

GOD'S CALLING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Lesson Thirteen

IN ACTS: Stephen, the Church's First Martyr

Burden to Impart:

The testimony of God's faithful witnesses and martyrs is the seed of the church. Such lives and testimonies will remain forever.

Memory Verse: "And they stoned Stephen as he was calling upon the Lord and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" (Acts 7:59).

Facts to Teach:

1. While God was doing wondrous things with the Apostles and the gospel was spreading like wildfire with many thousands of zealous Jewish converts being added to the church, the Jewish religious leaders were rising up to oppose. They hated the Apostles and the church because they were jealous (Acts 5:17). Thus, Satan was able to fill their heart and use them to attack the Christians.
2. Stephen, one of the seven serving ones appointed by the Apostles (Acts 6:5), was not only filled with the Spirit and wisdom, but was also full of grace and power. Through Stephen God did great wonders and signs among the people (Acts 6:8). While preaching the gospel, some of the Jews argued and resisted the truth. Being unable to withstand the wisdom and Spirit with which Stephen spoke they became infuriated and began to lie about what Stephen was saying. They stirred up the Jewish leaders against him, who then arrested him and brought him before the Sanhedrin (Acts 6:9-12). This was the highest Jewish authority, which had also condemned the Lord Jesus to death.
3. They lied against him and falsely accused him, but they all noticed that his face was "as the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15). Their faces were like the Devil's, filled with anger and hatred. His was as an angel's, filled with love and peace.
4. Finally they gave him a chance to speak. He calmly related to them a detailed history of how God had repeatedly called their forefathers to follow and obey Him, but they refused and disobeyed (Acts 7). Then he looked at the whole crowd of them and, not being afraid to speak the truth, he boldly told them that they were the same: "stiff-necked and uncircumcised in hearts and ears," and always resisted the Holy Spirit, as their fathers did (Acts 7:51-52). Then he boldly charged them with the murder of the Lord Jesus.
5. Instead of receiving the truth and repenting at Stephen's testimony, they became enraged. God, however, was pleased and allowed Stephen to look directly into heaven, where he saw the Lord Jesus standing at the right hand of God. When he declared this to them they became crazed with anger, shouted, covered their ears, dragged him out of the city, and stoned him to death. Stephen was not silent, nor was he cursing them. He was calling loudly upon the Lord Jesus. They all heard. Then, his last words could never be forgotten as he screamed out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Then he fell "asleep" (Acts 7:54-60).