

I. Introduction

Good morning! Alexander Cole was born in Russia on December 1st, 2010. I don't know what the circumstances were, but Alexander's birth mother and father were not able to care for him and he was put up for adoption. Within a few months, Alexander was adopted by Peter and Laura, a couple who had been waiting for a chance to adopt a child. The process was complex, but finally, on September 13th of 2011, baby Alexander was welcomed to his new home in America.



Like many thousands of children before him, Alexander was adopted by a family that longed to have a child. It did not matter what country Alexander was from or what tragedy or hardship his original home might have experienced. Because of love, Alexander was adopted and welcomed into a new home.

In the USA there are over 100,000 adoptions every year and some other countries also have a lot of adoptions. Each adopted child is welcomed into a new family, often including new brothers and sisters. These children are welcomed unconditionally into new homes; homes they have never before been to. And, in the case of international adoptions, the adopted child also receives a new country and citizenship as well. Adoption into a new family because of unconditional love. A new home. A new citizenship. Does this remind us of anything?



When we believe in Jesus, our sins are forgiven and we receive eternal life. But that is not all; we are also adopted into God's family, a family with many millions of brothers and sisters. **John 1:12-13** says, **"Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God-- children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."** When we receive Jesus and welcome Him into our heart and life, we are adopted into God's family and made to be His children.

Another blessing that we receive when we trust in Jesus is citizenship in heaven. Just as Baby Alexander received a new home country, we also receive a new citizenship. For Christians this world is no longer our home; our true home is in heaven. **Philippians 3:20**, **"But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ."**

If you have trusted in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, then you have a home in heaven. Our home in heaven is a place we have never yet been to, but even so, when we go to heaven we will be welcomed home to be with the Lord forever. Do you remember what Jesus told His disciples in **John 14:2**? **"In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you."** Our Lord Jesus has prepared a place for all of His adopted brothers and sisters; a place where we can enjoy His presence and fellowship forever.

When we go home to heaven, we will meet some amazing brothers and sisters who have gone on before us. One of these is a man named Stephen. You may remember that his name was mentioned last week when we read about the appointment of the first seven men who served as deacons in the church. In today's passage, we will see how Stephen became the first martyr of the early church and how he was welcomed home by our Lord Jesus.



Let's read Acts 6:8-15 to get us started.

II. Scripture Acts 6:8-15 (NIV 1984)

8 Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. 9 Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)--Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, 10 but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke. 11 Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God." 12 So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. 13 They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. 14 For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us." 15 All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

III. Teaching

As we discussed last week, Stephen was appointed as one of the seven men who were to take care of the daily distribution of food and therefore he is considered to be one of the first deacons of the church. As we see in this passage, Stephen was also a powerful preacher and miracle worker. But, as generally happens wherever effective ministry is being done, opposition arose. Greek-speaking Jews associated with the so-called Synagogue of the Freedmen, apparently largely from the city of Cyrene, in Libya and the city of Alexandria in Egypt, began to argue with Stephen publicly.



However, it seems that Stephen easily overcame them in the public debates. As verse 10 says, **“but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.”** Properly explained, the truth is always stronger than error. But people don't like to be wrong and no one likes to have their errors pointed out in public. In this case, since these men were unable to defeat Stephen in a fair debate, they decided to try dishonesty and deception. They stirred up some liars and dragged Stephen before the Sanhedrin for judgment. Then, as **Acts 6:13** says, **“They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law.”**

The members of the Sanhedrin had already condemned Jesus to death and they had also ordered Peter and the apostles to be beaten. The Sanhedrin would not have been in a favorable mood toward Stephen. And, yet, something struck them when Stephen was brought before them. **Acts 6:15**, **“All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.”** What does this mean? I don't know exactly, but I think it means that despite the circumstances, Stephen was full of peace, joy, and love. Think about it. Stephen is faced with lying witnesses accusing him of many things and he is standing before those with the power to judge him. But he is at peace.

This brings Philippians chapter 4 to my mind. Stephen stood before the Sanhedrin many years before the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Philippi. But I think Stephen already knew these things. Listen to what Paul wrote in **Philippians 4:4-7**. **“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”**

Stephen may not have realized it yet, but on that day he was going to become the first Christian martyr. But even if someone had told him that he would soon be dead, I don't think Stephen would have worried about it. Stephen already had the, **“peace of God.”** Stephen is going to give a sermon to the Sanhedrin. In his sermon, Stephen is going to review the history of Israel and remind the Sanhedrin about how Israel had rebelled against God many times. We will take a closer look at Stephen's message next time, but for today let's skip forward to Acts 7:51-60 where Stephen is finishing his message.

IV. Scripture Acts 7:51-60 (NIV 1984)

51 "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 52 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-- 53 you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it." 54 When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." 57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 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.

V. Teaching

Like one of the Old Testament prophets, Stephen told the Sanhedrin the truth, even though they did not want to hear it. In rejecting and crucifying Jesus Christ, the Sanhedrin had demonstrated that they were just as stubborn as the Israelite kings of old who had rebelled against God and killed His prophets. The Sanhedrin was rebuked, but they did not repent, at least not on that day. Instead they simply grew angry and refused to listen anymore. We might think that Stephen should have chosen softer words, but sometimes the Lord leads His servants to speak the truth quite plainly when that is what is needed.



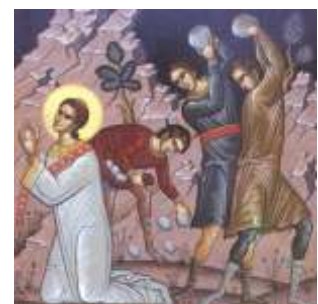
On that day, the Sanhedrin and the others who were there did not repent. But Stephen's words may well have echoed in their minds for months and years afterwards, and perhaps Stephen's strong words eventually brought at least some of them to repentance. Strong words must be used cautiously because they can leave a long-lasting impression, but sometimes it is for the better.

I remember one time when I was nineteen years old. It was a time in my life when I was drinking and running around at night and I had gotten a traffic ticket for driving too fast. I was in the Marine Corps then and the rule at that time was that when young Marines got a traffic ticket, they had to go to court in uniform and one of their supervisors had to go with them. Staff Sergeant Allen was selected to drive me to court and appear with me before the judge that day. The court itself was quite simple. I admitted that I had been driving too fast and paid my fine.

The drive 45 minutes to and from the court was the hard part. It was a time in my life when I had no interest in the things of God; I was too busy partying to think about much else. But Staff Sergeant Allen was what Americans call a Bible thumper and he was going to make sure I heard the message. One line from his message stuck with me every after. Pardon me, but I want to quote what he said. After reviewing a long list of my sins and rebuking me, he told me, "*It just breaks my heart to see a young man like you going to hell.*" I was not willing to listen at the time. But I never forgot what he said and his strong warning became part of the story of how the Lord eventually softened my heart.



Perhaps Stephen's strong message had the same effect on some of the men of the Sanhedrin that day. Stephen spoke to them with strong words, but the reason was because Stephen's heart was soft. Stephen loved his enemies. We see this in the Scripture. They argued with Stephen. They brought false witnesses against Stephen. They dragged him to court. They closed their eyes to his angelic face. They stopped their ears to his message. They dragged him out and stoned him.



How did Stephen respond to their violence? **Acts 7:59-60**, "While they



were stoning him, Stephen prayed, '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." Stephen responded in faith and in love. He responded in faith, knowing he would be welcomed into his heavenly home. He responded in love, praying for his enemies even at his death. It is remarkable and wonderful that Stephen faced death with an attitude so similar to the attitude Jesus Himself displayed on the cross.

Luke 23:46 tells us that, "Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last."

And, in **Luke 23:34**, "Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'" Jesus prayed for His enemies from the cross and Stephen prayed for the people who were stoning him. Stephen had received salvation by the grace of God received through faith in Jesus Christ, but there is something more. Stephen had grown in his faith and had become like Jesus. Facing death, Stephen showed the same attitude that was in Christ Jesus, his Lord.



As we walk with Jesus, we become more and more like Him. The Holy Spirit leads us into peace, joy, a lifestyle of love and an attitude of faith in all circumstances. When we go home to heaven we will rejoice together with Stephen and with all of the men and women of faith who have gone on before us. It will be a big celebration, a wonderful homecoming party.

VI. Conclusion

In **Acts 7:55**, we read, "But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." Usually, Scripture described Jesus in heaven as being seated at the right hand of God. But as Stephen, a beloved adopted son of God is about to come, Jesus stands and heaven is opened so that Stephen can see. We can be sure that Stephen was welcomed home with a glorious celebration.



How about us? Whether we die as martyrs or in our sleep, sooner or later, we all face death. Many of the people of this world face death with fear or anger. But if we have placed our faith in Jesus we can face death, however it comes, with peace and joy, knowing that there is a welcome waiting for us in heaven. How should we live? We should live so that when we go home to heaven we will hear our master say, "Welcome home!" "Well done, good and faithful servant." (Matthew 25:21a)



Let's pray.

VII. Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,

Your love is unending and perfect. Your grace and mercy are beyond measure. Thank you for providing for our salvation through the cross of Christ Jesus. Help us to repent of our sins and to open our hearts wide to Him so that we might be saved. I pray that each of us here, and also our family, friends, and neighbors, might come to know the peace of Christ and be filled with the joy of the Lord. Teach us to trust in You and walk by Your Holy Spirit. Give us wisdom and strength for each day. May we, by Your grace, learn to live in a way that is pleasing in Your sight so that we might be welcomed home to heaven as good and faithful servants of Your Kingdom. We praise Your Holy Name. In Jesus' precious Name I pray, amen.