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STEPHEN IS STONED TO DEATH BY THE SANHEDRIN

STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS
NUMBER 27
ACTS 7:51-60

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ACTS 7:51 "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye." This means that the Sanhedrin members have had negative volition concerning Calvary's Cross. They have resisted the Holy Spirit and this is expressed in the words "Uncircumcised in heart and ears". They were not converted though they were the most self-righteous religious people living in the earth. This verse summarizes their whole attitude of unbelief. The word "Stiffnecked" refers to their negative volition. "Uncircumcised in heart and ears" referred to their willful unbelief. The Exodus generation did this very same thing. Remember that the Holy Spirit always has a special place in gospel hearing. John 16:8 describes the special ministry of the Holy Spirit at the point of gospel hearing. Notice how accurate the gospel is. God-consciousness is achieved by the thinking of the individual. But human thought will not help us accept the gospel. This is the ministry of the Holy Spirit. He will reprove the world (This is a logical future verb) in three realms--Of SIN, RIGHTEOUSNESS, AND JUDGMENT. Notice, the issue is Christ. The Holy Spirit will reprove us of sin, "BECAUSE THEY BELIEVE NOT ON ME". Please notice, that the issue is always Christ and belief in Christ. That is why when we go out to talk to people about salvation talk to them about Christ and not their sins. Righteousness--because God (Christ) was seated at the right hand of God. Christ died in his humanity, but remember his Deity could not die. God cannot die. When Christ died his righteousness was acceptable to the Father, therefore we stand in his righteousness and not in our own. That's why the song says, "Dressed in his righteousness alone". Judgment--because Satan is already judged and eventually all unbelievers will receive the same judgment.

Steph'n told them that they resisted the Holy Spirit. This word comes from anti-pipto and means to "push against". They literally "pushed against" the Holy Spirit and refused to be led to God.

In the New Testament there are five sins listed as being against the Holy Spirit. Two are committed by a believer and three are committed by an unbeliever.

1. Acts 7:51. Here in our passage resisting the Holy Spirit means to reject Christ. This is rejecting the Holy Spirit in the conversion experience. This is committed only by an unbeliever.
2. Matthew 12:14. This is blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. Rejection of Christ is here involved and can be committed only by ~~a~~ a believer. When we resist the leading and teaching of the Holy Spirit and fail to believe in Christ, this is the only sin God cannot pardon.
3. Lying to the Holy Spirit. Acts 5:3 as illustrated by Ananias and Sapphira. This is a lust type of sin and can be committed only by a believer.
4. Grieving the Holy Spirit. This is in Ephesians 4:30. Every time a believer sins he grieves the Holy Spirit. This is committed only by a believer.
5. Quenching the Holy Spirit. 1 Thess. 5:19. This involves the believer relying upon human power rather than on divine power.

ACTS 7:52 "Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers:" The prophets were true to the word and they were persecuted. In fact, they even killed some who preached Christ. "The coming of the Just one" refers to the first coming of Jesus Christ. Here Stephen looks straight at them and reminds them that they murdered Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

ACTS 7:53 "Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it."

And if this were not enough, Stephen goes on to remind them that they not only rejected the prophets and killed the Chief Prophet, but they have not kept the law. "Disposition of Angels" means that Moses was taught by angels when he received the law. Possibly this is referring to Gabriel, who also taught Daniel. Angels have had a teaching ministry, and we know this from Psalms 68:17 and Galatians 3:19. They rejected the law even when it was taught by angels.

The Sanhedrin Rejects Stephen

So they had rejected the Law, they had rejected the prophets, and they had rejected Jesus Christ, now they are going to reject Stephen. They didn't have to stand and sing "Just As I Am" and all come forward to make a decision--they just came forward without an invitation and they came with one intention--to kill Stephen.

ACTS 7:54 "When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth." It says, "They were cut in their minds". The heart part of the mind is the thinking part of the mind. What was said cut them up. The word "cut" comes from diaprio and means to cut through. What Stephen has said had cut through their minds and had opened up the truth. It also caused them to cut through the speech of Stephen and see what he actually meant. Animals gnash their teeth when they attack other animals. The members of the Sanhedrin did that right here. It was something like a modern mob.

ACTS 7:55 "But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God," But he, being full of the Holy Spirit. Please notice the word "Being". It comes from huparcho and means that for a long time he had been filled with the Holy Spirit and this was his condition of life. Stephen had been filled with the Holy Spirit all the time he had been making this speech. Some of it was bitter and some of it was cutting, but through it all he was filled with the Holy Spirit. The verb is a present active participle and means he was habitually filled with the Holy Spirit. Stephen had been under "Living Grace" but now he moves under "Dying Grace".

It should read, "He saw the glory of God even Jesus standing". Jesus was standing to applaud the message of Stephen. God was saying in substance, "You have just heard a message that actually received a standing ovation from Heaven". Remember, when Stephen gave that message there were actually very few believers in that crowd.

ACTS 7:56 "And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God." As a part of God's great reward to Stephen he let him look into Heaven and see the standing ovation to his message.

ACTS 7:57 "Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord," They held their hands over their ears and they rushed on him impetuously. They were the Supreme Court of the Jews, supposed to be the thinking dignitaries of the nation, and they are acting like a snarling pack of hyenas. They were people, but had become like wild animals.

Illustration--People who run up and down the streets with rocks and clubs and demonstrate for this cause or that have ceased to be a solution to the problem and have become a part of the problem. Instead of the academic community being the thinking centers of the nation, they have been misled and have become a part of the problem. There is only one way to stop a mob--and that is to use force. (Go read the French Revolution and Napoleon.)

ACTS 7:58 "And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul."

They cast him out violently and took him out of the city and stoned him. The language says they kept on stoning him even after he was dead. They threw down their clothes at the feet of Saul. Remember, before Saul was saved he was the worst sinner that ever lived. He was a self-righteous religious bigot. A bit later we will study him and his self-righteousness.

ACTS 7:59 "And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." The Greek actually says that they kept on stoning him after he was dead. He called unto God and said, "Lord Jesus receive my spirit".

ACTS 7:60 "And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep." The force of his prayer was this--"Lord, don't destroy them now. Spare them and give them a chance to be saved". Don't kill them now, give them a chance to be saved was the actual force of this language. And Saul, a little later on, as a result of this prayer of Stephen would be saved.

We read "He fell asleep". In Daniel 12:2, 1 Cor. 11:30, and 1 Cor. 15:51, and 1 Thess. 4:13 the word "sleep" is used for Christian death. It simply refers to peace and happiness and perfection.

In closing, please note nine points in connection with the death of Stephen.

1. With the unbeliever, life is a conflict. It is a conflict with life and a conflict with death. The unbeliever has no answer to either.
2. Fear of death demonstrates that a man who has such fear has no hope of life beyond the grave.
3. The materialist says, "Eat, drink and be merry". Have fun today, and postpone tomorrow.
4. Salvation changes all this. Once a person is converted he should have no fear of death. He understands 2 Cor. 5:8 and Rev. 21:4.
5. Stephen proves this point. Stephen was not frightened by the animal characteristics of this mob. He died violently without but he was calm within.
6. Stephen's death is a testimony and a witness to Philippians 1:21. By his death he gained. When they killed him they only promoted him. They thought once they got rid of him no one would replace him--yet his replacement was standing right there in that crowd, soon to become the leader of the Christian world. One day Saul of Tarsus would have occasion to say the same words Stephen had said here.
7. In the face of death Stephen had no fear. The reason we know this is that right through it all he was capable of clear thinking. Even when the stones were striking him he was still thinking clearly.
8. Stephen died a painful death in the hands of wild hyenas, yet he was relaxed and happy.
9. When a believer dies thinking doctrine he always dies happy. This death was God's preparation of Saul of Tarsus for his great work.