

I See the Heavens Opened

Acts of the Apostles 6:8-8:3

What We Found

Stephen's long speech turned out to be a prosecution brief built on two arguments running through Israel's whole story: God has never been confined to one land or one building, appearing to Abraham in Mesopotamia, to Joseph in Egypt, to Moses at a bush; and Israel has always rejected her God-sent deliverers at the first encounter, Joseph sold by his brothers and recognized at the second visit, Moses refused and then sent back as ruler and deliverer. The pattern landed on the present tense: the Righteous One Himself, rejected at the first encounter, and, hidden inside the indictment, the hope of a second.

On the temple, Stephen honored what God commanded and condemned only the presumption that God could be contained or owned. Solomon had said both truths in one breath at the dedication itself: heaven cannot contain you, yet let your eyes be open toward this house (1 Kings 8:27-30). Presence by gift, not by containment, the same two truths the lamp beside every tabernacle confesses.

Then we watched the first martyr die like his Master, almost word for word: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" beside "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit"; "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" beside "Father, forgive them." One difference: Stephen prayed his dying prayers to Jesus. And at the edge of the scene stood a young man named Saul, minding coats, while Stephen's intercession for his killers rose past him toward heaven. The believers scattered through Judea and Samaria, and the map of Acts 1:8 turned its second page, driven forward by the very persecution meant to close the book.

Voices of the Church

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 315, on St. Stephen (5th century)

St. Augustine drew a straight line from the martyr's last prayer to the Church's greatest missionary: if Stephen had not prayed, the Church would not have Paul. The stones that struck Stephen were answered by the intercession he offered while they struck.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Fulgentius of Ruspe, Sermon 3 on St. Stephen (6th century)

St. Fulgentius says that love was Stephen's weapon, and by it he was everywhere victorious: love of God that did not yield to the raging council, and love of neighbor that interceded for the very men stoning him. Stephen went first, and Paul followed after, helped by Stephen's prayer, so that now the two rejoice together where there is no envy.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles (4th century)

Chrysostom marvels that even the raging council could not help seeing Stephen's face like the face of an angel, the grace within him shining out in his very appearance. Gentleness under injustice, we might add, is itself a kind of proof: rage can counterfeit conviction, but it cannot counterfeit peace.

Live It This Week

One assignment, the hardest this study will ever give you. Choose your Saul: the person who has hurt you, mocked your faith, or stands furthest from God among the people you know. Every day this week, pray Stephen's prayer for that person by name: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them," adding one sentence asking God to do for them what He did for the coat-minder. Do not tell them. Do not expect to feel warm. Pray anyway, and remember Augustine's arithmetic: one dying man's prayer for his enemies gave the Church thirteen epistles and half the book of Acts.

Memory Verse

"And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'" (Acts 7:60)

Before Next Session

Read Acts 8:4-40, once. Watch where the Gospel goes, who carries it, and what happens in a chariot on a desert road.

Catechism References

CCC 2473-2474 (martyrdom, the supreme witness) · CCC 2844 (forgiveness of enemies) · CCC 659-664 (the Son of Man at God's right hand)