

ACTS: ALIGNING WITH GOD'S SOVEREIGN WORK OF DISCIPLING

XVI. God's Edifying Use Of Stephen's Tragic Martyrdom

(Acts 8:1-4)

I. Introduction

- A. The book of Acts explains "the orderly and sovereignly directed progress of the kingdom message from Jews to Gentiles, and from Jerusalem to Rome," Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament, p. 351.
- B. Accordingly, we can learn much about aligning our ministry efforts with God's sovereign work from studying the Early Church era as it is presented in the book of Acts.
- C. Acts 8:1-4 presents God's edifying use of Stephen's tragic martyrdom, and we view the passage for insight:

II. God's Edifying Use Of Stephen's Tragic Martyrdom, Acts 8:1-4.

- A. From the human viewpoint, Stephen's martyrdom was a catastrophe for the Jerusalem Church:
 1. The martyrdom of Stephen involved a great loss of a great leader for the believers in Jerusalem:
 - a. Stephen was the only deacon selected by the congregation minister livelihood provisions for its widows of whom it was said that he was unequivocally full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, Acts 6:1-5.
 - b. In that deacon role, God used him to perform many signs and wonders, what had attracted the attention and the eventual opposition of the synagogue of the Freedmen, Acts 6:8-9.
 - c. Stephen with his great wisdom had withstood the debates of the entire synagogue of the Freedmen so that his foes had been unable to answer him, Acts 6:10.
 - d. When slanderously charged with blaspheming against Moses and God and brought before the Sanhedrin with these charges, God had caused Stephen's face to shine as had the face of Moses, signaling to all present that the God of Moses was the same God that Stephen righteously served, Acts 6:11-15.
 2. Stephen's martyrdom also led to great persecution for the Jerusalem Church, Acts 8:1-3:
 - a. Great persecution against the Church occurred in Jerusalem following Stephen's death so that all the believers were scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, with only the apostles remaining in Jerusalem, Acts 8:1.
 - b. Devout men carried Stephen to his burial and made great lamentation over him, Acts 8:2.
 - c. Besides all this, Saul at whose feet the witnesses who stoned Stephen laid their outer garments for guarding (Acts 7:58; Bible Know. Com. N. T., p. 371) not only approved of Stephen's death (Ibid.), but he ravaged the Church, entering house after house and dragging off men and women and putting them in prison, beating them to try to get them to blaspheme Christ! (Ibid., p. 372; Acts 8:3; 22:19; 26:11)
- B. Nevertheless, from God's perspective, Stephen's martyrdom only served to further Christ's Great Commission:
 1. Christ's last words before He ascended to heaven was that His disciples would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judaea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, Acts 1:8-9. Stephen's martyrdom served God's plan of spreading the Church out from Jerusalem to minister in all Judaea and Samaria, Acts 8:1b.
 2. In addition, as these believers were scattered abroad by the great persecution in Jerusalem, Stephen's sterling witness motivated them to proclaim God's Word wherever they went, Acts 8:4.
 3. Furthermore, the ravaging work of Saul to try to destroy the Christian faith was also used of God to help further His plan to get believers out into Judaea and Samaria, taking the Gospel with them, Acts 8:1, 3-4.
 4. However, unseen at this time was the great turmoil that festered in the heart of the young man Saul, a turmoil that would result in his not only getting saved, but becoming the great missionary of Christianity:
 - a. Later in the Apostle Paul's testimony before king Agrippa, Paul admitted that when Christ appeared to him on the road to Damascus to convert him to Christ, Jesus had clarified that it was hard Paul kick against the goads, Acts 26:14. Stephen's address before the Sanhedrin had deeply impressed the young Saul, and his conscience had been troubled by it, seen in Paul's later use of Stephen's very words in ministering the Gospel to the Antioch Jews in Acts 13:46-48 with Acts 7:27, 39, 42.
 - b. After his conversion, Saul, who later was called Paul, ended up writing much of the New Testament, spiritually enriching the lives of millions of believers in Christ down through the ages of Church History!

Lesson: *Though Stephen's martyrdom from the human view at the time seemed to be a disaster for the Jerusalem Church, in God's view, it only furthered the Great Commission for the long-term welfare of the Church universal.*

Application: *May we never become dismayed at apparent setbacks to the faith that we might face at our level but realize God that sovereignly will fulfill His Great Commission amid even such apparent human tragedies.*