

THE DEATH OF STEPHEN.

Five Pen Pictures of the Last Moments of a Glorious Martyr.

God Selects His Choicest Treasures for the Galleries of Heaven—The Christian's Dying Day is Always a Happy Experience.

Rev. Dr. Talnage's latest sermon, given below, is a vivid story of martyrdom and an entrancing description of the glories awaiting the dying Christian. The text used is Acts 7: 54-60: "Behold I see the heavens opened, etc. Stephen had been preaching a rousing sermon, and the people could not stand it. They resolved to do as men sometimes would like to do in this day, if they dared, with some plain preacher of righteousness—kill him. The only way to silence this man was to knock the breath out of him. So they rushed Stephen out of the gates of the city, and with curse, and whoop, and bellow they brought him to the cliff, as was the custom when they wanted to take away life by stoning. Having brought him to the edge of the cliff, they pushed him off. After he had fallen they came and looked down, and seeing that he was not yet dead, they began to drop stones upon him, stone after stone. Amid this horrible rain of missiles, Stephen clambers up on his knees and folds his hands, and the blood drips from his temples to his cheeks, from his cheeks to his garments, from his garments to the ground; and then, looking up, he makes two prayers—one for himself and one for his murderers. "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit;" that was for himself. "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge;" that was for his assailants. Then, from pain and loss of blood, he swooned away and fell asleep.

I want to show you to-day five pictures. Stephen gazing into Heaven. Stephen looking at Christ. Stephen stoned. Stephen in his dying prayer. Stephen asleep. First, look at Stephen gazing into Heaven. Before you take a leap you want to know where you are going to land. Before you climb a ladder you want to know to what point the ladder reaches. And it was right that Stephen, within a few moments of Heaven, should be gazing into it. We would all do well to be found in the same posture. There is enough in Heaven to keep us gazing. A man of large wealth may have a statue in the hall, and works of art in all parts of the house, but he has the chief pictures in the art gallery, and there hour after hour you walk with catalogue and glass and ever-increasing admiration. Well, Heaven is the gallery where God has gathered the chief treasures of His realm. The whole universe is His palace. In this lower room where we stop there are many adornments; tessellated floor of amethyst, and on the winding cloud-stairs are stretched out canvases on which commingle azure, and purple, and saffron, and gold.

But Heaven is the gallery in which the chief glories are gathered. There are the brightest robes. There are the richest crowns. There are the highest exaltations. John says of it: "The kings of the earth shall bring their honor and glory into it." And I see the procession forming, and in the line come all empires, and the stars sprang up into an arch for the hosts to march under. The hosts keep step to the sound of earthquake and the pitch of avalanche from the mountains, and the flag they bear is the flame of a consuming world, and all heaven turns out with harps and trumpets and myriad-voiced acclamation of angelic dominion to welcome them in, and so the kings of the earth bring their honor and glory into it. Do you wonder that good people often stand, like Stephen, looking into Heaven? We have many friends there.

There is not a man in this house today so isolated in life but there is some one in Heaven with whom he once shook hands. As a man gets older the number of his celestial acquaintances very rapidly multiplies. We have not had one glimpse of them since the night we kissed them good-by and they went away, but still we stand gazing at Heaven. As when some of our friends go across the sea, we stand on the dock, or on the steam tug, and watch them, and after awhile the hull of the vessel disappears, and then there is only a patch of sail on the sky, and soon that is gone, and they are all out of sight, and yet we stand looking in the same direction; so when our friends go away from us into the future world we keep looking down through the Narrows, and gazing and gazing, as though we expected that they would come out and stand on some cloud, and give us one glimpse of their blissful and transfused faces.

While you long to join their companionship, and the years and the days go with such tedium that they break your heart, and the viper of pain and sorrow and bereavement keep gnawing at your vitals, you stand still, like Stephen, gazing into Heaven. You wonder if they have changed since you saw them last. You wonder if they would recognize your face now, so changed has it been with trouble. You wonder if, amid the myriad delights they have, they care as much for you as they used to when they gave you a helping hand and put their shoulder under your burdens. You wonder if they look any older, and sometimes in the evening-tide, when the house is all quiet, you wonder if you should call them by their first name if they would not answer, and perhaps sometimes you do make the experiment, and when none but God and yourself are there you distinctly call their names and listen, and sit gazing into Heaven.

Pass on now, and see Stephen looking upon Christ. My text says he saw the Son of Man at the right hand of God. Just how Christ looked in this world, just how He looks in Heaven, we cannot say. A writer in the time of Christ says, describing the Saviour's personal appearance, that He had blue eyes and light complexion,

and a very graceful structure, but I suppose it was all guesswork. The painters of the different ages have tried to imagine the features of Christ and put them upon canvas, but we will have to wait until with our own eyes we see Him and with our own ears we can hear Him. And yet there is a way of seeing and hearing Him now. I have to tell you that unless you see and hear Christ on earth, you will never see and hear Him in Heaven. Look! There He is. Behold the Lamb of God. Can you not see Him? Then pray to God to take the scales off your eyes. Look that way—try to look that way. His voice comes down to you this day—comes down to the blindest, to the deafest soul, saying: "Look unto Me, all ye ends of the earth, and be saved, for I am God, and there is none else. Proclamation of universal emancipation for all slaves. Proclamation of universal amnesty for all rebels. Belshazzar gathered the Babylonish nobles to his table, George I. entertained the lords of England at a banquet, Napoleon III. welcomed the czar of Russia and the Sultan of Turkey to his feast, the emperor of Germany was glad to have our minister, George Bancroft, sit down with him at his table, but tell me, ye who know most of the world's history, what other king ever asked the abashed and the forlorn and the wretched and the outcast to come and sit beside him?

Oh, wonderful invitation! You can take it to-day, and stand at the head of the darkest alley in any city, and say: "Come! Clothes for your rags, save for your sores, a throne for your eternal reigning." A Christ that talks like that, and acts like that, and pardons like that—do you wonder that Stephen stood looking at Him? I hope to spend eternity doing the same thing. I must see Him; I must look upon that face once clouded with my sin, but now radiant with my pardon. I want to touch that hand that knocked off my shackles. I want to hear that voice which pronounced my deliverance. Behold Him, little children, for if you live to three score years and ten, you will see none so fair. Behold Him, ye aged ones, for He only can shine through the dimness of your falling eyesight. Behold Him, earth. Behold Him, Heaven. What a moment when all the nations of the saved shall gather around Christ! All faces that way. All thrones that way, gazing on Jesus.

His work if all the nations knew. Sure the whole earth would love Him, too. I pass on now, and look at Stephen stoned. The world has always wanted to get rid of good men. Their very life is an assault upon wickedness. Out with Stephen through the gates of the city. Down with him over the precipices. Let every man come up and drop a stone upon his head. But these men did not so much kill Stephen as they killed themselves. Every stone rebounded upon them. While these murderers were transfixed by the scorn of all good men Stephen lives in the admiration of all Christendom. Stephen stoned, but Stephen alive. So all good men must be peiled. All who will live godly in Christ Jesus must suffer persecution. It is no eulogy of a man to say that everybody likes him. Show me anyone who is doing all his duty to state or church, and I will show you men who utterly abhor him.

If all men speak well of you, it is because you are either a laggard or a doer. If a steamer makes rapid progress through the waves, the water will boil and foam all around it. Brave soldiers of Jesus Christ will hear the carbines click. When I see a man with voice, and money, and influence all on the right side, and some caricature him, and some sneer at him, and some denounce him, and men who pretend to be actuated by right motives conspire to cripple him, to cast him out, to destroy him, I say, "Stephen stoned."

When I see a man in some great moral or religious reform battling against gross shops, exposing wickedness in high places, by active means trying to purify the church and better the world's estate, and I find that some of the newspapers anathematize him, and men, even good men, oppose him and denounce him, because, though he does good, he does not do it in their way, I say, "Stephen stoned." The world, with infinite spite, took after John Frederik Oberlin, and Paul, and Stephen of the text. But you notice, my friends, that while they assailed him they did not succeed really in killing him. You may assault a good man, but you cannot kill him.

On the day of his death, Stephen spoke before a few people in the Sanhedrin; now he addresses all Christendom. Paul the Apostle stood on Mars Hill addressing a handful of philosophers who knew not so much about science as a modern school girl. To-day he talks to all the millions of Christendom about the wonders of justification and the glories of resurrection. John Wesley was howled down by the mob to whom he preached, and they threw bricks at him, and they denounced him, and they jostled him, and they spat upon him, and yet to-day, in all lands, he is admitted to be the great father of Methodism. Booth's bullet vacated the presidential chair; but from that spot of congealed blood on the floor in the box of Ford's theater there sprang up the new life of a nation. Stephen stoned, but Stephen alive.

Pass on now and see Stephen in his dying prayer. His first thought was not how the stones hurt his head, nor what would become of his body. His first thought was about his spirit. "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." The murderer standing on the trap door, the black cap being drawn over his head before the execution, may grimace about the future, but you and I have no shame in confessing some anxiety about where we are going to come out. You are not all body. There is within you a soul. I see it gleam from your eyes, and I see it irradiating your countenance.

I do not care what you do with my body when my soul is gone, or whether you believe in cremation or inhumation. I shall sleep just as well in a wrapping of sackcloth as in satin lined with eagle's down. But my soul

—before this day passes I will find out where it will land. Thank God for the intimation of my text, that when we die Jesus takes us. That answers all questions for me. What though there were massive bars between here and the city of light, Jesus could remove them. What though there were great Saharas of darkness, Jesus could illumine them. What though I get weary on the way, Christ could lift me on His omnipotent shoulder. What though there were chasms to cross, his hand could transport me. Then let Stephen's prayer be my dying litany: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." It may be in that hour we will be too feeble to say a long prayer. It may be in that hour we will not be able to say the "Lord's Prayer," for it has seven petitions. Perhaps we may be too feeble even to say the infant prayer our mothers taught us, which John Quincy Adams, 79 years of age, said every night when he put his head upon his pillow:

Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep.

We may be too feeble to employ either of these familiar forms; but this prayer of Stephen's is so short, is so concise, is so earnest, is so comprehensive, we surely will be able to say that: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Oh, if that prayer is answered, how sweet it will be to die! This world is clever enough to us. Perhaps it has treated us a great deal better than we deserve to be treated; but if on the dying pillow there should break the light of that better world, we shall have no more regret about leaving a small, dark, damp house for one large, beautiful and spacious. That dying minister in Philadelphia some years ago beautifully depicted it, when, in the last moment, he threw up his hands and cried out: "I move into the light!"

Pass on now, and I will show you one more picture, and that is Stephen asleep. With a pathos and simplicity peculiar to the Scriptures, the text says of Stephen: "He fell asleep." "Oh," you say, "what a place that was to sleep! A hard rock under him, stones falling down upon him, the blood streaming, the mob howling. What a place it was to sleep!" And yet my text takes that symbol of slumber to describe his departure, so sweet was it, so contented was it, so peaceful was it. Stephen had lived a very laborious life, his chief work had been to care for the poor. How many loaves of bread he distributed, how many bare feet he had sandaled, how many coats of sickness and distress he blessed with ministries of kindness and love, I do not know; but from the way he lived, and the way he preached, and the way he died, I know he was a laborious Christian. But that is all over now. He has pressed the cup to the last fainting lip. He has taken the last insult from his enemies. The last stone to whose crushing weight he is susceptible has been hurled. Stephen is dead! The disciples come. They take him up. They wash away the blood from the wounds. They straighten out the bruised limbs. They brush back the tangled hair from the brow, and then they pass around to look upon the calm countenance of him who had lived for the poor and died for the truth. Stephen asleep!

I have seen the sea driven with the hurricane until the tangled foam caught in the rigging, and wave rising above wave seemed as if about to storm the heavens, and then I have seen the tempest drop, and the waves crouch, and everything become smooth and burnished as though a camping place for the glories of Heaven. So I have seen a man, whose life has been tossed and driven, coming down at last to an infinite calm, in which there was the hush of Heaven's lullaby. Stephen asleep! I saw such an one. He fought all his days against poverty and against abuse. They traduced his name. They rattled at the door knob while he was dying, with duns for debts he could not pay; yet the peace of God brooded over his pillow, and while the world faded, Heaven dawned, and the deepening twilight of earth's night was only the opening twilight of Heaven's morn. Not a sigh. Not a tear. Not a struggle. Hush! Stephen asleep!

I have not the faculty to tell the weather. I can never tell by the setting sun whether there will be a drought or not. I cannot tell by the blowing of the wind whether it will be fair weather or foul on the morrow. But I can prophesy, and I will prophesy what weather it will be when you, the Christian, come to die. You may have it very rough now. It may be this week one annoyance, the next another annoyance. It may be this year one bereavement, the next another bereavement. Before this year has passed, you may have to beg for bread, or ask for a scuttle of coal, or a pair of shoes; but at the last Christ will come in and darkness will go out. And though there may be no hand to close your eyes, and no breast on which to rest your dying head, and no candle to lift the night, the odors of God's hanging garden will regale your soul, and at your bedside will halt the chariots of the King. No more rent to pay, no more agony because flour has gone up, no more struggle with "the world, the flesh, and the devil;" but peace—long, deep, everlasting peace. Stephen asleep!

Asleep in Jesus, blessed sleep. From which none ever wake to weep; A calm and undisturbed repose. Uninjured by the last of foes.

Asleep in Jesus, far from them Thy kith-dred and their graves may be; But there is still a blessed sleep. From which none ever wake to weep.

You have seen enough for one morning. No one can successfully examine more than five pictures in a day. Therefore, we stop, having seen this cluster of Divine Raphaels—Stephen gazing into Heaven; Stephen looking at Christ; Stephen stoned; Stephen in his dying prayer; Stephen asleep.

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