

May 17

They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. John 16:2

THE persecutions of today are more refined than in any previous period. The faithful today are not stoned with literal

PD76 "Why did God permit persecutions? The answer is that testings of faith and loyalty to God are as necessary to Jesus' followers as they were to Himself, and for the same reason -- to develop and crystallize character."

R2415 "The conditions imposed upon the Church are designed of the Lord to be crucial tests of *her loyalty* to him, and to the law of the New Covenant under which she was received by him. Trials, difficulties, persecutions, are useful in proving whether or not her covenant of consecration is from the heart: those who have merely made a lip covenant will be sifted out..."

R131 "In what way, do we become overcomers and gain the victory, and win the prize of being part of the Bride? By presenting our bodies a living sacrifice, by crucifying our fleshly will and nature, becoming *dead*... When *dead*, you will seek to eat, drink, talk and be clothed, not as the world might dictate, nor your *own* tastes desire, but according to the best information you can obtain of the will of God concerning you. This is a hard work and it involves much pain to the old nature... It is so difficult a task that we never could accomplish it unaided..."

The second or great company are of the household also. They have made the covenant to die, but poor frail humanity shrinks from becoming a "speckled bird," a target for this world's sneers and ridicule. They love the favor of God and the favor of man also. They restrain themselves from presumptuous sins, and console themselves that they are far better than many others. They have not the power of faith to lay hold of God's promised assistance. "How can ye *believe* who receive honor one of another and seek not, the honor that cometh from God *only*."

R2230 SONGS IN THE HOUSE OF OUR PILGRIMAGE "*Thy statutes have been my songs in the house of my pilgrimage.*"--Psa. 119:54...

There are...blessed joys which the world cannot give, neither take away: and these are the source and cause of the unceasing joy and "songs in the night," before the glorious dawn of the new Millennial day: these songs are inspired by the joys granted us in the house of our pilgrimage--

stones or shot with literal arrows or literally beheaded, but it is still true that the wicked shoot out arrows at the righteous, "even bitter words," and many because of faithfulness are reproved and slandered and cut off from fellowship--"beheaded for the testimony of Jesus." Let all such emulate Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Let their

while we are actually absent from our "home."

What are our joys which no man taketh from us? and which persecution and affliction and trouble can only deepen and widen and make more sweet? What joy is this?... Confidence that he is both able and willing to perfect the work which he has begun... Our confidence is...that "the Father himself loveth" us, and will not turn us away so long as we desire to abide obediently in his love. Yea, we are confident...that he who is for us is more powerful than all who can be against us. Such confidence is sure to bring joy beyond the world's comprehension, and a peace of God that passeth all understanding, which keeps the heart.

And such joy, produced by the true gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ received into an honest heart, naturally and properly awakens the "songs in the house of our pilgrimage."

"Mid all the tumult and the strife

I hear the music ringing,

It finds an echo in my soul,

how can I keep from singing..."

"Thou hast put a new song into my mouth, even the loving-kindness of our God." And it is a fact that those who have tasted that the Lord is gracious, those who have received the joy which no man can take from them, those who have tasted of the grace of God in Christ, will not only rejoice and literally sing musical songs with their lips, but they will also rejoice to have their entire lives a song of praise and thanksgiving unto God...

Even in the very midst of trials and difficulties, and while cast down so that the songs do not abound, we may nevertheless in all conditions and at all times realize God's love and care and so firmly hold on to the Lord, with the hand of faith, that we would in the darkest moments be able to realize the joy of our Master's sympathy and love and help, and thus have the joy which no disaster of the present time can interrupt... Let us remember Paul and Silas praising God in the prison of Philippi, while their backs were still lacerated and bleeding.

It should be the aim of the Lord's people to cultivate this joy and the conditions favorable to it, daily... Its possession and increase depends chiefly upon the heart -- the center of our affections. If we set our affections, our hearts, on earthly things and seek for joy through the various gratifications of the flesh...we will thereby quench

testimonies be given with radiant faces like his. Let their eyes of faith perceive Jesus at the right hand of the Majesty on High as their Advocate and Deliverer. Let their words be with moderation as were Stephen's, and let it be true of them, as written of him, "full of grace and power" and "filled with the Holy Spirit."

to some extent the spirit of the new mind, and correspondingly decrease the joys of the new mind. On the contrary, the more we overcome the world, the flesh and the devil, the more we seek to do the will of our Father who is in heaven, the more we seek for the fellowship and communion of our dear Redeemer, the more we seek to do those things which are pleasing in his sight, so much the more will we have of the joy and peace which no man taketh from us and which trials, difficulties and persecutions can only make the more sweet and precious."

R2896 "If we accept the results of any matter as being good, and if we realize that we were guided to those results by divine providence, we should think and feel most generously, most kindly, toward those who were the instruments used by providence, notwithstanding the fact that they might have been unwilling instructors, or, like Joseph's brethren, have verily intended opposite results. Those who are enabled to take such a view of affairs and forces operating in their daily lives are enabled "always to triumph through the Lord," as the Apostle expresses it. And such find no room for bitterness or railing, either against Satan or against any of his servants. 2 Cor. 2:14; Jude 9.

This does not mean that they call the evil course good; nor that they will or should have any sympathy with the evil course... But it does mean that their minds will be so filled with the thought of divine supervision in their affairs...that all things are working for their good, however they outwardly appear, that they will not have any bitterness whatever, either of word or of heart, toward those who attempted to, and outwardly did, do them evil, but whose evil intentions and conduct were overruled by the Almighty. In proportion as the Lord's people get into the large place where they can take a broad view of the situation, in that same proportion will they find themselves not only delivered from anger and malice and hatred and strife toward their opponents, but instead, possessed of "the peace of God which passeth all understanding," ruling in their hearts, keeping them secure amidst all of the storms and vicissitudes of life--because their anchor holds within the veil. They have "set to their seal that the Lord is true," and hence can rejoice always."

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THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

"Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it."--1 Cor. 4:12.

SINCE GOD HIMSELF is Love, the very highest ideal of perfection which He has given to His people is the standard of Love. We cannot imagine a higher standard than this, nor one more difficult to attain. It is the special characteristic without which none will get the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. This mark of

perfection was stamped on our Lord. He delighted to do the Father's will in *all* respects, even to the extent of *laying down His life* for those who, on account of Adam's sin, were under the sentence of death.

Our Lord did not, however, need to run toward this mark of

perfect love; for He was *always perfect*--"holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners." (Heb. 7:26.) The Church, on the contrary, are naturally imperfect and fallen by heredity; but we have been washed from all stain of guilt in the blood of the Lamb. The mark of perfect love we attain *gradually*. We first reach perfection of heart intention, and then we pass through experiences which crystallize our characters in righteousness. In all of these trials and difficulties, we must demonstrate that, if our physical organism were perfect, we would always do God's holy will.

As we see this quality of love in our Lord Jesus, we appreciate it, even though we realize that we are not up to the standard which God requires. Nevertheless, our great desire is that we have perfect love for everything in harmony with the will of God. After we have reached perfection of heart intention, the test is no longer upon us of *attaining* the mark, but of *pressing down upon* that mark *until our character has been crystallized*. As the Apostle Paul says, "Having done all, *stand*." (Eph. 6:13.) We do not progress beyond *perfect love*; for no one can do more than to have a full desire that God's will be done in him. He could do no more, whether he lived five years longer or fifty years. Perfect love is the mark toward which he pressed, and he can attain no higher standard.

While one stands at the mark of Love, the *tests grow stronger*. We pass through experiences--often trivial enough--which tempt us to malice, envy, anger and strife. If we are overcome by these tests, and fall away from the condition of *perfect love*, we shall lose the prize for which we are running. (Phil. 3:14.) One who thus falls away may get into the Great Company for development; but if he were to lose all love, he would go into the Second Death. In either of these cases, the person has moved away from the mark of perfect Love, the only standard for those who desire to be in the Kingdom and to participate in the glorious things which God has in store for those who love Him supremely.

GENEROSITY AND BENEVOLENCE CHARACTERISTIC OF GOD'S PEOPLE

Our Lord desires to see in His followers the disposition to overcome the weaknesses and tendencies of the fallen condition and to follow in His footsteps. Of Him it is written, "Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow in His steps;...who, when He was reviled, reviled not again; when He suffered, He threatened not." (I Peter 2:21-23.) To be reviled is to be made to *appear vile*, to be evil spoken of, slandered. The natural tendency of all is to resent injustice, to render evil for evil, to give as good as we get-- and a little more if possible. This is the natural inclination because we are in the fallen condition, unbalanced in our minds.

Our Lord's teaching is all the opposite of the spirit of reviling. No matter how much we are reviled, we are not to revile in return; no matter how much we are persecuted, we are not to persecute in return. This is the Law of the New Creation. Instead of reviling again, we are to *bless*. This does not mean that when one has said a slanderous thing of us, we are to say, "God bless you"; but that if the person is in difficulty and needs help, we are to overlook altogether what he has done to us, and be just as ready to help him as any other person.

This spirit of generosity and benevolence should be the spirit of the Lord's people. We are to bless those who revile and persecute us by doing them good and by explaining to them, if possible, the situation, which evidently they have misunderstood. We are to bless them by helping them, if opportunity offers, out of darkness into light.

Our faith is greatly strengthened by considering the course of our Lord and noting the similarity between His experiences and ours. Both He and His Apostles were persecuted by the Jewish household of faith. The whole Jewish nation professed to be God's people; and our Lord recognized them as His own, as it is written. (John 1:11.) Yet when "He came unto His own," they received Him not, but persecuted Him and even crucified Him. Later, they persecuted His Apostles and their followers.

Apparently the household of faith has had a monopoly of persecutions. All down the Gospel Age, those who have professed to be God's people have persecuted others. Both Catholics and Protestants have persecuted each other and the Jews, God's chosen people. The majority of persecutions have been by those who professed to be the people of God, many of whom really *thought they were*.

The persecutions of today are of the same kind. They come from those who profess to be the Lord's people. In harmony with this fact is the Scripture which says, "Your brethren that hated you, that cast you out for My Name's sake, said, Let the Lord be glorified: but He shall appear to your joy, and they shall be ashamed." (Isa. 66:5.) This statement applies also to the members of our own

families, who are not in sympathy with the Truth; that is to say, any persecutions coming from the members of our families are usually from those who profess to be Christians. As a rule, their opposition is not for personal reasons, but on account of some doctrinal point, which they do not see in the same light as do those whom they persecute.

It behooves the Lord's people to look with great sympathy upon those who may be their persecutors. We recall instances where persecution has been carried on with the thought that the persecutors were doing the will of God. Those who persecuted the Lord Jesus were to some degree ignorant of who He was. In Acts 3:17, St. Peter says, "And now, brethren, I wot that through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers." St. Paul says, "Had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." (I Cor. 2:8.) When Saul of Tarsus persecuted St. Stephen and others of the early Church, he verily thought that he did God service, as he himself afterwards tells us.--Acts 26:9-11.

FIDELITY TO THE TRUTH A CAUSE OF PERSECUTION

All down through the Gospel Age, those who have been faithful to the Truth of God have been put "out of the synagogue." The creeds of men have been barriers to keep out those who understood the Word of God. There was a time when many were excommunicated as heretics *because of conscience*. One of these was Michael Servetus, a brother Christian, whose horrible death at the stake was brought about by John Calvin. This course of conduct literally fulfilled the Scripture which says, "They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service."--John 16:2.

Those who had charge of the synagogues were not always *bad* people, but they were *mistaken*, as was Saul of Tarsus when he haled men and women to prison. (Acts 8:3.) The same conditions exist today. The darkness hateth the light. When any become enlightened in the Word of God, they are told, "If you stay with us, you must not present these matters." Those who are loyal to God are in this way forced out of the synagogues.

Our day has a peculiarity, however, that other days have not had. The Divine Plan is so beautiful that by its light we see that others are in darkness. The voice of God, the voice of conscience, of enlightenment, calls the people of God out of Babylon, which is misrepresenting God's character, Plan and Word. Instead of feeling like bringing vengeance upon our enemies, we should feel sympathy for them--not *with* them, but *for* them. We should realize that with them it is very much as it was with the Jews of our Lord's day, who, had they known what they were doing, would have been very much ashamed of their course.

The persecutions of today are different from those of any other period of history. Many faithful followers of the Lord are reproved and slandered for their loyalty to the Word of God. Our Lord's words, however, warrant us in expecting that those who are faithful to Him will be evil spoken of, even as He was. With His words before our minds, we should not be surprised at false charges and false insinuations made against His true followers in proportion to their prominence as His servants.

Our Lord's warning that men "shall say *all manner of evil* against you *falsely for My sake*" (Matt. 5:11), does not imply that those who malign the true Christian will say, "We do this to you for Christ's sake, because you are one of His followers." We have never heard of any one who was thus persecuted, and therefore such a course cannot be what our Lord meant. Evidently His meaning was that His followers, honorable, moderate, truthful, honest, virtuous, possessing the spirit of a sound mind, like Himself, would be highly esteemed amongst the nominally religious, were it not for their loyalty to the Word of God. Because of faithfully pointing out popular errors, because of fidelity to the Truth, they are hated by those prominent in Churchianity.

THE GOLDEN RULE A TEST TO CHRISTIANS

These conditions are testing the adherents of Churchianity along the lines of the Golden Rule; and when they speak evil through malice, hatred, strife and opposition, they are condemning themselves under that rule; for well do they know that they do not wish others to speak evil of them--either through hearsay or through concocted lies or through malice.

These conditions are also a test to the Lord's people, to prove whether they are willing to endure these persecutions and oppositions cheerfully, as a part of the cost of being disciples of Christ. If under the pressure they revile in return and slander and backbite, they are thus demonstrating their unfitness to have a place in the Kingdom. If, on the other hand, they receive these lessons with patience and long-suffering, they will develop more of the character-

likeness of their Redeemer and thus become more worthy of a share with Him in the future glory.

Our Lord's declaration, "Ye are the salt of the earth," may very properly be applied to those of the followers of the Lord who give heed to His teachings and who cultivate His character-likeness. As salt is useful in arresting decomposition, so the influence of these faithful ones is preservative. At the time of the First Advent, the world was in a condition in which it would probably have hastened to degeneracy and decay, but for the introduction of the preservative influence extending from the members of the Body of Christ. That influence is still manifest in so-called Christendom.

Even today, although the truly consecrated believers in the great Redeemer are confessedly few in number, yet the saltness from the teachings of the Savior has a wide influence upon the world. Without it, doubtless, corruption and a complete collapse would have come long ago. In spite of it, we see very corrupting and corrupt influences at work everywhere; and the wider our horizon, the more general our information, the more we realize the truth of this statement. When the last member of the Body of Christ shall have passed beyond the veil, the salt will be gone. Then corruption will take hold swiftly, and the result will be the great time of trouble such as never was since there was a nation.--Matt. 24:21; Dan. 12:1.

The Scriptures point out the fact that the Lord's consecrated people belong so completely to Him that in all their afflictions He is afflicted. (Isa. 63:9.) When Saul of Tarsus was persecuting the early Church, our Lord called out to him on the way to Damascus, and said, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou ME? And he said, Who are Thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am *Jesus*, whom thou *persecutest*." (Acts 9:4,5.) Saul was not persecuting the glorified Savior directly, but he was persecuting the *followers* of Jesus--not the *New Creatures*, but the *flesh*. Since, then, our Lord adopts the flesh of His followers as His, the Church is said to be filling up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ.--Col. 1:24.

Throughout the Gospel Age, the world has been blind to the fact that it has persecuted the Church of Christ-- those whom God has chosen to be joint-heirs with our Lord Jesus Christ. (Rom. 8:17.) When later the eyes of mankind shall have been opened, they will realize what they have done, and will be very much ashamed of their conduct. After Saul of Tarsus saw that he had been fighting against God, his whole course of life was changed.

THE ANTITYPICAL BURNING OUTSIDE THE CAMP

As our Lord suffered in the flesh, so will also those who are members of the Church, which is His Body. (Eph. 1:22,23.) St. Peter admonishes us to expect this, saying, "Forasmuch then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same mind." (I Peter 4:1.) It is the *flesh*, not the *New Creature*, that *suffers*. While we are suffering in the flesh, we are also being devel-

oped in the spirit.

In Psalm 44:22, we read, "For Thy sake we are killed all the Day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter." St. Paul shows that this statement is a prophecy applicable to the entire membership of Christ, of whom our Lord Jesus is the Head. (Rom. 8:36.) The day to which reference is made is the Gospel Age (2 Cor. 6:2), the antitypical Day of Atonement. As on the typical Atonement Day the typical sacrifices were offered, so all down the Gospel Age the antitypical "better sacrifices" have been made. (Heb. 9:23; 13:11-13.) These "better sacrifices" began with our Lord and continue with His Body, which is the Church.

The antitypical sacrificing began at the time of our Lord's consecration, which was His full surrender of His life to God, to be used in any way that the Father saw fit and that His providences might direct. The Church follows in His steps. Our consecration is our death to the world, to earthly hopes, aims and ambitions. In our Lord's case, we see that His sacrificial death not only meant the giving away of His physical strength in healing, teaching, etc., but included also the suffering resulting from the opposition of those about Him. Even from members of His own family He experienced ostracism. So Jesus died daily.

In proportion as we are faithful to our Heavenly Father and to the terms of our consecration, we shall have similar experiences. Faithfulness to our covenant of sacrifice will bring upon us opposition from the world, the flesh and the Devil. Particularly will our persecution come from those Christians who are not developed sufficiently to appreciate matters from the proper standpoint.

St. Paul, in speaking of his own case, says that he was dying daily. (I Cor. 15:31.) This statement applies to all who are laying down their lives in the Lord's service. Sometimes it is by the expenditure of physical strength; sometimes it is by a stab from some one who has hurt us, wounded us, injured us with his tongue. In the type, this kind of experience is represented by the burning of the flesh outside the camp, a place which typifies the outcast condition.

The faithful servants of the Lord will be ostracised by the world, as our Lord foretold. (Matt. 24:9; John 16:1-3.) Their attitude of full consecration to do the Father's will is not appreciated; for to the world it seems to be foolish. It is a reproof. As our Lord said, "For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved."--John 3:20.

To be faithful unto death is a part of the covenant of sacrifice. In some instances, death may come early; in others, it may come late. St. Stephen was faithful unto death, which came early in his Christian experience; St. Peter was also faithful, but met his death after a long lifetime. The promise to the overcomer is, "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life." (Rev. 2:10.) "If we suffer, we shall also reign with Him."--2 Tim. 2:12.

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THE FIRST CHRISTIAN MARTYR

--FEB. 21.--ACTS 6:8-15; 7:54-60.--

"Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."--Rev. 2:10.

APPARENTLY Stephen's martyrdom occurred not a great while after Pentecost, but the interim had been a period of considerable progress. At the time of the ascension "about one hundred and twenty" were reckoned as being in full and deep fellowship in Christ; ten days later at Pentecost three thousand converts were added; shortly after five thousand more as recorded in our last lesson; later (Acts 5:14) "multitudes, both men and women, were added to the Lord;" still later, "the number of the disciples was multiplied in Jerusalem greatly, and a great multitude of priests were obedient to the faith." (Acts 6:1-7.) This period of gathering the ripe wheat and establishing them in the doctrines of Christ was a very necessary prelude to the period of trial, persecution and suffering which shortly followed. The persecution, however, was no less a divine mercy than the previous peace and prosperity: the divine rule for the Gospel Church evidently is that each member shall be "made perfect through suffering." The stoning of Stephen was merely the beginning of the general persecution which in one form or another has continued ever since, and must continue until the last members of the body of Christ shall have proven themselves faithful even unto death and been accounted worthy of the crown of life mentioned in our golden text.

Stephen, it will be remembered, was chosen as one of the assistants of the apostles and was known as a deacon--minister or servant--the original intention being that the service should be chiefly with reference to the temporal interests of the Church. His choice

would indicate that he was considered at the time a man of ability, and that faithfulness to the work entrusted to him led on to still greater privileges and opportunities for service. Accordingly we find him in this lesson ministering spiritual things with imbue ment of the spirit and ability closely approaching that of the apostles. He was full of faith and power, says our common version, and no doubt truly, but the oldest manuscripts render this "full of *grace* and power." Both were true, because he could not have had the grace and the power without the faith. "This is the victory which overcometh the world, even your faith." In Stephen's case the faith working by love had produced zeal for the Lord and his cause; and the faith and zeal blended with the spirit of holiness gave Stephen extraordinary grace and power, as pointed out in *verse 8*. And the same combination will produce like grace and power in all of the Lord's people in proportion as these elements of character are found in each.

Tradition has it that Stephen's ability as a speaker (*verses 9,10*) brought him into special prominence and that as a religious logician he met with the learned men of his time, amongst whom it is said Saul of Tarsus was one. The Jews, while in a general sense one in religious matters, were nevertheless broken up into various little cliques and schools of thought, much after the manner of the denominations of Christendom today. The classes here mentioned as disputants with Stephen are supposed to have represented the advanced philosophies of that day, combined with Judaism; but all of their philosophy could not cope with the wisdom and spirit of the truth

which were with Stephen. Naturally this led wicked hearts to envy, malice and hatred; for those who are not above all things lovers of the truth are always moved to more or less hatred when successfully opposed by the truth.

(11-14) Many have supposed that Stephen met his death at the hands of a mob. But this is incorrect. Those who were his enemies because unable to resist the force of his arguments had no authority to stone him, nor did they wish to appear before the people in the light of persecutors of their opponent. They therefore suborned or procured witnesses outside of their own cliques to bring charges against Stephen before the Sanhedrin and then while he was disputing with them the official representatives of the Sanhedrin came upon him and "caught him" and brought him before the council,--as though caught in the very act of blasphemy.

At the trial the witnesses testified falsely in the sense that they misrepresented the words and arguments of Stephen, putting them in a false light. There was, nevertheless, probably considerable truth in the charge that Stephen said that Jesus of Nazareth would destroy their city and change the customs of Moses. Had they confined themselves to a strict statement of the matter as Stephen represented it, they would not have been false witnesses; but, evidently anxious to serve those who employed them as witnesses, they exaggerated Stephen's statements to the extent of misrepresentation of certain connecting facts and statements in his discourse.

(15) It is recorded that when the apostles, Peter and John, stood before a similar council, a short time previous, their judges marveled at their courage in view of the fact that they were unlearned men. So also Stephen was courageous. Notwithstanding the fact of his arrest, and that he was on trial, and that if found guilty the punishment would be death by stoning, according to the law, Stephen was not daunted. Instead of a look of fear and servility, or of anger, malice, hatred and defiance, the record is that they beheld his ⁽¹⁾face "as it had been the face of an angel;"--a face beaming with love, kindness, interest in their welfare, desire to do them good, of purity and holiness of motive, combined with humble confidence in God and fearlessness of men. We believe that to a greater or less extent this is the case with all who receive the holy spirit, in proportion as they progress in the knowledge, faith, love, zeal and character of Christ their Lord. This change does not come instantaneously; it comes gradually. The spirit of the world places the marks of selfishness and hardness upon the countenances of all the slaves of sin, in proportion as they are faithful thereto. But when the spirit of the truth is received and these become freed from the slavery to sin and become the servants of righteousness, the result is a proportionate displacement of the marks of slavery upon the countenance and an illumination instead, which more and more approaches the angelic. Look the worldly man or woman in the face, and see how the cares and battles of and for sin have left their traces: look then into the faces of those who are fully and intelligently the Lord's, and notice how the marks of care are superseded by a look of confidence and trust and peace proceeding from the hearty acceptance of their new Master's spirit. And this illumination will be found most remarkable and conspicuous when such saints are actively engaged in telling the good tidings, and particularly when opposing the error.

Stephen's discourse before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:1-53) marks him as having been a man of great ability. It reads more like the language of the Apostle Paul than that of any other New Testament writer. And the Apostle Paul, then Saul of Tarsus, is supposed to have been one of his hearers, a member of the Sanhedrin.

The closing of Stephen's address (*verses 51-53*) laid upon the Jewish people, and especially upon the Jewish Sanhedrin as the representatives of the religious law, the full responsibility for the death of the "Just One"--as his betrayers and murderers. This pointed application of Scripture and facts, as might have been expected, only aroused the evil hearts of the judges. Of those converted by Peter's discourse it was said, "They were pricked to the heart;" but of these it is said, "They were cut to the hearts" by the words of truth--the evil of their natures was aroused to the full, they gnashed on him with their teeth--they were exceedingly incensed.

(55-58) Full of the holy spirit, Stephen was wholly unmoved by their manifestations of anger. He was testifying for God and for the truth, and instead of fear of man his heart was brought into the closer sympathy and union with the Lord. The Lord knew all about the termination of the trial and what the sentence would be, and no doubt gave Stephen a vision of heavenly glory--of the Father, and of Christ at the right hand of his majesty. This no doubt was for the

strengthening of Stephen's own faith for the martyrdom just at hand; and perhaps also intended to act as it did upon his unjust judges. His declaration of the vision which he saw capped the climax of their indignation, at his supposed opposition to God and to Moses and to themselves as representatives of the Law. They construed this to be additional blasphemy--that Jesus of Nazareth, whom they condemned as a blasphemer, and whose crucifixion they had procured, was acceptable to God; and not only so, but made next to the Father--at the right hand of God, or place of power and influence. Using this as a pretext, they terminated the trial and executed the sentence of stoning--stopping their ears as though they would thus say, what no doubt some of them actually felt, that such an exaltation of Jesus next to Jehovah, far above Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the prophets was gross blasphemy which they could not justify themselves in hearing and felt bound to resent by stoning the blasphemer.

According to the Law, those who heard the blasphemy did the stoning; and they laid their outer garments at the feet of Saul, which would seem to indicate that he not only consented to the verdict that Stephen was a blasphemer worthy of death, but that he was one of the leaders in the prosecution, as well as an influential man in the Sanhedrin.

(59-60) Without attempting to dissuade them from their course, Stephen offered up prayer to the Lord, and a beautiful prayer it was--not only for the preservation of his spirit, but also that the sin might not be laid to the charge of his murderers.

Thus he "fell asleep." This testimony respecting Stephen is in full accord with the testimony of other Scriptures. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the prophets "slept" with their fathers in death; and the Apostle, after enumerating some of the faithful ones of the past (who were stoned, etc., in hope of a better resurrection), grouping them all together, says (Heb. 11:39,40), "These all...received not the promise; God having provided some *better thing for us*, that they without us should not be made perfect." They all are represented as sleeping and waiting for the morning--the resurrection morning--the Millennial morning--the morning of which the prophet David spoke, saying, "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning;" the morning of which the prophet Job spoke, saying, "Hide me in the grave until thy wrath be past [the reign of death during the present age with all of its concomitants of sorrow, trouble and pain, are evidences of divine wrath]. Thou shalt call, and I will answer thee: thou wilt have a desire to the work of thine hands." Our Lord, speaking of the resurrection morn, the same great day of awakening from the sleep of death, corroborates Job's statement, saying, "All that are in the graves shall hear his voice and shall come forth." (John 5:28,29.) Stephen slept with the others, but as one of the overcomers of the new dispensation he will have a share in the first resurrection (Rev. 20:6), and thus awake earlier in the morning than others not winners of the prize of the high calling of this Gospel age.--Psa. 46:5, margin.

The expression "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" signifies that Stephen understood that the spark of life, the spirit of life, was passing from his control; and by this expression he gave evidence of his faith in a future life, committing it wholly to the care of him who redeemed him from the power of the grave and who is shortly to deliver therefrom all who trust in him.

Stephen's faithful witness unto death was followed in turn by that of many others likewise faithful unto death and heirs of crowns of life according to the promise. The beneficent influences of the gospel of Christ have since Stephen's day so permeated the civilized world, and so affected it, that the followers of Christ are not at present in danger of being stoned to death for preaching his gospel. Nevertheless, the Apostle's words still hold good, "All who will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." It is still necessary to suffer with Christ, if we would be glorified with him and share his coming Kingdom. ⁽²⁾But the persecutions of to-day are more refined than in any previous period. The faithful to-day are not stoned with literal stones or shot with literal arrows or literally beheaded, but it is still true that the wicked shoot out arrows at the righteous, "even *bitter words*," and many because of faithfulness are reproved and slandered and cut off from fellowship--beheaded for the testimony of Jesus. (Rev. 20:4.) Let all such emulate Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Let their testimonies be given with radiant faces like his. Let their eyes of faith perceive Jesus at the right hand of the majesty on high as their Advocate and Deliverer. Let their words be with moderation as were Stephen's, and let it be true of them, as written of him, "full of grace and power" and "filled with the holy spirit."

⁽¹⁾ See R2952 col. 2 paragraph 4.

⁽²⁾ May 17 Manna, John 16:12