full of the Holy Ghost will be full of the scripture, as Stephen was.

2. That he quotes the scriptures according to the Septuagint translation, by which it appears he was one of the Hellenist Jews, who used that version in their synagogues. His following this, occasions divers variations from

the Hebrew original in this discourse, which the judges of the court did not correct, because they knew how he was led into them; nor is it any derogation to the authority of that Spirit by which he spoke, for the variations are not material. We have a maxim, *Apices juris non sunt jura* — *Mere points of law are not law itself*. These verses carry on this his compendium of church history to the end of the book of Genesis. Observe,

(1.) His preface: *Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken*. He gives them, though not flattering titles, yet civil and respectful ones, signifying his expectation of fair treatment with them; from men he hopes to be treated with humanity, and he hopes that brethren and fathers will use him in a fatherly brotherly way. They are ready to look upon him as an apostate from the Jewish church, and an enemy to them. But, to make way for their conviction to the contrary, he addresses himself to them as *men, brethren, and fathers*, resolving to look on himself as one of them, though they would not so look on him. He craves their attention: *Hearken*; though he was about to tell them what they already knew, yet he begs them to hearken to it, because, though they knew it all, yet they would not without a very close application of mind know how to apply it to the case before them.

(2.) His entrance upon the discourse, which (whatever it may seem to those that read it carelessly) is far from being a long ramble only to amuse the hearers, and give them a diversion by telling them an old story. No; it is all pertinent and *ad rem* — *to the purpose*, to show them that God had no this heart so much upon that holy place and the law as they had; but, as he had a church in the world many ages before that holy place was founded and the ceremonial law given, so he would have when they should both have had their period.

[1.] He begins with the call of Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees, by which he was set apart for God to be the trustee of the promise, and the father of the Old-Testament church. This we had an account of (^{GEN}Genesis 12:1, etc.), and it is referred to, (^{NEH}Nehemiah 9:7, 8. His native country was an idolatrous country, it was Mesopotamia, (v. 2), *the land of the Chaldeans* (v. 4); thence God brought him at two removes, not too far at once, dealing tenderly with him; he first brought him out of the land of the Chaldeans to Charran, or Haran, a place midway between that and Canaan (^{GEN}Genesis 11:31), and thence five years after, when his father was dead, he *removed him into* the land of *Canaan, wherein you now*

dwell. It should seem, the first time that God spoke to Abraham, he appeared in some visible display of the divine presence, as the *God of glory* (v. 2), to settle a correspondence with him: and then afterwards he kept up that correspondence, and spoke to him from time to time as there was occasion, without repeating his visible appearances as the God of glory.

First, From this call of Abraham we may observe,

1. That in all our ways we must acknowledge God, and attend the directions of his providence, as of the pillar of cloud and fire. It is not said, Abraham removed, but, *God removed him into this land wherein you now dwell*, and he did but follow his Leader.
2. Those whom God takes into covenant with himself he distinguishes from the children of this world; they are effectually called out of the state, out of the land, of their nativity; they must sit loose to the world, and live above it and every thing in it, even that in it which is most dear to them, and must trust God to make it up to them in another and better country, that is, the heavenly, which he will show them. God's chosen must follow him with an implicit faith and obedience.

Secondly, But let us see what this is to Stephen's case.

1. They had charged him as a blasphemer of God, and an apostate from the church; therefore he shows that he is a son of Abraham, and values himself upon his being able to say, *Our father Abraham*, and that he is a faithful worshipper of the God of Abraham, whom therefore he here calls *the God of glory*. He also shows that he owns divine revelation, and that particularly by which the Jewish church was founded and incorporated.
2. They were proud of their being circumcised; and therefore he shows that Abraham was taken under God's guidance, and into communion with him, before he was circumcised, for that was not till v. 8. With this argument Paul proves that Abraham was justified by faith, because he was justified when he was in uncircumcision: and so here.
3. They had a mighty jealousy for this holy place, which may be meant of the whole land of Canaan; for it was called the *holy land*, *Immanuel's land*; and the destruction of the holy house inferred that of

the holy land. “Now,” says Stephen, “you need not be so proud of it; for,”

(1.) “You came originally out of *Ur of the Chaldees*, where *your fathers served other gods* (^{461D}Joshua 24:2), and you were not the first planters of this country. Look therefore *unto the rock whence you were hewn, and the hole of the pit out of which you were digged;*” that is, as it follows there, “*look unto Abraham your father, for I called him alone* (^{250E}Isaiah 51:1, 2) — think of the meanness of your beginnings, and how you are entirely indebted to divine grace, and then you will see boasting to be for ever excluded. It was God that *raised up the righteous man from the east, and called him to his foot.* ^{231D}Isaiah 41:2. But, if his seed degenerate, let them know that God can destroy this holy place, and raise up to himself another people, for he is not a debtor to them.”

(2.) “God appeared in his glory to Abraham a great way off in Mesopotamia, before he came near Canaan, nay, before he dwelt in Charran; so that you must not think God's visits are confined to *this land*; no; he that brought the seed of the church from a country so far east can, if he pleases, carry the fruit of it to another country as far west.”

(3.) “God made no haste to bring him into this land, but let him linger some years by the way, which shows that God has not his heart so much upon this land as you have yours, neither is his honour, nor the happiness of his people, bound up in it. It is therefore neither blasphemy nor treason to say, *It shall be destroyed,*”

[2.] The unsettled state of Abraham and his seed for many ages after he was called out of Ur of the Chaldees. God did indeed promise that he would *give it to him for a possession, and to his seed after him*, v. 5. But, *First, As yet he had no child*, nor any by Sarah for many years after. *Secondly*, He himself was but a stranger and a sojourner in that land, and God *gave him no inheritance in it, no, not so much as to set his foot on*; but there he was as in a strange country, where he was always upon the remove, and could call nothing his own. *Thirdly*, His posterity did not come to the possession of it for a long time: *After four hundred years they shall come and serve me in this place*, and not till then, v. 7. Nay, *Fourthly*, They must undergo a great deal of hardship and difficulty before they shall be put into the possession of that land: they shall be brought into

bondage, and ill treated in a strange land: and this, not as the punishment of any particular sin, as their wandering in the wilderness was, for we never find any such account given of their bondage in Egypt; but so God had appointed, and it must be. And *at the end of four hundred years, reckoning from the birth of Isaac, that nation to whom they shall be in bondage will I judge, saith God.* Now this teaches us,

1. That *known unto God are all his works* beforehand. When Abraham had neither inheritance nor heir, yet he was told he should have both, the one a land of promise, and the other a child of promise; and therefore both had, and received, by faith.
2. That God's promises, though they are slow, are sure in the operation of them; they will be fulfilled in the season of them, though perhaps not so soon as we expect.
3. That though the people of God may be in distress and trouble for a time, yet God will at length both rescue them and reckon with those that do oppress them; for, *verily there is a God that judgeth in the earth.*

But let us see how this serves Stephen's purpose.

1. The Jewish nation, for the honour of which they were so jealous, was very inconsiderable in its beginnings; as their common father Abraham was fetched out of obscurity in Ur of the Chaldees, so their tribes, and the heads of them, were fetched out of servitude in Egypt, when they were the *fewest of all people*, ^{<870>}Deuteronomy 7:7. And what need is there of so much ado, as if their ruin, when they bring it upon themselves by sin, must be the ruin of the world, and of all God's interests in it? No; he that brought them out of Egypt can bring them into it again, as he threatened (^{<836>}Deuteronomy 28:68), and yet be no loser, while he can out of stones raise up children unto Abraham.
2. The slow steps by which the promise made to Abraham advanced towards the performance, and the many seeming contradictions here taken notice of, plainly show that it had a spiritual meaning, and that the land principally intended to be conveyed and secured by it was the *better country, that is, the heavenly*; as the apostle shows from this very argument that the patriarchs *sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country*, thence inferring that *they looked for a city that had foundations*, ^{<510>}Hebrews 11:9, 10. It was therefore no blasphemy to say,

Jesus shall destroy this place, when at the same time we say, “He shall lead us to the heavenly Canaan, and put us in possession of that, of which the earthly Canaan was but a type and figure.”

[3.] The building up of the family of Abraham, with the entail of divine grace upon it, and the disposals of divine Providence concerning it, which take up the rest of the book of Genesis.

First, God engaged to be a God to Abraham and his seed; and, in token of this, appointed that he and his male seed should be circumcised, ⁽¹⁷⁾Genesis 17:9, 10. He gave him the covenant of circumcision, that is, the covenant of which circumcision was the seal; and accordingly, when Abraham had a son born, he *circumcised him the eighth day* (v. 8), by which he was both bound by the divine law and interested in the divine promise; for circumcision had reference to both, being a seal of the covenant both on God's part — I will be to thee *a God all-sufficient*, and on man's part — *Walk before me, and be thou perfect*. And then when effectual care was thus taken for the securing of Abraham's seed, to be a *seed to serve the Lord*, they began to multiply: *Isaac begat Jacob, and Jacob the twelve patriarchs*, or roots of the respective tribes.

Secondly, Joseph, the darling and blessing of his father's house, was abused by his brethren; they *envied him* because of his dreams, and *sold him into Egypt*. Thus early did the children of Israel begin to grudge those among them that were eminent and outshone others, of which their enmity to Christ, who, like Joseph, was a *Nazarite among his brethren*, was a great instance.

Thirdly, God owned Joseph in his troubles, and was with him (⁽¹⁸⁾Genesis 39:2, 21), by the influence of his Spirit, both on his mind, giving him comfort, and on the minds of those he was concerned with, giving him favour in their eyes. And thus at length he *delivered him out of his afflictions*, and Pharaoh made him the second man in the kingdom, ⁽¹⁹⁾Psalms 105:20-22. And thus he not only arrived at great preferment among the Egyptians, but became the *shepherd and stone of Israel*, ⁽²⁰⁾Genesis 49:24.

Fourthly, Jacob was compelled to go down into Egypt, by a famine which forced him out of Canaan, *a dearth* (which was a *great affliction*), to that degree that *our fathers found no sustenance* in Canaan, v. 11. That *fruitful land was turned into barrenness*. But, hearing that there was *corn in Egypt*

(treasured up by the wisdom of his own son), he *sent out our fathers first* to fetch corn, v. 12. And the *second time* that they went, Joseph, who at first made himself strange to them, made himself known to them, and it was notified to Pharaoh that they were Joseph's kindred and had a dependence upon him (v. 13), whereupon, with Pharaoh's leave, *Joseph sent for his father Jacob to him into Egypt, with all his kindred and family, to the number of seventy-five souls, to be subsisted there, v. 13.* In Genesis they are said to be *seventy souls*, ^{<4457>}Genesis 46:27. But the Septuagint there makes them seventy-five, and Stephen or Luke follows that version, as ^{<4436>}Luke 3:36, where Cainan is inserted, which is not in the Hebrew text, but in the Septuagint. Some, by excluding Joseph and his sons, who were in Egypt before (which reduces the number to sixty-four), and adding the sons of the eleven patriarch, make the number seventy-five.

Fifthly, Jacob and his sons died in Egypt (v. 15), but were carried over to be buried in Canaan, v. 16. A very considerable difficulty occurs here: it is said, *They were carried over into Sychem*, whereas Jacob was buried not in Sychem, but near Hebron, in the cave of Machpelah, where Abraham and Isaac were buried, ^{<4613>}Genesis 50:13. Joseph's bones indeed were buried in Sychem (^{<4623>}Joshua 24:32), and it seems by this (though it is not mentioned in the story) that the bones of all the other patriarchs were carried with his, each of them giving the same commandment concerning them that he had done; and of them this must be understood, not of Jacob himself. But then the sepulchre in Sychem was bought by Jacob (^{<4639>}Genesis 33:19), and by this it is described, ^{<4642>}Joshua 24:32. How then is it here said to be bought by Abraham? Dr. Whitby's solution of this is very sufficient. He supplies it thus: *Jacob went down into Egypt and died, he and our fathers; and (our fathers) were carried over into Sychem; and he, that is, Jacob, was laid in the sepulchre that Abraham brought for a sum of money,* ^{<4626>}Genesis 23:16. (Or, they were laid there, that is, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.) *And they, namely, the other patriarchs, were buried in the sepulchre bought of the sons of Emmor, the father of Sychem.*

Let us now see what this is to Stephen's purpose.

1. He still reminds them of the mean beginning of the Jewish nation, as a check to their priding themselves in the glories of that nation; and that it was by a miracle of mercy that they were raised up out of nothing to what they were, from so small a number to be so great a nation; but, if they

answer not the intention of their being so raised, they can expect no other than to be destroyed. The prophets frequently put them in mind of the bringing of them out of Egypt, as a aggravation of their contempt of the law of God, and here it is urged upon them as an aggravation of their contempt of the gospel of Christ.

2. He reminds them likewise of the wickedness of those that were the patriarchs of their tribes, in envying their brother Joseph, and selling him into Egypt; and the same spirit was still working in them towards Christ and his ministers.

3. Their holy land, which they doted so much upon, their fathers were long kept out of the possession of, and met with dearth and great affliction in it; and therefore let them not think it strange if, after it has been so long polluted with sin, it be at length destroyed.

4. The faith of the patriarchs in desiring to be buried in the land of Canaan plainly showed that they had an eye to the heavenly country, to which it was the design of this Jesus to lead them.

~~4477~~ ACTS 7:17-29

STEPHEN'S ADDRESS

Stephen here goes on to relate,

I. The wonderful increase of the people of Israel in Egypt; it was by a wonder of providence that in a little time they advanced from a family into a nation.

1. It was *when the time of the promise drew nigh* — the time when they were to be formed into a people. During the first two hundred and fifteen years after the promise made to Abraham, the children of the covenant were increased but to seventy; but in the latter two hundred and fifteen years they increased to six hundred thousand fighting men. The motion of providence is sometimes quickest when it comes nearest the centre. Let us not be discouraged at the slowness of the proceedings towards the accomplishment of God's promises; God knows how to redeem the time that seems to have been lost, and, *when the year of the redeemed is at hand*, can do a double work in a single day.

2. It was *in Egypt*, where they were oppressed, and ruled with rigour; when their lives were made so bitter to them that, one would think, they should have wished to be written childless, yet they married, in faith that God in due time would visit them; and God *blessed them*, who thus honoured him, saying, *Be fruitful, and multiply*. Suffering times have often been growing times with the church.

II. The extreme hardships which they underwent there, v. 18, 19. When the Egyptians observed them to increase in number they increased their burdens, in which Stephen observes three things: —

1. Their base ingratitude: They were oppressed by *another king that knew not Joseph*, that is, did not consider the good service that Joseph had done to that nation; for, if he had, he would not have made so ill a requital to his relations and family. Those that injure good people are very ungrateful, for they are the blessings of the age and place they live in.

2. Their hellish craft and policy: *They dealt subtly with our kindred*. *Come on*, said they, *let us deal wisely*, thinking thereby to secure themselves, but it proved dealing foolishly, for they did but treasure up wrath by it. Those are in a great mistake who think they deal wisely for themselves when they deal deceitfully or unmercifully with their brethren.

3. Their barbarous and inhuman cruelty. That they might effectually extirpate them, *they cast out their young children, to the end they might not live*. The killing of their infant seed seemed a very likely way to crush an infant nation. Now Stephen seems to observe this to them, not only that they might further see how mean their beginnings were, fitly represented (perhaps with an eye to the exposing of the young children in Egypt) by the forlorn state of a helpless, out-cast infant (~~2304~~ Ezekiel 16:4), and how much they were indebted to God for his care of them, which they had forfeited, and made themselves unworthy of: but also that they might consider that what they were now doing against the Christian church in its infancy was as impious and unjust, and would be in the issue as fruitless and ineffectual, as that was which the Egyptians did against the Jewish church in its infancy. “You think you deal subtly in your ill treatment of us, and, in persecuting young converts, you do as they did in casting out the young children; but you will find it is to no purpose, in spite of your malice Christ's disciples will *increase and multiply*.”

III. The raising up of *Moses to be their deliverer*. Stephen was charged with having spoken blasphemous words against Moses, in answer to which charge he here speaks very honourably of him.

1. Moses was born when the persecution of Israel was at the hottest, especially in that most cruel instance of it, the murdering of the new-born children: *At that time, Moses was born* (v. 20), and was himself in danger, as soon as he came into the world (as our Saviour also was at Bethlehem) of falling a sacrifice to that bloody edict. God is preparing for his people's deliverance, when their way is darkest, and their distress deepest.

2. *He was exceedingly fair*; his face began to shine as soon as he was born, as a happy presage of the honour God designed to put upon him; he was *asteios to Theo* — *fair towards God*; he was sanctified from the womb, and this made him beautiful in God's eyes; for it is the beauty of holiness that is in God's sight of great price.

3. He was wonderfully preserved in his infancy, first, by the care of his tender parents, who *nourished him three months in their own house*, as long as they durst; and then by a favourable providence that threw him *into the arms of Pharaoh's daughter, who took him up, and nourished him as her own son* (v. 21); for those whom God designs to make special use of he will take special care of. And did he thus protect the child Moses? Much more will he secure the interests of his holy child Jesus (as he is called ~~4027~~ Acts 4:27) from *the enemies that are gathered together against him*.

4. He became a great scholar (v. 22): *He was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians*, who were then famed for all manner of polite literature, particularly philosophy, astronomy, and (which perhaps helped to lead them to idolatry) hieroglyphics. Moses, having his education at court, had opportunity of improving himself by the best books, tutors, and conversation, in all the arts and sciences, and had a genius for them. Only we have reason to think that he had not so far forgotten the God of his fathers as to acquaint himself with the unlawful studies and practices of the magicians of Egypt, any further than was necessary to the confuting of them.

5. He became a prime minister of state in Egypt. This seems to be meant by his being *mighty in words and deeds*. Though he had not a ready way of expressing himself, but stammered, yet he spoke admirably good sense,

and every thing he said commanded assent, and carried its own evidence and force of reason along with it; and, in business, none went on with such courage, and conduct, and success. Thus was he prepared, by human helps, for those services, which, after all, he could not be thoroughly furnished for without divine illumination. Now, by all this, Stephen will make it appear that, notwithstanding the malicious insinuations of his persecutors, he had as high and honourable thoughts of Moses as they had.

IV. The attempts which Moses made to deliver Israel, which they spurned, and would not close in with. This Stephen insists much upon, and it serves for a key to this story (^{^{Exo 2:11-15} Exodus 2:11-15), as does also that other construction which is put upon it by the apostle, ^{^{Heb 11:24-26} Hebrews 11:24-26. There it is represented as an act of holy self-denial, here as a designed prelude to, or entrance upon, the public service he was to be called out to (v. 23): *When he was full forty years old, in the prime of his time for preferment in the court of Egypt, it came into his heart (for God put it there) to visit his brethren the children of Israel, and to see which way he might do them any service; and he showed himself as a public person, with a public character.*}}

1. As Israel's saviour. This he gave a specimen of in avenging an oppressed Israelite, and killing the Egyptian that abused him (v. 24). *Seeing one of his brethren suffer wrong, he was moved with compassion towards the sufferer, and a just indignation at the wrong-doer, as men in public stations should be, and he avenged him that was oppressed, and smote the Egyptian, which, if he had been only a private person, he could not lawfully have done; but he knew that his commission from heaven would bear him out, and he supposed that his brethren (who could not but have some knowledge of the promise made to Abraham, that the nation that should oppress them God would judge) would have understood that God by his hand would deliver them; for he could not have had either presence of mind or strength of body to do what he did, if he had not been clothed with such a divine power as evinced a divine authority. If they had but understood the signs of the times, they might have taken this for the dawning of the day of their deliverance; but they understood not, they did not take this, as it was designed, for the setting up of a standard, and sounding of a trumpet, to proclaim Moses their deliverer.*

2. As Israel's judge. This he gave a specimen of, *the very next day*, in offering to accommodate matters between two contending Hebrews,

wherein he plainly assumed a public character (v. 26): *He showed himself to them as they strove*, and, putting on an air of majesty and authority, *he would have set them at one again*, and as their prince have determined the controversy between them, *saying, Sirs, you are brethren*, by birth and profession of religion; *why do you wrong one to another?* For he observed that (as in most strifes) there was a fault on both sides; and therefore, in order to peace and friendship, there must be a mutual remission and condescension. When Moses was to be Israel's deliverer out of Egypt, he slew the Egyptians, and so delivered Israel out of their hands; but, when he was to be Israel's judge and lawgiver, he ruled them with the golden sceptre, not the iron rod; he did not kill and slay them when they strove, but gave them excellent laws and statutes, and decided upon their complaints and appeals made to him, ⁽²¹⁵⁾Exodus 18:16. *But* the contending Israelite that was most in *the wrong thrust him away* (v. 27), would not bear the reproof, though a just and gentle one, but was ready to fly in his face, with, *Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us?* Proud and litigious spirits are impatient of check and control. Rather would these Israelites have their bodies ruled with rigour by their task-masters than be delivered, and have their minds ruled with reason, by their deliverer. The wrong-doer was so enraged at the reproof given him that he upbraided Moses with the service he had done to their nation in killing the Egyptian, which, if they had pleased, would have been the earnest of further and greater service: *Wilt thou kill me, as thou didst the Egyptian yesterday?* v. 28, charging that upon him as his crime, and threatening to accuse him for it, which was the hanging out of the flag of defiance to the Egyptians, and the banner of love and deliverance to Israel. Hereupon *Moses fled into the land of Midian*, and made no further attempt to deliver Israel till forty years after; he settled as a stranger in Midian, married, and had two sons, by Jethro's daughter, v. 29.

Now let us see how this serves Stephen's purpose.

1. They charged him with blaspheming Moses, in answer to which he retorts upon them the indignities which their fathers did to Moses, which they ought to be ashamed of, and humbled for, instead of picking quarrels thus, under pretence of zeal for the honour of Moses, with one that had as great a veneration for him as any of them had.

2. They persecuted him for disputing in defence of Christ and his gospel, in opposition to which they set up Moses and his law: “But,” saith he, “you had best take heed,”

(1.) “Lest you hereby do as your fathers did, refuse and reject one *whom God has raised up to be to you a prince and a Saviour*; you may understand, if you will not wilfully shut your eyes against the light, that God will, by this Jesus, deliver you out of a worse slavery than that in Egypt; take heed then of thrusting him away, but receive him as a ruler and a judge over you.”

(2.) “Lest you hereby fare as your fathers fared, who for this were very justly left to die in their slavery, for the deliverance came not till forty years after. This will be the issue of it, you put away the gospel from you, and it will be *sent to the Gentiles*; you will not have Christ, and you shall not have him, so shall your doom be.” ~~4238~~ Matthew 23:38, 39.

~~4433~~ ACTS 7:30-41

STEPHEN'S ADDRESS

Stephen here proceeds in his story of Moses; and let any one judge whether these are the words of one that was a blasphemer of Moses or no; nothing could be spoken more honourably of him. Here is,

I. The vision which he saw of the glory of God at the bush (v. 30): *When forty years had expired* (during all which time Moses was buried alive in Midian, and was now grown old, and one would think past service), that it might appear that all his performances were products of a divine power and promise (as it appeared that Isaac was a child of promise by his being born of parents stricken in years), now, at eighty years old, he enters upon that post of honour to which he was born, in recompence for his self-denial at forty years old. Observe,

1. Where God appeared to him: *In the wilderness of Mount Sinai*, v. 30. And, when he appeared to him there, that was holy ground (v. 33), which Stephen takes notice of, as a check to those who prided themselves in the temple, that holy place, as if there were no communion to be had with God but there; whereas God met Moses, and manifested himself to him, in a

remote obscure place in the wilderness of Sinai. They deceive themselves if they think God is confined to places; he can bring his people into a wilderness, and there speak comfortably to them.

2. How he appeared to him: *In a flame of fire* (for our God is a consuming fire), and yet *the bush*, in which this fire was, though combustible matter, *was not consumed*, which, as it represented the state of Israel in Egypt (where, though they were in the fire of affliction, yet they were not consumed), so perhaps it may be looked upon as a type of Christ's incarnation, and the union between the divine and human nature: God, manifested in the flesh, was as the flame of fire manifested in the bush.

3. How Moses was affected with this:

(1.) *He wondered at the sight*, v. 31. It was a phenomenon with the solution of which all his Egyptian learning could not furnish him. He had the curiosity at first to pry into it: *I will turn aside now, and see this great sight*; but the nearer he drew the more he was struck with amazement; and,

(2.) *He trembled, and durst not behold*, durst not look stedfastly upon it; for he was soon aware that it was not a fiery meteor, but *the angel of the Lord*; and no other than *the Angel of the covenant*, the Son of God himself. This set him a trembling. Stephen was accused for blaspheming Moses and God (^{401b}Acts 6:11), as if Moses had been a little god; but by this it appears that he was a *man, subject to like passions as we are*, and particularly that of fear, upon any appearance of the divine majesty and glory.

II. The declaration which he heard of the covenant of God (v. 32): *The voice of the Lord came to him*; for faith comes by hearing; and this was it: *I am the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob*; and therefore,

1. "I am the same that I was." The covenant God made with Abraham some ages ago was, *I will be to thee a God*, a God all-sufficient. "Now," saith God, "that covenant is still in full force; it is not cancelled nor forgotten, but I am, as I was, the God of Abraham, and now I will make it to appear so;" for all the favours, all the honours God put upon Israel, were founded upon this covenant with Abraham, and flowed from it.

2. "I will be the same that I am." For if the death of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, cannot break the covenant-relation between God and them (as by this it appears it cannot), then nothing else can: and then he will be a God,

(1.) To their souls, which are now separated from their bodies. Our Saviour by this proves the future state, ^{<423>}Matthew 22:31, 32. Abraham is dead, and yet God is still his God, therefore Abraham is still alive. God never did that for him in this world which would answer the true intent and full extent of that promise, that he would be the God of Abraham; and therefore it must be done for him in the other world. Now this is that life and immortality which are brought to light by the gospel, for the full conviction of the Sadducees, who denied it. Those therefore who stood up in defence of the gospel, and endeavoured to propagate it, were so far from blaspheming Moses that they did the greatest honour imaginable to Moses, and that glorious discovery which God made of himself to him at the bush.

(2.) To their seed. God, in declaring himself thus the God of their fathers, intimated his kindness to their seed, that they should be *beloved for the fathers' sakes*, ^{<515>}Romans 11:28; ^{<608>}Deuteronomy 7:8. Now the preachers of the gospel preached up this covenant, *the promise made of God unto the fathers; unto which promise those of the twelve tribes that did continue serving God hoped to come*, ^{<426>}Acts 26:6, 7. And shall they, under colour of supporting the holy place and the law, oppose the covenant which was made with Abraham and his seed, his spiritual seed, before the law was given, and long before the holy place was built? Since God's glory must be for ever advanced, and our glorying for ever silenced, God will have our salvation to be by promise, and not by the law; law; the Jews therefore who persecuted the Christians, under pretence that they blasphemed the law, did themselves blaspheme the promise, and forsook all their own mercies that were contained in it.

III. The commission which God gave him to deliver Israel out of Egypt. The Jews set up Moses in competition with Christ, and accused Stephen as a blasphemer because he did not do so too. But Stephen here shows that Moses was an eminent type of Christ, as he was Israel's deliverer. When God had declared himself the God of Abraham he proceeded,

1. To order Moses into a reverent posture: *“Put off thy shoes from thy feet. Enter not upon sacred things with low, and cold, and common thoughts. Keep thy foot,* ^{<201>}Ecclesiastes 5:1. Be not hasty and rash in thy approaches to God; tread softly.”

2. To order Moses into a very eminent service. When he is ready to receive commands, he shall have commission. He is commissioned to demand

leave from Pharaoh for Israel to go out of his land, and to enforce that demand, v. 34. Observe,

(1.) The notice God took both of their sufferings and of their sense of their sufferings: *I have seen, I have seen their affliction, and have heard their groaning*. God has a compassionate regard to the troubles of his church, and the groans of his persecuted people; and their deliverance takes rise from his pity.

(2.) The determination he fixed to redeem them by the hand of Moses: *I am come down to deliver them*. It should seem, though God is present in all places, yet he uses that expression here of coming down to deliver them because that deliverance was typical of what Christ did, when, *for us men, and for our salvation, he came down from heaven; he that ascended first descended*. Moses is the man that must be employed: *Come, and I will send thee into Egypt*: and, if God send him, he will own him and give him success.

IV. His acting in pursuance of this commission, wherein he was a figure of the Messiah. And Stephen takes notice here again of the slights they had put upon him, the affronts they had given him, and their refusal to have him to reign over them, as tending very much to magnify his agency in their deliverance.

1. God put honour upon him whom they put contempt upon (v. 35): *This Moses whom they refused* (whose kind offers and good offices they rejected with scorn, *saying, Who made thee a ruler and a judge? Thou takest too much upon thee, thou son of Levi,* ^{<44B>}Numbers 16:3), *this same Moses did God send to be a ruler, and a deliverer, by the hand of the angel which appeared to him in the bush*. It may be understood either that God sent to him by the hand of the angel going along with him he became a complete deliverer. Now, by this example, Stephen would intimate to the council *that this Jesus whom they now refused*, as their fathers did Moses, *saying, Who made thee a prophet and a king? Who gave thee this authority?* even this same has God advanced *to be a prince and a Saviour, a ruler and a deliverer*; as the apostles had told them awhile ago (^{<44B>}Acts 5:30, 31), *that the stone which the builders refused was become the head-stone in the corner,* ^{<44B>}Acts 4:11.

2. God showed favour to them by him, and he was very forward to serve them, though they had thrust him away. God might justly have refused

them his service, and he might justly have declined it; but it is all forgotten: they are not so much as upbraided with it, v. 36. *He brought them out, notwithstanding, after he had shown wonders and signs in the land of Egypt* (which were afterwards continued for the completing of their deliverance, according as the case called for them) *in the Red Sea and in the wilderness forty years*. So far is he from blaspheming Moses that he admires him as a glorious instrument in the hand of God for the forming of the Old-Testament church. But it does not at all derogate from his just honour to say that he was but an instrument, and that he is outshone by this Jesus, whom he encourages these Jews yet to close with, and to come into his interest, not fearing but that then they should be received into his favour, and receive benefit by him, as the people of Israel were delivered by Moses, though they had once refused him.

V. His prophecy of Christ and his grace, v. 37. He not only was a type of Christ (many were so that perhaps had not an actual foresight of his day), but Moses spoke of him (v. 37): *This is that Moses who said unto the children of Israel, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren*. This is spoken of as one of the greatest honours God put upon him (nay, as that which exceeded all the rest), that by him he gave notice to the children of Israel of the great prophet that should come into the world, raised their expectation of him, and required them to receive him. When his bringing them out of Egypt is spoken of it is with an emphasis of honour, *This is that Moses*, ^{<466>}Exodus 6:26. And so it is here, *This is that Moses*. Now this is very full to Stephen's purpose; in asserting that Jesus should change the customs of the ceremonial law, he was so far from blaspheming Moses that really he did him the greatest honour imaginable, by showing how the prophecy of Moses was accomplished, which was so clear, that, as Christ told them himself, *If they had believed Moses, they would have believed him*, ^{<466>}John 5:46.

1. Moses, in God's name, told them that, in the fulness of time, they should have a prophet raised up among them, one of their own nation, that should be like unto him (^{<585>}Deuteronomy 18:15, 18), — a ruler and a deliverer, a judge and a lawgiver, like him, — who should therefore have authority to change the customs that he had delivered, and to bring in a better hope, as *the Mediator of a better testament*.

2. He charged them to hear that prophet, to receive his dictates, to admit the change he would make in their customs, and to submit to him in every

thing; “and this will be the greatest honour you can do to Moses and to his law, who said, *Hear you him*; and came to be a witness to the repetition of this charge by *a voice from heaven*, at the transfiguration of Christ, and by his silence gave consent to it,” ^{<475>}Matthew 17:5.

VI. The eminent services which Moses continued to do to the people of Israel, after he had been instrumental to bring them out of Egypt, v. 38. And herein also he was a type of Christ, who yet so far exceeds him that it is no blasphemy to say, “He has authority to change the customs that Moses delivered.” It was the honour of Moses,

1. That *he was in the church in the wilderness*; he presided in all the affairs of it for forty years, was king in Jeshurun, ^{<535>}Deuteronomy 33:5. The camp of Israel is here called *the church in the wilderness*; for it was a sacred society, incorporated by a divine charter under a divine government, and blessed with divine revelation. The church in the wilderness was a church, though it was not yet perfectly formed, as it was to be when they came to Canaan, *but every man did that which was right in his own eyes*, ^{<518>}Deuteronomy 12:8, 9. It was the honour of Moses that he was in that church, and many a time it had been destroyed if Moses had not been in it to intercede for it. But Christ is the president and guide of a more excellent and glorious church than that in the wilderness was, and is more in it, as the life and soul of it, than Moses could be in that.

2. That *he was with the angel that spoke to him in the mount Sinai, and with our fathers* — was with him in the holy mount twice forty days, with the angel of the covenant, Michael, our prince. Moses was immediately conversant with God, but never lay in his bosom as Christ did from eternity. Or these words may be taken thus: *Moses was in the church in the wilderness*, but it was *with the angel that spoke to him in mount Sinai*, that is, at the burning bush; for that was said to be at mount Sinai (v. 30); that angel went before him, and was guide to him, else he could not have been a guide to Israel; of this God speaks (^{<1230>}Exodus 23:20), *I send an angel before thee*, and ^{<1230>}Exodus 33:2. And see ^{<1216>}Numbers 20:16. He was in the church with the angel, without whom he could have done no service to the church; but Christ is himself that angel which was with the church in the wilderness, and therefore has an authority above Moses.

3. That *he received the lively oracles to give unto them*; not only the ten commandments, but the other instructions which *the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying, Speak them to the children of Israel.*

(1.) The words of God are *oracles*, certain and infallible, and of unquestionable authority and obligation; they are to be consulted as oracles, and by them all controversies must be determined.

(2.) They are *lively oracles*, for they are the oracles of the living God, not of the dumb and dead idols of the heathens: the word that God speaks is spirit and life; not that the law of Moses could give life, but it showed the way to life: *If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.*

(3.) Moses received them from God, and delivered nothing as an oracle to the people but what *he had first received from God.*

(4.) The lively oracles which he received from God he faithfully gave to the people, to be observed and preserved. It was the principal privilege of the Jews that *to them were committed the oracles of God*; and it was by the hand of Moses that they were committed. As Moses gave them not that bread, so neither did he give them that law from heaven (~~406~~ John 6:32), but God gave it to them; and he that gave them those customs by his servant Moses might, no doubt, when he pleased, change the customs by his Son Jesus, who received more lively oracles to give unto us than Moses did.

VII. The contempt that was, after this, and notwithstanding this, put upon him by the people. Those that charged Stephen with speaking against Moses would do well to answer what their own ancestors had done, and they tread in their ancestors' steps.

1. *They would not obey him, but thrust him from them*, v. 39. They murmured at him, mutinied against him, refused to obey his orders, and sometimes were ready to stone him. Moses did indeed give them an excellent law, but by this it appeared that *it could not make the comers there unto perfect* (~~380~~ Hebrews 10:1), for *in their hearts they turned back again into Egypt*, and preferred their garlic and onions there before the manna they had under the guidance of Moses, or the milk and honey they hoped for in Canaan. Observe, Their secret disaffection to Moses, with their inclination to Egyptianism, if I may so call it. This was, in effect, turning back to Egypt; it was doing it in heart. Many that pretend to be

going forward towards Canaan, by keeping up a show and profession of religion, are, at the same time, in their hearts turning back to Egypt, like Lot's wife to Sodom, and will be dealt with as deserters, for it is the heart that God looks at. Now, if the customs that Moses delivered to them could not prevail to change them, wonder not that Christ comes to change the customs, and to introduce a more spiritual way of worship.

2. *They made a golden calf* instead of him, which besides the affront that was thereby offered to God, was a great indignity to Moses: for it was upon this consideration that they made the calf, because “*as for this Moses, who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we know not what is become of him; therefore make us gods of gold;*” as if a calf were sufficient to supply the want of Moses, and as capable of going before them into the promised land. *So they made a calf in those days when the law was given them, and offered sacrifices unto the idol, and rejoiced in the work of their own hands.* So proud were they of their new god that when they had *sat down to eat and drink, they rose up to play!* By all this it appears that there was a great deal which the law could not do, *in that it was weak through the flesh;* it was therefore necessary that this law should be perfected by a better hand, and he was no blasphemer against Moses who said that Christ had done it.

~~4172~~ ACTS 7:42-50

STEPHEN'S ADDRESS

Two things we have in these verses: —

I. Stephen upbraids them with the idolatry of their fathers, which God gave them up to, as a punishment for their early forsaking him in worshipping the golden calf; and this was the saddest punishment of all for that sin, as it was of the idolatry of the Gentile world *that God gave them up to a reprobate mind.* When *Israel was joined to idols,* joined to the golden calf, and not long after to Baal-peor, God said, *Let them alone;* let them go on (v. 42): *Then God turned, and gave them up to worship the host of heaven.* He particularly cautioned them not to do it, at their peril, and gave them reasons why they should not; but, when they were bent upon it, *he gave them up to their own hearts; lust,* withdrew his restraining grace, and then they walked in their own counsels, and were so

scandalously mad upon their idols as never any people were. Compare ^{<304B>}Deuteronomy 4:19 with ^{<248B>}Jeremiah 8:2. For this he quotes a passage out of ^{<302B>}Amos 5:25. For it would be less invidious to tell them their own [character and doom] from an Old-Testament prophet, who upbraids them,

1. For not sacrificing to their own God in the wilderness (v. 42): *Have you offered to me slain beasts, and sacrifices, by the space of forty years in the wilderness?* No; during all that time sacrifices to God were intermitted; they did not so much as keep the passover after the second year. It was God's condescension to them that he did not insist upon it during their unsettled state; but then let them consider how ill they requited him in offering sacrifices to idols, when God dispensed with their offering them to him. This is also a check to their zeal for the customs that Moses delivered to them, and their fear of having them changed by *this Jesus*, that immediately after they were delivered these customs were for forty years together disused as needless things.

2. For sacrificing to other gods after they came to Canaan (v. 43): *You took up the tabernacle of Moloch.* Moloch was the idol of the children of Ammon, to which they barbarously offered their own children in sacrifice, which they could not do without great terror and grief to themselves and their families; yet this unnatural idolatry they arrived at, when *God gave them up to worship the host of heaven.* See ^{<483B>}2 Chronicles 28:3. It was surely the strongest delusion that ever people were given up to, and the greatest instance of the power of Satan in the children of disobedience, and therefore it is here spoken of emphatically: *Yea, you took up the tabernacle of Moloch, you submitted even to that, and to the worship of the star of your god Remphan.* Some think Remphan signifies *the moon*, as Moloch does *the sun*; others take it for *Saturn*, for that planet is called *Remphan* in the Syriac and Persian languages. The Septuagint puts it for *Chiun*, as being a name more commonly known. They had images representing the star, like the silver shrines for Diana, here called *the figures which they made to worship*. Dr. Lightfoot thinks they had figures representing the whole starry firmament, with all the constellations, and the planets, and these are called *Remphan* — “the high representation,” like the celestial globe: a poor thing to make an idol of, and yet better than a golden calf! Now for this it is threatened, *I will carry you away beyond Babylon.* In Amos it is *beyond Damascus*, meaning *to Babylon, the land of the north*. But Stephen changes it, with an eye to the captivity of the ten tribes, who were *carried away beyond Babylon, by the river of Gozan, and*

in the cities of the Medes, ^{<1716>}2 Kings 17:6. Let it not therefore seem strange to them to hear of the destruction of this place, for they had heard of it many a time from the prophets of the Old Testament, who were not therefore accused as blasphemers by any but the wicked rulers. It was observed, in the debate on Jeremiah's case, that Micah was not called to an account though he prophesied, saying, *Zion shall be ploughed as a field,* ^{<2118>}Jeremiah 26:18, 19.

II. He gives an answer particularly to the charge exhibited against him relating to the temple, *that he spoke blasphemous words against that holy place,* v. 44-50. He was accused for saying that Jesus would destroy this holy place: "And what if I did say so?" (saith Stephen) "the glory of the holy God is not bound up in the glory of this holy place, but that may be preserved untouched, though this be laid in the dust;" for,

1. "It was not till our fathers came into the wilderness, in their way to Canaan, that they had any fixed place of worship; and yet the patriarchs, many ages before, worshipped God acceptably at the altars they had adjoining to their own tents *in the open air — sub dio;* and he that was worshipped without a holy place in the first, and best, and purest ages of the Old-Testament church, may and will be so when this holy place is destroyed, without any diminution to his glory."

2. The holy place was at first but a tabernacle, mean and movable, showing itself to be short-lived, and not designed to continue always. Why might not this holy place, though built of stones, be decently brought to its end, and give place to its betters, as well as that though framed of curtains? As it was no dishonour, but an honour to God, that the tabernacle gave way to the temple, so it is now that the material temple gives way to the spiritual one, and so it will be when, at last, the spiritual temple shall give way to the eternal one.

3. That tabernacle was *a tabernacle of witness,* or of testimony, *a figure of good things to come, of the true tabernacle which the Lord pitched, and not men,* ^{<811D>}Hebrews 8:2. This was the glory both of the tabernacle and temple, that they were erected for a testimony of that temple of God which in the latter days should be opened in heaven (^{<111D>}Revelation 11:19), and of Christ's tabernacling on earth (as the word is, ^{<1114>}John 1:14), and of the temple of his body.

4. That tabernacle was framed just as God appointed, and *according to the fashion which Moses saw in the mount*, which plainly intimates that it had reference to good things to come. Its rise being heavenly, its meaning and tendency were so; and therefore it was no diminution at all to its glory to say that this temple made with hands should be destroyed, in order to the building of *another made without hands*, which was Christ's crime (~~416B~~ Mark 14:58), and Stephen's.

5. That tabernacle was pitched first in the wilderness; it was not a native of this land of yours (to which you think it must for ever be confined), but was brought in in the next age, by our fathers, who came after those who first erected it, into the possession of the Gentiles, into the land of Canaan, which had long been in the possession of the devoted nations *whom God drove out before the face of our fathers*. And why may not God set up his spiritual temple, as he had done the material tabernacle, in those countries that were now the possession of the Gentiles? That tabernacle was brought in by those who came *with Jesus*, that is, *Joshua*. And I think, for distinction sake, and to prevent mistakes, it ought to be so read, both here and ~~504B~~ Hebrews 4:8. Yet in naming *Joshua* here, which in Greek is *Jesus*, there may be a tacit intimation that as the Old-Testament Joshua brought in that typical tabernacle, so the New-Testament Joshua should bring in the true tabernacle into the possession of the Gentiles.

6. That tabernacle continued for many ages, *even to the days of David*, above four hundred years, before there was any thought of building a temple, v. 45. David, having *found favour before God*, did indeed desire this further favour, to have leave to build God a house, to be a constant settled tabernacle, or dwelling-place, for the Shechinah, or the tokens of the presence of the God of Jacob, v. 46. Those who have found favour with God should show themselves forward to advance the interests of his kingdom among men.

7. God had his heart so little upon a temple, or such a holy place as they were so jealous for, that, when David desired to build one, he was forbidden to do it; God was in no haste for one, as he told David (~~407E~~ 2 Samuel 7:7), and therefore it was not he, but his son Solomon, some years after, that built him a house. David had all that sweet communion with God in public worship which we read of in his Psalms before there was any temple built.

8. God often declared that temples made with hands were not his delight, nor could add any thing to the perfection of his rest and joy. Solomon, when he dedicated the temple, acknowledged that God *dwelleth not in temples made with hands*; he has not need of them, is not benefited by them, cannot be confined to them. The whole world is his temple, in which he is every where present, and fills it with his glory; and what occasion has he for a temple then to manifest himself in? Indeed the pretended deities of the heathen needed temples made with hands, for they were gods made with hands (v. 41), and had no other place to manifest themselves in than in their own temples; but the one only true and living God needs no temple, for *the heaven is his throne*, in which he rests, and *the earth is his footstool*, over which he rules (v. 49, 50), and therefore, *What house will you build me*, comparable to this which I have already? *Or, what is the place of my rest?* What need have I of a house, either to repose myself in or to show myself? *Hath not my hand made all these things?* And *these show his eternal power and Godhead* (^{<41D>}Romans 1:20); they so show themselves to all mankind that those who worship other gods are without excuse. And as the world is thus God's temple, wherein he is manifested, so it is God's temple in which he will be worshipped. As the earth is full of his glory, and is therefore his temple (^{<20B>}Isaiah 6:3), so the earth is, or shall be, full of his praise (^{<30B>}Habakkuk 3:3), *and all the ends of the earth shall fear him* (^{<36D>}Psalms 67:7), and upon this account it is his temple. It was therefore no reflection at all upon this holy place, however they might take it, to say *that Jesus should destroy this temple*, and set up another, into which all nations should be admitted, ^{<45G>}Acts 15:16, 17. And it would not seem strange to those who considered that scripture which Stephen here quotes (^{<20D>}Isaiah 66:1-3), which, as it expressed God's comparative contempt of the external part of his service, so it plainly foretold the rejection of the unbelieving Jews, and the welcome of the Gentiles that were of a contrite spirit into the church.

^{<40E>}ACTS 7:51-53

STEPHEN'S ADDRESS

Stephen was going on in his discourse (as it should seem by the thread of it) to show that, as the temple, so the temple-service must come to an end, and it would be the glory of both to give way to that worship of the Father

in spirit and in truth which was to be established in the kingdom of the Messiah, stripped of the pompous ceremonies of the old law, and so he was going to apply all this which he had said more closely to his present purpose; but he perceived they could not bear it. They could patiently hear the history of the Old Testament told (it was a piece of learning which they themselves dealt much in); but if Stephen go about to tell them that their power and tyranny must come down, and that the church must be governed by a spirit of holiness and love, and heavenly-mindedness, they will not so much as give him the hearing. It is probable that he perceived this, and that they were going to silence him; and therefore he breaks off abruptly in the midst of his discourse, and by that spirit of wisdom, courage, and power, wherewith he was filled, he sharply rebuked his persecutors, and exposed their true character; for, if they will not admit the testimony of the gospel to them, it shall become a testimony against them.

I. They, like their fathers, were stubborn and wilful, and would not be wrought upon by the various methods God took to reclaim and reform them; they were like their fathers, inflexible both to the word of God and to his providences.

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1. They were *stiff-necked* (v. 51), and would not submit their necks to the sweet and easy yoke of God's government, nor draw in it, but were *like a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke*; or they would not bow their heads, no, not to God himself, would not do obeisance to him, would not humble themselves before him. The stiff neck is the same with the hard heart, obstinate and contumacious, and that will not yield — the general character of the Jewish nation, ^{<23>}Exodus 32:9; 33:33, 5; 34:9; ^{<30>}Deuteronomy 9:6, 13; 31:27; ^{<31>}Ezekiel 2:4.

2. They were *uncircumcised in heart and ears* their hearts and ears were not devoted and given up to God, as the body of the people were in profession by the sign of circumcision: "In name and show you are circumcised Jews, but in heart and ears you are still uncircumcised heathens, and pay no more deference to the authority of your God than they do, ^{<20>}Jeremiah 9:26. You are under the power of unmortified lusts

and corruptions, which stop your ears to the voice of God, and harden your hearts to that which is both most commanding and most affecting.” They had not that *circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh*, ^{<SM>}Colossians 2:11.

II. They, like their fathers, were not only not influenced by the methods God took to reform them, but they were enraged and incensed against them: *You do always resist the Holy Ghost*.

1. They resisted the Holy Ghost speaking to them by the prophets, whom they opposed and contradicted, hated and ridiculed; this seems especially meant here, by the following explication, *Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted?* In persecuting and silencing those that spoke by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost they resisted the Holy Ghost. Their fathers resisted the Holy Ghost in the prophets that God raised up to them, and so did they in Christ's apostles and ministers, who spoke by the same Spirit, and had greater measures of his gifts than the prophets of the Old Testament had, and yet were more resisted.

2. They resisted the Holy Ghost striving with them by their own consciences, and would not comply with the convictions and dictates of them. God's Spirit strove with them as with the old world, but in vain; they resisted him, took part with their corruptions against their convictions, and rebelled against the light. There is that in our sinful hearts that always resists the Holy Ghost, a flesh that lusts against the Spirit, and wars against his motions; but in the hearts of God's elect, when the fulness of time comes, this resistance is overcome and overpowered, and after a struggle the throne of Christ is set up in the soul, and every thought that had exalted itself against it is brought into captivity to it, ^{<TM>}2 Corinthians 10:4, 5. That grace therefore which effects this change might more fitly be called *victorious grace* than *irresistible*.

III. They, like their fathers, persecuted and slew those whom God sent unto them to call them to duty, and make them offers of mercy.

1. Their fathers had been the cruel and constant persecutors of the Old-Testament prophets (v. 51): *Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted?* More or less, one time or other, they had a blow at them all. With regard even to those that lived in the best reigns, when the princes did not persecute them, there was a malignant party in the nation that mocked at them and abused them, and most of them were at last, either by

colour of law or popular fury, put to death; and that which aggravated the sin of persecuting the prophets was, that the business of the prophets they were so spiteful at was to *show before of the coming of the just One*, to give notice of God's kind intentions towards that people, to send the Messiah among them in the fulness of time. Those that were the messengers of such glad tidings should have been courted and caressed, and have had the preferments of the best of benefactors; but, instead of this, they had the treatment of the worst of malefactors.

2. They had been the *betrayers and murderers of the just One* himself, as Peter had told them, ^{<404>}Acts 3:14, 15; 5:30. They had hired Judas to betray him, and had in a manner forced Pilate to condemn him; and therefore it is charged upon them that they were his betrayers and murders. Thus they were the genuine seed of those who slew the prophets that foretold his coming, which, by slaying him, they showed they would have done if they had lived then; and thus, as our Saviour had told them, they brought upon themselves the guilt of the blood of all the prophets. To which of the prophets would those have shown any respect who had no regard to the Son of God himself?

IV. They, like their fathers, put contempt upon divine revelation, and would not be guided and governed by it; and this was the aggravation of their sin, that God had given, as to their fathers his law, so to them his gospel, in vain.

1. Their fathers received the law, and did not observe it, v. 53. God wrote to them the great things of his law, after he had first spoken them to them; and yet they were counted by them as a strange or foreign thing, which they were no way concerned in. The law is said to be *received by the disposition of angels*, because angels were employed in the solemnity of giving the law, in the thunderings and lightnings, and the sound of the trumpet. It is said to be *ordained by angels* (^{<405>}Galatians 3:19), God is said to come *with ten thousand* of his saints to give the law (^{<406>}Deuteronomy 33:2), and it was a *word spoken by angels*, ^{<407>}Hebrews 2:2. This put an honour both upon the law and the Lawgiver, and should increase our veneration for both. But those that thus received the law yet kept it not, but by making the golden calf broke it immediately in a capital instance.

2. They received the gospel now, by the disposition, not of angels, but of the Holy Ghost, — not with the sound of a trumpet, but, which was more strange, in the gift of tongues, and yet they did not embrace it. They would not yield to the plainest demonstrations, any more than their fathers before them did, for they were resolved not to comply with God either in his law or in his gospel.

We have reason to think Stephen had a great deal more to say, and would have said it if they would have suffered him; but they were wicked and unreasonable men with whom he had to do, that could no more hear reason than they could speak it.

~~405~~ ACTS 7:54-60

STEPHEN'S MARTYRDOM

We have here the death of the first martyr of the Christian church, and there is in this story a lively instance of the outrage and fury of the persecutors (such as we may expect to meet with if we are called out to suffer for Christ), and of the courage and comfort of the persecuted, that are thus called out. Here is hell in its fire and darkness, and heaven in its light and brightness; and these serve as foils to set off each other. It is not here said that the votes of the council were taken upon his case, and that by the majority he was found guilty, and then condemned and ordered to be stoned to death, according to the law, as a blasphemer; but, it is likely, so it was, and that it was not by the violence of the people, without order of the council, that he was put to death; for here is the usual ceremony of regular executions — he was cast out of the city, and the hands of the witnesses were first upon him.

Let us observe here the wonderful discomposure of the spirits of his enemies and persecutors, and the wonderful composure of his spirit.

I. See the strength of corruption in the persecutors of Stephen — malice in perfection, hell itself broken loose, men become incarnate devils, and the serpent's seed spitting their venom.

1. *When they heard these things they were cut to the heart* (v. 54), *dieprionto*, the same word that is used ~~8157~~ Hebrews 11:37, and translated

they were sawn asunder. They were put to as much torture in their minds as ever the martyrs were put to in their bodies. They were filled with indignation at the unanswerable arguments that Stephen urged for their conviction, and that they could find nothing to say against them. They were not pricked to the heart with sorrow, as those were ^{<402>}Acts 2:37, but cut to the heart with rage and fury, as they themselves were, ^{<403>}Acts 5:33. Stephen rebuked them sharply, as Paul expresses it (^{<5013>}Titus 1:13), *apotomos* — *cuttingly*, for they were cut to the heart by the reproof. Note, Rejecters of the gospel and opposers of it are really tormentors to themselves. Enmity to God is a heart-cutting thing; faith and love are heart-healing. When they heard how he that *looked like an angel* before he began his discourse talked like an angel, like a messenger from heaven, before he concluded it, they were *like a wild bull in a net, full of the fury of the Lord*, (^{<250>}Isaiah 51:20), despairing to run down a cause so bravely pleaded, and yet resolved not to yield to it.

2. *They gnashed upon him with their teeth.* This denotes,

(1.) Great malice and rage against him. Job complained of his enemy that he *gnashed upon him with his teeth*, ^{<800>}Job 16:9. The language of this was, *Oh that we had of his flesh to eat!* ^{<813>}Job 31:31. They *grinned at him*, as dogs at those they are enraged at; and therefore Paul, cautioning against those of the circumcision, says, *Beware of dogs*, ^{<3002>}Philippians 3:2. Enmity at the saints turns men into brute beasts.

(2.) Great vexation within themselves; they fretted to see in him such manifest tokens of a divine power and presence, and it vexed them to the heart. *The wicked shall see it and be grieved, he shall gnash with his teeth and melt away*, ^{<1020>}Psalms 112:10. Gnashing with the teeth is often used to express the horror and torments of the damned. Those that have the malice of hell cannot but have with it some of the pains of hell.

3. *They cried out with a loud voice* (v. 57), to irritate and excite one another, and to drown the noise of the clamours of their own and one another's consciences; when he said, *I see heaven opened*, they cried with a loud voice, that he might not be heard to speak. Note, It is very common for a righteous cause, particularly the righteous cause of Christ's religion, to be attempted to be run down by noise and clamour; what is wanting in reason is made up in tumult, and *the cry of him that ruleth among fools, while the words of the wise are heard in quiet.* They cried with a loud

voice, as soldiers when they are going to engage in battle, mustering up all their spirit and vigour for this desperate encounter.

4. They *stopped their ears*, that they might not hear their own noisiness; or perhaps under pretence that they could not bear to hear his blasphemies. As Caiaphas rent his clothes when Christ said, *Hereafter you shall see the Son of man coming in glory* (^{<1864>}Matthew 26:64, 65), so here these *stopped their ears* when Stephen said, *I now see the Son of man standing in glory*, both pretending that what was spoken was not to be heard with patience. Their stopping their ears was,

(1.) A manifest specimen of their wilful obstinacy; they were resolved they would not hear what had a tendency to convince them, which was what the prophets often complained of: they were *like the deaf adder, that will not hear the voice of the charmer*, ^{<1804>}Psalms 58:4, 5.

(2.) It was a fatal omen of that judicial hardness to which God would give them up. They stopped their ears, and then God, in a way of righteous judgment, stopped them. This was the work that was now in doing with the unbelieving Jews: *Make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy*; thus was Stephen's character of them answered, *You uncircumcised in heart and ears*.

5. They *ran upon him with one accord* — the people and the elders of the people, judges, prosecutors, witnesses, and spectators, they all flew upon him, as beasts upon their prey. See how violent they were, and in what haste — they ran upon him, though there was no danger of his outrunning them; and see how unanimous they were in this evil thing — they ran upon him *with one accord*, one and all, hoping thereby to terrify him, and put him into confusion, envying him his composure and comfort in soul, with which he wonderfully enjoyed himself in the midst of this hurry; they did all they could to ruffle him.

6. They *cast him out of the city, and stoned him*, as if he were not worthy to live in Jerusalem; nay, not worthy to live in this world, pretending herein to execute the law of Moses (^{<1246>}Leviticus 24:16), *He that blasphemeth the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death, all the congregation shall certainly stone him*. And thus they had put Christ to death, when this same court had found him guilty of blasphemy, but that, for his greater ignominy, they were desirous he should be crucified, and God overruled it for the fulfilling of the scripture. The fury with which

they managed the execution is intimated in this: they cast him out of the city, as if they could not bear the sight of him; they treated him as an anathema, as the offscouring of all things. The witnesses against him were the leaders in the execution, according to the law (^{<517>}Deuteronomy 17:7), *The hands of the witnesses shall be first upon him, to put him to death*, and particularly in the case of blasphemy, (^{<524>}Leviticus 24:14; ^{<533>}Deuteronomy 13:9. Thus they were to confirm their testimony. Now, the stoning of a man being a laborious piece of work, the witnesses took off their upper garments, that they might not hang in their way, *and they laid them down at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul*, now a pleased spectator of this tragedy. It is the first time we find mention of his name; we shall know it and love it better when we find it changed to *Paul*, and him changed from a persecutor into a preacher. This little instance of his agency in Stephen's death he afterwards reflected upon with regret (^{<423>}Acts 22:20): *I kept the raiment of those that slew him*.

II. See the strength of grace in Stephen, and the wonderful instances of God's favour to him, and working in him. As his persecutors were full of Satan, so was he *full of the Holy Ghost*, fuller than ordinary, anointed with fresh oil for the combat, that, as the day, so might the strength be. Upon this account those are *blessed who are persecuted for righteousness' sake*, that *the Spirit of God and of glory rests upon them*, (^{<404>}1 Peter 4:14. When he was chosen to public service, he was described to be a man *full of the Holy Ghost* (^{<405>}Acts 6:5), and now he is called out to martyrdom he has still the same character. Note, Those that are full of the Holy Ghost are fit for any thing, either to act for Christ or to suffer for him. And those whom God calls out to difficult services for his name he will qualify for those services, and carry comfortably through them, by filling them with the Holy Ghost, that, as their afflictions for Christ abound, their consolation in him may yet more abound, and then *none of these things move them*. Now here we have a remarkable communion between this blessed martyr and the blessed Jesus in this critical moment. When the followers of Christ are for his sake *killed all the day long, and accounted as sheep for the slaughter*, does this separate them from the love of Christ? Does he love them the less? Do they love him the less? No, by no means; and so it appears by this narrative, in which we may observe.

1. Christ's gracious manifestation of himself to Stephen, both for his comfort and for his honour, in the midst of his sufferings. When they were cut to the heart, and gnashed upon him with their teeth, ready to eat him

up, then he had a view of the glory of Christ sufficient to fill him with joy unspeakable, which was intended not only for his encouragement, but for the support and comfort of all God's suffering servants in all ages.

(1.) He, *being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, v. 55.*

[1.] Thus he looked above the power and fury of his persecutors, and did as it were despise them, and laugh them to scorn, as the daughter of Zion, ^{<3572>}Isaiah 37:22. They had their eyes fixed upon him, full of malice and cruelty; but he looked up to heaven, and never minded them, was so taken up with the eternal life now in prospect that he seemed to have no manner of concern for the natural life now at state. Instead of looking about him, to see either which way he was in danger or which way he might make his escape, he looks up to heaven; thence only comes his help, and thitherward his way is still open; though they compass him about on every side, they cannot interrupt his intercourse with heaven. Note, A believing regard to God and the upper world will be of great use to us, to set us above the fear of man; for as far as we are under the influence of that fear we *forget the Lord our Maker*, ^{<2513>}Isaiah 51:13.

[2.] Thus he directed his sufferings to the glory of God, to the honour of Christ, and did as it were appeal to heaven concerning them (Lord, for thy sake I suffer this) and express his earnest expectation that Christ should be magnified in his body. Now that he was ready to be offered he looks up stedfastly to heaven, as one willing to offer himself.

[3.] Thus he lifted up his soul with his eyes to God in the heavens, in pious ejaculations, calling upon God for wisdom and grace to carry him through this trial in a right manner. God has promised that he will be with his servants whom he calls out to suffer for him; but he will for this be sought unto. He is nigh unto them, but it is *in that for which they call upon him. Is any afflicted? Let him pray.*

[4.] Thus he breathed after the heavenly country, to which he saw the fury of his persecutors would presently send him. It is good for dying saints to look up stedfastly to heaven: "Yonder is the place whither death will carry my better part, and then, *O death! where is thy sting?*"

[5.] Thus he made it to appear that he was full of the Holy Ghost; for, wherever the Spirit of grace dwells, and works, and reigns, he directs the

eye of the soul upward. Those that are full of the Holy Ghost will look up stedfastly to heaven, for there their heart is.

[6.] Thus he put himself into a posture to receive the following manifestation of the divine glory and grace. If we expect to hear from heaven, we must look up stedfastly to heaven.

(2.) He saw the glory of God (v. 55); *for he saw*, in order to this, *the heavens opened*, v. 56. Some think his eyes were strengthened, and the sight of them so raised above its natural pitch, by a supernatural power, that he saw into the third heavens, though at so vast a distance, as Moses's sight was enlarged to see the whole land of Canaan. Others think it was a representation of the glory of God set before his eyes, as, before, Isaiah and Ezekiel; heaven did as it were come down to him, as ~~Rev~~ Revelation 21:2. The heavens were opened, to give him a view of the happiness he was going to, that he might, in prospect of it, go cheerfully through death, so great a death. Would we by faith look up stedfastly, we might see the heavens opened by the mediation of Christ, the veil being rent, and a new and living way laid open for us into the holiest. The heaven is opened for the settling of a correspondence between God and men, that his favours and blessings may come down to us, and our prayers and praises may go up to him. We may also see the glory of God, as far as he has revealed it in his word, and the sight of this will carry us through all the terrors of sufferings and death.

(3.) He *saw Jesus standing on the right hand of God* (v. 55), *the Son of man*, so it is v. 546. Jesus, being the Son of man, having taken our nature with him to heaven, and being there clothed with a body, might be seen with bodily eyes, and so Stephen saw him. When the Old-Testament prophets saw the glory of God it was attended with angels. The Shechinah or divine presence in Isaiah's vision was attended with seraphim, in Ezekiel's vision with cherubim, both signifying the angels, the ministers of God's providence. But here no mention is made of the angels, though they surround the throne and the Lamb; instead of them Stephen sees Jesus at the right hand of God, the great Mediator of God's grace, from whom more glory redounds to God than from all the ministration of the holy angels. The glory of God shines brightest in the face of Jesus Christ; for there shines the glory of his grace, which is the most illustrious instance of his glory. God appears more glorious with Jesus standing at his right hand than with millions of angels about him. Now,

[1.] Here is a proof of the exaltation of Christ to the Father's right hand; the apostles saw him ascend, but they did not see him sit down, *A cloud received him out of their sight*. We are told that he sat down on the right hand of God; but was he ever seen there? Yes, Stephen saw him there, and was abundantly satisfied with the sight. He saw Jesus at the right hand of God, denoting both his transcendent dignity and his sovereign dominion, his uncontrollable ability and his universal agency; whatever God's right hand gives to us, or receives from us, or does concerning us, it is by him; for he is his right hand.

[2.] He is usually said to *sit* there; but Stephen sees him *standing* there, as one more than ordinarily concerned at present for his suffering servant; he stood up as a judge to plead his cause against his persecutors; he is *raised up out of his holy habitation* (³⁰¹³Zechariah 2:13), *comes out of his place to punish*, ²³⁶¹Isaiah 26:21. He stands ready to receive him and crown him, and in the mean time to give him a prospect of the joy set before him.

[3.] This was intended for the encouragement of Stephen. He sees Christ is for him, and then no matter who is against him. When our Lord Jesus was in his agony an angel appeared to him, strengthening him; but Stephen had Christ himself appearing to him. Note, Nothing so comfortable to dying saints, nor so animating to suffering saints, as to see Jesus at the right hand of God; and, blessed be God, by faith we may see him there.

(4.) He told those about him what he saw (v. 56): *Behold, I see the heavens opened*. That which was a cordial to him ought to have been a conviction to them, and a caution to them to take heed of proceeding against one upon whom heaven thus smiled; and therefore what he saw he declared, let them make what use they pleased of it. If some were exasperated by it, others perhaps might be wrought upon to consider this Jesus whom they persecuted, and to believe in him.

2. Stephen's pious addresses to Jesus Christ. The manifestation of God's glory to him did not set him above praying, but rather set him upon it: *They stoned Stephen, calling upon God*, v. 59. Though he called upon God, and by that showed himself to be a true-born Israelite, yet they proceeded to stone him, not considering how dangerous it is to fight against those who have an interest in heaven. Though they stoned him, yet he called upon God; nay, therefore he called upon him. Note, It is the comfort of those who are unjustly hated and persecuted by men that they have a God to go to, a God all-sufficient to call upon. Men stop their ears,

as they did here (v. 57), but God does not. Stephen was now cast out of the city, but he was not cast out from his God. He was now taking his leave of the world, and therefore calls upon God; for we must do this as long as we live. Note, It is good to die praying; then we need help — strength we never had, to do a work we never did — and how can we fetch in that help and strength but by prayer? Two short prayers Stephen offered up to God in his dying moments, and in them as it were breathed out his soul: —

(1.) Here is a prayer for himself: *Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.* Thus Christ had himself resigned his spirit immediately into the hands of the Father. We are here taught to resign ours into the hands of Christ as Mediator, by him to be recommended to the Father. Stephen saw Jesus standing at the Father's right hand, and he thus calls to him: “Blessed Jesus, do that for me now which thou standest there to do for all thine, receive my departing spirit into thy hand.” Observe,

[1.] The soul is the man, and our great concern, living and dying, must be about our souls. Stephen's body was to be miserably broken and shattered, and overwhelmed with a shower of stones, the earthly house of this tabernacle violently beaten down and abused; but, however it goes with that, “Lord,” saith he, “let my spirit be safe; let it go well with my poor soul.” Thus, while we live, our care should be that though the body be starved or stripped the soul may be fed and clothed, though the body lie in pain the soul may dwell at ease; and, when we die, that though the body be thrown by as a despised broken vessel, and a vessel in which there is no pleasure, yet the soul may be presented a vessel of honour, that God may be the strength of the heart and its portion, though the flesh fail.

[2.] Our Lord Jesus is God, to whom we are to seek, and in whom we are to confide and comfort ourselves living and dying. Stephen here prays to Christ, and so must we; for it is the will of God that all men should thus *honour the Son, even as they honour the Father.* It is Christ we are to commit ourselves to, who alone is able to keep what we commit to him against that day; it is necessary that we have an eye to Christ when we come to die, for there is no venturing into another world but under his conduct, no living comforts in dying moments but what are fetched from him.

[3.] Christ's receiving our spirits at death is the great thing we are to be careful about, and to comfort ourselves with. We ought to be in care about this while we live, that Christ may receive our spirits when we die; for, if

he reject and disown them, whither will they betake themselves? How can they escape being a prey to the roaring lion? To him therefore we must commit them daily, to be ruled and sanctified, and made meet for heaven, and then, and not otherwise, he will receive them. And, if this has been our care while we live, it may be our comfort when we come to die, that we shall be received into everlasting habitations.

(2.) Here is a prayer for his persecutors, v. 60.

[1.] The circumstances of this prayer are observable; for it seems to have been offered up with something more of solemnity than the former. *First*, He *knelt down*, which was an expression of his humility in prayer. *Secondly*, He *cried with a loud voice*, which was an expression of his importunity. But why should he thus show more humility and importunity in this request than in the former? Why, none could doubt of his being in good earnest in his prayers for himself, and therefore there he needed not to use such outward expressions of it; but in his prayer for his enemies, because that is so much against the grain of corrupt nature, it was requisite he should give proofs of his being in earnest.

[2.] The prayer itself: *Lord, lay not this sin to their charge*. Herein he followed the example of his dying Master, who prayed thus for his persecutors, *Father, forgive them*; and set an example to all following sufferers in the cause of Christ thus to pray for those that persecute them. Prayer may preach. This did so to those who stoned Stephen, and he knelt down that they might take notice he was going to pray, and cried with a loud voice that they might take notice of what he said, and might learn, *First*, That what they did was a sin, a great sin, which, if divine mercy and grace did not prevent, would be laid to their charge, to their everlasting confusion. *Secondly*, That, notwithstanding their malice and fury against him, he was in charity with them, and was so far from desiring that God would avenge his death upon them that it was his hearty prayer to God that it might not in any degree be laid to their charge. A sad reckoning there would be for it. If they did not repent, it would certainly be laid to their charge; but he, for his part, did not desire the woeful day. Let them take notice of this, and, when their thoughts were cool, surely they would not easily forgive themselves for putting him to death who could so easily forgive them. *The blood-thirsty hate the upright, but the just seek his soul*, ¹⁰⁰Proverbs 29:10. *Thirdly*, That, though the sin was very heinous, yet they must not despair of the pardon of it upon their repentance. If they

would lay it to their hearts, God would not lay it to their charge. “Do you think,” saith St. Austin, “that Paul heard Stephen pray this prayer? It is likely he did and ridiculed it then (*audivit subsannans, sed irrisit — he heard with scorn*), but afterwards he had the benefit of it, and fared the better for it.”

3. His expiring with this: *When he had said this, he fell asleep*; or, as he was saying this, the blow came that was mortal. Note, Death is but a sleep to good people; not the sleep of the soul (Stephen had given that up into Christ's hand), but the sleep of the body; it is its rest from all its griefs and toils; it is perfect ease from toil and pain. Stephen died as much in a hurry as ever any man did, and yet, when he died, he fell asleep. He applied himself to his dying work with as much composure of mind as if he had been going to sleep; it was but closing his eyes, and dying. Observe, He fell asleep when he was praying for his persecutors; it is expressed as if he thought he could not die in peace till he had done this. It contributes very much to our dying comfortably to die in charity with all men; we are then found of Christ in peace; let not the sun of life go down upon our wrath. He fell asleep; the vulgar Latin adds, *in the Lord*, in the embraces of his love. If he thus sleep, he shall do well; he shall awake again in the morning of the resurrection.