

## **ACTS 7:54-8:4, THE MURDER OF STEPHEN; THE SCATTERING OF BELIEVERS**

### **Acts 7:54-60 The Martyrdom of Stephen by Stoning**

To the early part of Stephen's defense his judges listened with a measure of agreement. But as the sense of his argument became apparent, they heard him with increasing anger and wrath. And when he charges them directly with blasphemous, continual resistance both to the Holy Spirit and to the prophets and with the murder of Jesus, the Righteous One, their vexation and rage cannot be restrained.

7:54, Two reactions of Stephen's judges:

1. **"they were cut to the heart"** = "they were rent with rage/vexation"
2. **"they gnashed on him with their teeth"** = teeth-gnashing is a physical manifestation of internal rage

7:55, 56, While his audience gives vent to passionate rage, Stephen remains calm under the control of the Holy Spirit. As his gaze goes heavenly, a vision of God's glory with Jesus standing at His right hand meets his eye.

He now utters the ultimate blasphemy to Jewish ears, "Look: I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

See Mark 14:61-64: compare responses and reactions to the reply of Jesus to the high priest when he was asked if He was indeed the "Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One."

7:57 His listeners will hear no more: they rush on him with one passion, i.e., to stone him in accord with Mosiac Law.

7:58 The Law in Lev. 24:13-17 demanded any Jew convicted of blasphemy

- 1) to be stoned,
- 2) outside the city,
- 3) with witnesses casting the first stones, Deut. 17:7.

7:59, 60 As the stones began to crush out the life of his body, Stephen calls upon the Lord to welcome his spirit and to forgive his murderers.

- At death, the believer's soul/spirit goes immediately into the presence of Christ. There is no purgatory, no intermediate state, 2 Cor. 5:8; Philipp. 1:21-23.

- **"lay not this sin to their charge"...**GRACE IN ACTION!

- **"and having said this he fell asleep."** "Sleep" is an appropriate metaphor for the believer in death because

- 1) there is a similarity of bodily appearance in both sleep and death, that of rest and peace;
- 2) as the sleeper continues to exist in sleep, so also the person in death; and
- 3) both states are temporary: the sleeper will rise and the person in death will be raised. John 11:11; Acts 13:36; I Thess. 4:13-15; I Cor. 15:6, 51; 2 Pet. 3:4 all use the metaphor this way.

**(OVER)**

## Acts 8:1-4 Saul: Persecution of Believers & Their Response

The murder of Stephen triggers a fierce persecution of the believers in Jerusalem. This violent and sudden outburst doubtless arose from the fact that their belief was different than that of perverted Judaism and the differences were now very apparent. The Pharisees, hitherto neutral, and the Sadducees, their rivals, now make common cause against the followers of Jesus the Messiah. Agents of civil government for whatever reasons do not interfere, and the wild fury of fanatical bigotry rushes upon the defenseless witnesses for the truth and scatters them.

Note: 3 statements about Saul in the context:

1. **7:58 "the witnesses (false witness, 6:13) laid down their clothes (tunics, mantles)"** at the feet of Saul: this indicates a close association of Saul with false witness from the synagogue of the Libertines.
  - Saul = a young man (νεανίος / neanios) = 24-40 yrs. old
  - Why did the witnesses take off their clothes? See Deut. 17:7.
2. **8:1 "Saul was consenting unto Stephen's death,"** Saul was agreeing to, had pleasure in the murder of Stephen.
3. **8:3 "As for Saul, he ravaged ("made havoc," KJV) the church."**
  - going house to house
  - dragging men and women to prison.

PAUL NEVER FORGOT THESE ATROCIOUS ACTS & HIS OWN PERSONAL CULPABILITY:  
see his in his words spoken 13-14 years later, Acts 22:20 & 26:9-12

As for the response of Believers to these persecutions:

1. 8:1 "they were all scattered / dispersed throughout the areas of Judea and Samaria"... and eventually to Phoenicia, the island of Cyprus, and to Antioch of Syria. See Acts 11:19
2. 8:1 The Twelve Apostles stay in Jerusalem (maybe in hiding)
3. 8:2 Devout Believers bury Stephen (probably immediately; that is, before Saul can get to them)
4. 8:4 Those that were scattered went everywhere preaching the Word, BUT TO JEWS ONLY AS ACTS 11:19 CLEARLY STATES

Thus due to violence by the antagonists of Jesus the Messiah, His followers carry His message to Judea, Samaria and beyond, but narrowly to Jews only as though they were the only candidates for justification.

These early believing Jewish-Christians, gathered around the Twelve, still held to the privileges of their national heritage. Despite their new Messianic faith, they continued to idealize the sacred institutions of the past, 'continuing steadfastly in the Temple', 'going to the Temple at the hour of prayer' which was also the hour of the sacrificial service, meeting under its eaves at Solomon's porch.

**BUT NOW THEY ARE SCATTERED. AND THE MAN MOST RESPONSIBLE, SAUL, WILL SOON BE SAVED AND JOIN THEM IN WITNESS TO THE SALVATION FOUND ONLY IN JESUS THE MESSIAH.**