

V. EVER SHOWS PITY AND FORGIVENESS.

Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. Luke 23. 34.

VI. IN THE END OBTAINS GLORIOUS VICTORY.

Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his. Num. 23. 10.

EXPLANATORY NOTES.

Our lesson to-day presents the final scene in the tragedy begun in Lesson VIII. The accounts of the events which led up to Stephen's death should be carefully kept in mind—the economic difficulty in the Church, which led to the appointment of deacons, or “stewards;” the preeminence of Stephen as an evangelical debater; the antagonism of the Pharisees, aroused by Stephen's burning words; the alienation from the Christians of the sympathies of the common people; the malicious charge made against Stephen; his arrest, and his masterly defense. Stephen's speech should be carefully studied. He first strives to disprove the charge of impiety by loyally accepting the entire Mosaic revelation; then undertakes to show that the covenant of the promise preceded the customs which Moses delivered; that Moses himself was only a link in the chain of God's graduated revelation, that the temple was not in any exclusive sense the dwelling place of God, and that the Mosaic law had never been consistently kept, not even by these present champions. It was “these things” which “cut to the heart” the Sanhedrin. But before we dwell on the final scene we should make ourselves familiar also with another series of introductory facts. The date of the lesson is not certain; but a year or more before this time Pilate had been removed from the governorship of Judea, and a little later Calaphas had been deposed from the high-priesthood. Political unrest made opportunities for widespread disorders. So the highest Hebraic court degenerates into a mob, and Stephen is dragged outside the city walls and stoned to death. The identical flash of historic light which gives us our last view of Stephen gives us our first glimpse of a young man whose name was Saul, destined to become the greatest of Christian apostles. Our lesson in its closing verses dwells with emphasis on the persecution which followed Stephen's death. In this persecution Saul was a prominent figure. To those who had a nearer view of these events this persecution must have threatened the very perpetuity of the Christian teachings and life, but in fulfillment of the promise of the Lord it tended only to the increased strength and spread of the Church.

Verse 54. *When they* [the members of the Sanhedrin, sitting on their cushions in a semicircle] *heard these things* [Stephen's bold overthrow of all their religious preconceptions], *they were cut to the heart* [“sawn through,” convicted but not penitent], *and they gnashed on him with their teeth*, as an oriental will to-day in a storm of rage and spite. But if Stephen had said no more we may doubt whether the members of the Sanhedrin would have gone on to open violence.

55. *He, being full of the Holy Ghost.* Filled and exalted with special power according to our Lord's promise. It is inspiring to note how God respects human individuality. One by one the disciples receive the Holy Ghost, and the immediate effect on each is unique. Turn to Acts 1. 8, and read: “Peter, filled with the Holy Ghost, said.” Always when this marvelous divine endowment came on that great orator he spoke. Stephen, however, when he was filled with the Holy Ghost *looked and saw*. Had Peter had Stephen's astuteness and intellectual insight he never could have made the later blunder for which Paul rebuked him. Had Stephen had Peter's political acumen he would not thus early have brought on a fatal conflict. Each

man had his own native qualities and “the limitations of those qualities,” and God honored each and made him useful. There is room here for practical application. *Looked up steadfastly* [“with attention”] *into heaven, and saw the glory of God* [a Jewish phrase for God's personal manifestation, “the Shekinah”], *and Jesus standing on the right hand of God*. This vision came within Stephen's range because he was “full of the Holy Ghost.” Probably only he saw it and not the others in the room.

56. Stephen's words, *Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God*, are nearly a repetition of the statement of verse 55. But his utterance of what he saw not only breaks up the session of the council, but suddenly revolutionizes the history of the Church. We cannot be sure how far the phrase “Son of man” was accepted by the Sanhedrin as a Messianic designation. It was certainly understood by them to refer to Jesus Christ. In other places Jesus is represented as sitting on the right hand of God; here he stands; and it has been a favorite thought with Christian scholars that the suggestion came to Stephen's mind that he had risen to receive his faithful servant to the joys of heaven.