

## The First Christian Martyr.

MARCH 18.

ACTS VII: 54-8; 8: 1-4.

*Golden Text, Rev 2: 10.*

**S**TEPHEN had been dragged before the Council on a false charge of blasphemy, founded upon either a mis-quotation or misapprehension of what he had said, Ch. 6: 14; as in the case of his Master, Mark 14: 58. In reply he makes a remarkably clever speech. He shewed that Moses who instituted the Law expressly warned the Jews that it only foreshadowed a more perfect dispensation that was to follow and that the same penalties inflicted upon them for disobedience might fall upon his hearers for rejecting the Messiah. More he would have said in the application of his theme but for the frenzied rage which interrupted him. V. 54. *Thee thinkest*—his irresistible arguments. *Cut to the heart*—literally, "sawn asunder." They were mortified beyond measure that not one of the learned council could answer him. *Onashed upon him*—an expression of brutal hatred and contempt; and of their own disappointment. Vs 55, 56. *But he, &c.*—The Divine presence produced in Stephen quite an opposite effect. He stands before them a picture of sublime composure. *Saw the glory of God*—with the inner eye of faith he beheld the beautiful vision. Those who would see God must "look up." *Jesus standing*—not sitting, as elsewhere represented, but in the attitude of eager interest, watching from heaven the scene in that council chamber. V. 57. Forgetting what was due to the dignity of the high court, they were so mad that they could not wait the end of the trial, but stopping their ears to shut out Stephen's ringing words, and to drown the din of their own voices, they rushed upon him like so many demons, hustled him out of the council, and had him conveyed to the common place of execution. V. 58. What a remarkable introduction is this to him who was to become the grandest missionary the world ever saw, now about thirty years of age and a man of culture! Saul's part in this transaction is regretfully referred to by himself in ch. 22: 20. V. 59. *They stoned Stephen*—the prescribed mode of dealing with blasphemers, Lev. 24: 16. *Calling upon God*—rather on "the Lord," N. V., for it was Jesus who is invoked. *Kissed my spirit*—almost identical with Christ's prayer, Luke 23: 46. See also 2 Tim 1: 12. V. 60. *Lay not this sin*—see Matt. 5: 44. and Luke 23: 34. *A full asleep*—This beautiful imagery is also used by Paul and invests its derivative the "com-eery" with a halo of hope and comfort. Our departed friends do not die; they only sleep, 1 Thes. 4: 13-14 ch. 8: 1-4. The persecution raised against the church resulted in the martyrdom of many others, ch. 22: 4, and 26: 10, but was overruled for the furtherance of the kingdom, for while the apostles remained at Jerusalem to defend and confirm the infant church many of the brethren were "scattered"—not that they fled from suffering, but were rather strengthened by it to obey the command, "Go ye into all the world, &c." If we would die the death of the righteous, we must be careful to live the righteous life.

## Simon the Sorcerer.

APRIL 1

ACTS VIII: 14-25

*Golden Text, Acts 8: 21.*

**R**EAD from v. 5. After the death of Stephen the apostles remained in Jerusalem, but many of the leading Christians left the city agreeably to their Lord's injunction, Matt. 10: 23. Philip, the evangelist, one of the seven deacons, went to Samaria, the chief town in the district of the same name, about thirty miles north from Jerusalem, where he preached the gospel with great success, working many miracles. There was a fitness in his going rather than any of the apostles; (1) because being a "Grecian," or foreign Jew, he would be specially exposed to persecution from the orthodox Jerusalem Pharisees. (2), the fact of his not being a native of Jerusalem would be in his favour with the Samaritans who kept up their old animosity against the Jews, Jn. 4: 9. In the same city was one Simon Magus, a notable imposter, v. 9, who had for a long time deceived the people by his magic arts, leading them to suppose that he was divinely commissioned. Struck with the power which attended the preaching of Philip, Simon professed himself a convert and as such was baptized, but as the sequel shows, without experiencing "baptismal regeneration." V. 14. The news of the revival reaching Jerusalem, Peter and John were sent to Samaria—evidence that Peter was not primate of the church, but on a par with the other apostles, and like them subject to the presbytery. V. 15. The purpose of their visit was to ascertain the truth of the report and the extent of the movement; as overseers to give counsel and encouragement; to ask for them the gift of the Holy Ghost. It seemed necessary to give official countenance to this work done through the agency of one who was not an ordained apostle. *Prayed for them*—Even the apostles could only pray for the gift of the Holy Ghost. It was not theirs to bestow. V. 17. *Laid their hands on them*—A symbolic act in token of their delegated authority and jurisdiction, ch. 1: 8. V. 18. Simon's motive now appears to be utterly wrong. He did not care about receiving the Holy Ghost himself, but was ambitious to have the honour of seeming to be an apostle. He could make more money thus than by his necromancy, and was willing to pay any price for the privilege. The thought which led to the proposal was as bad as the act of offering the money. The source of all sin is in the heart, Jer. 17: 9; Matt. 15: 19. Religion is not a mere matter of profession. It regulates the heart and the life. God searches the heart, and he alone can renew it, Ps 139: 23. V. 22. *Repent and pray*—There is no limit to God's forgiveness, but it must be obtained through repentance and faith. V. 23. *Pray ye for me*—no sign of repentance, nor sense of sin, nor prayer for forgiveness, but a cowardly fear of outward punishment which he asks Peter to pray God to avert. V. 25. The condition of the natural heart is described as one of bondage. The prisoner cannot loosen his own chains. Another must do that. The gift of God, eternal life, can only be obtained by faith in the Son of God, Jn. 10: 27, 28; Rom. 6: 23.