

Installment 1

An Accomplice to Homicide

Scene: It's the Deep South; the year 1913. A black man stands before a group of rabid Klansmen as they "put him on trial" for certain "crimes" against their white society and their concept of religion. No one stands with him or supports him. In fact, the Klan has gotten false witnesses to stand up and say that he has said this and that about the Klan, all lies of course. The cards are stacked against him.

"Are you guilty of these crimes," the judge snarls at the black man. All eyes turn toward the man, expecting him to be shivering as he stands before them. But he seems almost unconcerned, as though he was caught up in a beautiful vision of good things, as though all he hears are angels' voices. "Ah...string him up! someone shouts. "Yea! Do it now!" another angry voice barks. But just then the black man opens his mouth to speak and for a moment silence descends over the crowd. "Brothers," he says, "Listen to me..." But he is not heard, a half dozen men strip off their costumes and give them to a younger man to watch. They don't want to get them dirty.

The young man holding their clothes urges that "justice" be done! He thoroughly agrees with what is happening. The black man never had a chance. As he is being hung he shouts out, "I see Jesus standing at the right hand of God!" The Klansmen covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him"¹ The young man yells, "String him up! Shut him up!"

The black man said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep."²

Well, our first installment of "The Third Heaven: Jesus and Paul" is much like the tale of the crazy Klansmen and their love of killing the powerless, except the powerless in our story turns out to be really powerful!

I think this would be a good place to stop and read Acts 6:1-8:1a.

¹ Acts 7:57. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is from the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible.

² Acts 7:59-60. To "fall asleep" meant to die.

The Dark Cloud of Danger

In the Acts account from which we just read, we learned of Stephen, the first martyr of the Christian Church. This tragic and disastrous event probably occurred around 37 C.E. Saul (or Paul) would have been around 17 years old or so. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Our passage is the first to mention the younger Saul and to give us some clue as to his convictions. Next week we will take a look at some of his actions...actions that speak louder than words.

The Book of Acts records some 33 years of selective history of the fledgling group called Christians. Acts 6:1f. tells us that the preached Word was increasingly effective among the people, even among some in the priesthood. We also learn through Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin of the historical connection between Old Testament leaders like Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, and Solomon and their relationship to the gospel of Jesus Christ. This "new" expression of Old Testament covenant and promise was at this time a fluid movement anchored in the resurrection of Jesus, whereas the priesthood and the Temple are seen more as immovable institutions. Thus, the early Christians, such as Stephen, were regarded by the keepers of the Law (particularly scribes and priests) as a threat to the establishment, to God and to Moses, according to the charges against Stephen.

If we read the whole Book of Acts, we see early a threatening tone, a dark cloud of suspicion and growing hatred, launched against the small Christian movement. Some priests, including the High Priest, were convinced that commitment to Jesus meant the death of all they held dear rather than the grand blessing of salvation to all who would believe in Him. Christians are understood as an enthusiastic group of converted Jews, later Gentiles as well, who found joy in their faith and did what they could to share the faith as well as their goods, particularly to the poor and marginalized.

Stephen is presented as "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit," a man full of "God's grace and power," who "did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people," and a man filled with the wisdom of the Spirit of God. He is the epitome of gentleness and yet speaks with the conviction of authority, as one who is obedient to the faith. He wishes that the Sanhedrin would see in Jesus what he sees, that is, the Son of God

who has come to fulfill God's promises to saints in the Old Testament. In other words, the long-expected Messiah has come!

Now the Sanhedrin is faced with the same dilemma as their ancestors, will they accept the message of the prophets or reject it? The young Saul would reject it on the grounds that Christians were reactionaries and posed a great threat to the Jews under Roman rule. He knew the Romans would brook no rivals and would crush all resistance, especially when the opposition talked freely about a king other than Caesar. Saul undoubtedly saw himself as a keeper of the peace by persecuting Christians, as a keeper of the Law by doing all he could to put a stop to preaching about Jesus as risen, and as one approved by the community of Jewish faith. Who knows? Perhaps he had a not-too-secret desire to be counted among the greats of Israel, perhaps in time even another David.

Sometimes the Word is hard.

"Lord, do not hold this sin against them." These are the last words of the dying Stephen. Actually he had shown his loyalty to Judaism by speaking well of Jewish history, thus he could not be blaspheming either God or Moses. But as he spoke, Stephen could sense that his hearers were growing restless and shutting him out. So Stephen launches a broadside:

"You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."³

This was too much! They howled! Covered their ears! Rushed at him! Murdered him, and thus joined their "fathers" as "the worst of the worst" by refusing to hear Stephen about Yahweh, God of the universe, God of Israel! I did some research on stoning, the Jewish method of capital punishment, but could find little on the specifics of stoning during Bible times.⁴ It is of more than passing interest that the young Saul who

³ Acts 7:51-53, Today's New International Version.

⁴ I did find a great deal on the Internet about stoning today, particularly in countries influenced by Islam. Check it out. Put in "Death by stoning" as a subject for your search and see what you get. Crucifixion was a Roman means of capital punishment. While the Jewish leadership wanted Jesus dead, it was the Romans who actually did the deed.

approved of Stephen's death by this cruel method would himself, later as a Christian evangelist, be stoned and left for dead.⁵

What do we learn from our passage?

1. We learn that Stephen did not hold personal grudges against those who wanted him dead and out of the way.

2. We learn that Christians made a different connection between the Old Testament and Jesus than the scribes, the official teachers of Israel.

3. The Sanhedrin was primed to take violent action against Stephen. Note Acts 5:27ff. Christians had a history, albeit a short one, of disobeying the rulings of the Sanhedrin.

4. We learn Stephen's death sparked "a great persecution" of the church, a persecution so intense that many Christians left Jerusalem and went elsewhere. The text says they continued witnessing.⁶

5. We learn that the early church was generally brave, good, and open to the Spirit of God.

6. We learn that Stephen's prayer for forgiveness was answered in the life of Saul. The Spirit would speak to his conscience and his life would be dramatically changed.

What else do you see in our lesson? Perhaps that it is possible for men to think they are doing God a service by killing other men? Saul would buy this idea at first. Perhaps there is a natural tension between a vital movement and a convinced establishment? Do you see anything else in our account of Stephen?

Next week we will take a deeper look at Saul and try to see what made him tick. The title of the lesson will be "**Breathing Vicious Threats.**" You might read **Acts 7:54-9:31** as part of your preparation. Always use what you discover as insights for prayer. Can you think of specific instances where the faith is persecuted either in America or overseas? Try to see what relevance the text has for today's society and church.

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⁵ II Corinthians 11:25.

⁶ Acts 8:1-4.