



St. Stephen.

"Seeing above the golden crown,
Into death's arms he willing goes ;
Dying, he conquers death ; o'erthrown,
O'erthrows his foes."

THE sun was sinking fast beyond the western hills of Judea, and it might almost be imagined that the sad moaning of the wind which blew in hurried and fitful blasts, foretold the sorrows and the trouble which were soon to befall the disciples of the LORD JESUS CHRIST, and those of His chosen Apostles: for they were now about to find that in the world they should have tribulation, and that all their hope, and all their trust must be in HIM, who for their sakes had overcome the world.* There was a great crowd collected together, and it might easily be perceived, from their loud voices and angry words, that some great and important dispute was going on. In the

* St. John xvi. 33.

midst of this crowd of noisy men, one might be seen whose face was full of sweet and holy expression; and while all around him had countenances darkened by anger, he seemed to be unmoved by the violence which was displayed. It appeared that the crowd was gathered about this quiet-looking man, and that the noise arose from those who were disputing with him. Although many hard and bitter expressions were used, they never once provoked him to lift up his voice: and the calmness with which he replied to their reproaches, and the gentleness with which he enforced the truths concerning which they were so eagerly disputing, only tended to stir up the anger of those who were unable to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.* And what do you think he was speaking about, which made these men so very angry? He was speaking about the LORD JESUS CHRIST. He was showing how that He was the eternal SON OF GOD, and that He was the MESSIAH promised to their fathers; and that as the covenant into which God had entered with Israel, and the sacrifices which He had commanded Moses to

* Acts vi. 10.

appoint, were intended to prepare the minds of the people for the coming of their Lord, they must now be done away with; since CHRIST was the MESSIAH who was to come, and they therefore must not look for another.

St. Stephen, who had been ordained by the Apostles as one of the seven deacons of the Church, was the holy man thus holding a disputation with the Jews: and the more clearly he proved that JESUS CHRIST, whom they had a short time before crucified and slain, was the MESSIAH, the more angrily did they rage against him. They found, however, that they could not prevail against St. Stephen in argument, so they determined, if possible, to destroy him. But before they attempted this wickedness, they knew that they must bring some charge against him; and as he was a good and holy man, they could not discover that he had committed any crime which, if proved against him, would be punished by death. Still they were bent on his destruction: and since there was no real crime which they could lay to his charge, they resolved to invent one, and to prove it by false witnesses, who for the sake of money were ready to say or do any thing. So having found some

men who were willing to bear false witness against St. Stephen, they charged him with having spoken blasphemous words against Moses, and against God. Such a charge they knew would greatly provoke their rulers, and would lead them to think that a man who could speak thus blasphemously, was not fit to be believed. The Jews accordingly stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came and seized St. Stephen, and brought him before their council.

The Jewish council was sitting at the time, and the high priest was presiding over it. The crowd had no sooner rushed in with their prisoner, than they began to charge him with blasphemy; and the false witnesses said, "This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law: for we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us."* Such was the charge which the enemies of St. Stephen brought against him. False and wicked as it was, it caused no angry feelings in the mind of the saint: his heart was filled with holiness, and such

* Acts vi. 13, 14.

a heavenly expression did it give to his countenance, that all who sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.

When the accusers of St. Stephen had finished their charge, and when the members of the council saw that the charge produced no symptoms of guilt in their prisoner, the high priest said to him, "Are these things so?" They thus apparently gave St. Stephen an opportunity of defending himself; and he might, if he had chosen, have brought many persons to prove that he had not been in the habit of speaking blasphemous words: that so far had he been from doing any thing of the sort, he had always spoken with great reverence of Moses, and of the holy city Jerusalem, and of the temple, and of the law which Moses had commanded: that he had spoken about these things in such a manner as all good and holy men speak about things which have served to answer great and important purposes. He might also have brought forward many who could have proved how blamelessly he led his life; and how carefully he attended to the wants of the poor, and especially of the widows who were in dis-

tress. He might have brought forward witnesses who could have proved these things, and many more, to establish his innocence, but he chose rather to commit his cause to God, feeling with the royal saint of old, "Though an host of men were laid against me, yet shall not my heart be afraid; and though there rose up war against me, yet will I put my trust in Him."* Instead, therefore, of defending himself from charges which he knew were false, he gave an account of God's dealings with their fathers, and showed that they, no less than their sires, were a perverse race of men, unworthy of God's blessings. "As your father's did," said he, "so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which showed before of the coming of the Just One, of whom ye have now been the betrayers and murderers." When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart. Their consciences told them all this was very true. They could not but be aware how graciously God had dealt with their forefathers, and how greatly they had rebelled against Him. And when they heard themselves compared with

* Psalm xxvii. 3.

their rebellious fathers, and charged with being the betrayers and murderers of JESUS CHRIST, for to Him St. Stephen alluded when he spoke of the JUST ONE, their anger knew no bounds. They could not deny the truth of all that had been said, and this provoked them to madness; and giving way to their fury, they were determined to be revenged.

Oh, how fiend-like must their countenances have been! How must fury have shot from their eyes, and quivered on their lips, while they heard their unprotected prisoner bring these accusations against them? It must, indeed, have been a fearful sight, to have seen these Jewish rulers sitting, cut to the heart by the words of St. Stephen, and gnashing upon him with their teeth! What a contrast was presented by the calm demeanour of the persecuted saint!

While his judges were thus forgetful of the dignity of their office, and eagerly bent upon destroying their prisoner, St. Stephen, being full of the HOLY GHOST, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and JESUS standing on the right hand of God, and said, "Behold I see the heavens opened, and the SON OF MAN standing on the right

hand of God!" This was indeed a blessed sight; a sight which few eyes have had the privilege of beholding, and which few, moreover, could endure. For he beheld the heavens opened, and all that bliss and glory revealed which is laid up for all those who are true and faithful servants of God, who, while they are upon earth, believe in Him, fear Him, and love Him with all their heart, with all their mind, with all their soul, and with all their strength: who worship Him, who give Him thanks, who put their whole trust in Him, who call upon Him, who honour His holy Name and His word, and who serve Him truly all the days of their lives. Those who do all this will, when they die, go to heaven, and both see and enjoy the glory of that blessed place; but St. Stephen was allowed by Almighty God to see it before he died. When he declared the glory which he saw, those who heard him cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord. Angry as they were, they remained in their places while St. Stephen was charging them with their wickedness; but when they heard him not only speak of heaven, but also declare that he

actually saw all the glories of it open before him, they could restrain themselves no longer, and they rushed from their seats like men who were beside themselves, determined no longer to hear the voice of him who had so greatly exasperated them. Being thus in a state of high fury, they did not wait for a regular trial; the forms of Roman law through which they must have gone would have caused too much delay; they therefore raised a tumult, and, taking the law into their own hands, dragged their victim out of the city. And was there no one who would stand up in St. Stephen's defence, and try to stop the madness of the people? There were many who had the inclination, but no one had either power or courage to do so; for although there were many holy men who sorrowed much over the cruel treatment which the deacon met with, yet, as they were, for the most part, poor and humble men, they dared not to resist the violence of the people, which was now past all control, and which was encouraged by the rulers themselves. Much would they have rejoiced to deliver St. Stephen out of the hands of his enemies, but feeling how weak they were, and how few in number

compared with those who were persecuting him, they were forced to look at the grievous spectacle in silence; and could do nothing but submit to their enemies and offer up their earnest prayer to God that He would be pleased to look down in mercy upon their sorrows, and make them work together for their good.

With noise and clamour, the cruel persecutors of the saint stood around him, as soon as they were come without the walls of Jerusalem. It is almost wonderful that they waited until they had passed through the gate of the city before they began their work of murder, but they were afraid of putting any one to death within the city; so their fear got the better of their fury, and for a few minutes kept them from their purpose.

Oh what a sad and painful sight it must have been, to have seen this holy man hurried through the city by those who were thirsting for his blood! And sadder still it must have been to have seen him standing alone, surrounded by a crowd of murderers, who were throwing great stones at him, as he called upon God, and said, "LORD JESUS, receive my spirit." One would have thought

that they would almost have been afraid of injuring a man who thus showed how greatly he trusted in God. But rage had so completely got possession of their minds, that they never thought of this, nor cared for the consequence.

As they continued throwing their murderous stones at St. Stephen, he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, "LORD, lay not this sin to their charge." Thus following the example of his LORD and Master, whose last prayer for those who were shedding His blood was, "FATHER, forgive them, for they know not what they do."* Although the enemies of St. Stephen were killing him in a cruel manner, yet it pleased God that death should come upon him very gently; so gently indeed did it come, that when he died, he seemed to fall asleep.

At that sad hour few wished to change places with the martyr; but how many would now joyfully exchange! What would not those cruel men who stoned him to death give to share the glory to which his sufferings led! But no exchange can be made; nor can the wicked, by any possibility, share the

* St. Luke xxiii. 34.

happiness of the saints. It may, perhaps, be asked, why did not God deliver St. Stephen out of the hands of his enemies? Why did He not destroy those cruel men in a moment, as He could have done if he had chosen? We know that God can do any thing that pleases Him; and we may therefore be sure that God saw it would be best to leave these cruel men alone, and to let them put St. Stephen to death. By dying in this manner, St. Stephen was received into THE NOBLE ARMY OF MARTYRS; and had not only the honour of being the first who suffered martyrdom for the Christian religion, but also of being for ever remembered in the Church with love and admiration. And besides, when men saw that St. Stephen was ready to undergo a cruel death for the sake of the Gospel of CHRIST, it encouraged them to become Christians, at a time when such encouragement was wanting, on account of the hatred which the heathens bore towards the religion of JESUS CHRIST. Many, in consequence, received that holy religion, who would have, perhaps, been afraid to do so, if they had not seen or heard of one, who for the sake of those joys which are promised in the world to come, was

willing to lay down his life in order that he might obtain them. Those who thus put St. Stephen to death, little thought that through their cruelty, many others would become followers of JESUS CHRIST! that the very means which they employed to injure His religion, would afterwards cause it to spread all over the world. Such are the wonderful dealings of God! So are His ways higher than our ways, and His thoughts than our thoughts!

Whenever we think about those holy men, who for the sake of their religion were put to a cruel death, let us remember how faithful they were to the last, and strive and pray to be enabled to follow their good example, that when we die, JESUS CHRIST may receive us into His everlasting kingdom.

