

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Stephens Victorious Death

Scripture: Acts 7:54-8:1

Code: 44-27

Let's turn to the end of the seventh chapter of the book of Acts. As we continue to look at this incredible account of the beginnings of the church. And you know where we are, if you've been with us at all, at the end of chapter 7, we are at the event of the first Christian martyr, the first Christian to be killed for his testimony concerning Christ. His name is Stephen.

And, we met him, first of all, all the way back in chapter 6. He was one of the men chosen to provide ministry in the church. He was a man of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom. He was a man who was full of faith. And again, it says in verse 5, full of the Holy Spirit. He, along with six other men, were chosen out of the thousands in the early church for spiritual responsibility to fulfill ministry.

It turns out he was also a great, bold, courageous preacher and ended up being the first martyr. He is, because of his testimony, brought before the Jewish supreme court, the council, the Sanhedrin. He has been traveling around in Hellenistic synagogues, synagogues that were basically occupied by non-Israel Jews, those who had come from the Greek world, and they had synagogues in the city of Jerusalem, and there were a number of such synagogues. He himself being a Hellenistic Jew with a Gentile name, has taken on the ministry not only of caring for the widows, which we saw in 6, at the beginning of the chapter, but also going around to the synagogues – verse 9 of chapter 6 – the synagogue of the freed men, which included Cyrenians, Alexandrians, some from Cilicia in Asia, and he proclaimed the gospel.

And in those synagogues, men stood up and argued with him. They were, according to verse 10 of chapter 6, “unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.” So, if you can't win the argument, you attack the man. That's what they did. They accused him of blasphemous words, in verse 11, against Moses, blasphemous words against God. And down in verse 13, they accused him of blasphemous words against the temple, and against the law. They said, “We have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place,” the temple, and after, “the customs which Moses handed – and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.” I love the way that sixth chapter ends. “And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting on the Council,” that's the Sanhedrin, the Jewish supreme court, along with all of the people of the synagogues who were offended and dragged him there, “saw his face like the face of an angel.” Clearly touched by God.

That becomes a tribunal for him. He is in front, now, of the supreme court. And the high priest asks him in chapter 7 verse 1, “Are these things so?” These accusations, these indictments. Are you a

blasphemer of Moses, a blasphemer of God, a blasphemer of this holy place, and a blasphemer of the law? You need to answer.

Well, we know the answer. It stretches all the way from verse 2 to verse 53 of chapter 7. It is a long, drawn out answer in great detail. First, he shows that he is not a blasphemer of God but a true believer in God. He is also not a blasphemer of Moses, but accepts that what God gave Moses was, in fact, divine revelation. He is not a blasphemer of the law of God; he regards the law for what it really is. Nor is he a blasphemer of the temple. And so, he defends himself against each of the four accusations going through the chapter.

At the same time, however, he turns the tables on the Jewish supreme court, the Sanhedrin, and all the other Jewish people who were gathered there. And he says, in reality, along with your forefathers, have blasphemed God. You, along with your forefathers, have blasphemed Moses. You, along with your forefathers, have blasphemed the law of God in constant disregard and disobedience. You are blasphemers of this place. You, as our Lord declared, have turned it into a den of thieves.

So, he says, I'm not the blasphemer. You are the blasphemers. And he wraps up his sermon, and we'll pick it up in verse 51, with a summary indictment. "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears," no better than Gentiles, "are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One," the Messiah, "whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

You have blasphemed God, like your forefathers. You have neglected Moses and his law. You have defiled the temple. And it has all come down to you betraying and murdering the Son of God, the Righteous One.

At that point, we pick up the text in verse 54 and see their reaction. "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him. But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, 'Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!' Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them!' Having said this, he fell asleep.

"Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day, a great persecution

began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Some devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him.”

That’s the sad drama that came at the conclusion of his sermon. There were sermons, you’ll remember, that our Lord preached, that activated the crowd to the point that they wanted to stone Him, kill Him on the spot. One of them was in His own hometown of Nazareth, and He had to escape.

There was no escaping, however, for Stephen. And as I look at this passage and think about how I might convey to you what’s going on here, what strikes me is the starkness of the contrast between a Spirit-filled man dying, and a hate-filled crowd killing him. The conflict and the contrast is really very extreme. The real victims here, the real victims are the murderers. Stephen triumphs. Clearly we see that. Those who killed Stephen literally sealed their damnable destiny. He was the victor. They are the vanquished. It is just the reverse of what it appears. Stephen has just preached his defense, a really profound sermon. And at the end, he comes to the person of Jesus, who is the Messiah, and he indicts Israel all the way along through his sermon, for being blasphemers of God, of Moses, of the law, of the temple.

But that blasphemous history culminates in them betraying and murdering their own Messiah. So he comes into the supreme court, and here’s their indictment. And before he’s done, he has turned the tables completely on them and indicted them. They are the blasphemers. As Stephen bored down with the truth, the Sanhedrin, the synagogue leaders, everyone who was there came under so much conviction that they completely lost all control and they rushed on him to crush out his life.

In the midst of all this, Stephen is this man with the face of an angel. He is serene. He is calm. He is sustained. There’s a dignity and a nobility, and even a beauty about him. The contrast then, between the frenzied, panicky hatred, murderous intent of the Sanhedrin, and the magnificent serenity of Stephen is too stark to miss. It’s really the difference between heaven and hell. It’s the difference between heaven and hell.

In this martyrdom of Stephen, we’re going to see the contrast. That’s what I want you to look at. Easy, really, to just read the story and let your imagination go, and you could put together essentially what I’ve put together because it’s so obvious. But I want to parse it out a little bit for you. In the martyrdom of Stephen, we see the contrast between the hostile, Christ-hating world of the Jews, and the gentle, loving soul of Stephen. The world is in fury, doing its worst. That only brings out the very best in the man of God. Stephen confronted them boldly, dynamically with a frontal attack from the Word, using the sword of the Spirit, and he took that sword and did a masterful job of stabbing it deep into their souls. And they killed him for it. But God honored him for it.

I want to break down some of the contrasts. First of all, they were full of anger, and he was full of the Spirit. They were full of anger; he was full of the Spirit. That becomes obvious in verse 54 into the first part of verse 55. “Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him. But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven.” When he began his sermon, there was no question but that they were listening. I told you that when we started into that sermon, that he did what was necessary to do. He met them where they were, and where were they? They were committed to the Old Testament Scripture. And so, he took them through their own Bible, their own Scriptures. They listened with interest. They listened with some level of affirmation and agreement as he affirmed his belief in the true God and in Moses, and in the law, and even the place God had for the temple. He met them at a point of their own interest.

He started reciting their history, a topic most precious to their hearts. But as the emphasis of his argument became clearer and clearer, their interest turned to fury and absolute horror. It reached a level that we don't see described anywhere else in the life of the church in the book of Acts. They flung the charge of blasphemy at him. He turned it around and flung it back at them, and they were literally outraged beyond constraint. Verse 54, “When they heard this, they were cut to the quick.” Literally, in the Greek, they were sawn in half. They were ripped apart. This is tearing to shreds the veneer of false piety, religiosity. The arrows of God's truth, carried by the power of God's Spirit through the boldness of this Jewish preacher, brought such conviction that they went into an absolute outrage – a fit, you might say. They were so angry, they began gnashing their teeth at him, grinding their teeth like some wild beast.

This is a kind of behavior that defines being completely out of control with anger. Psalm 35 verse 16, “Like godless jesters at a feast, they gnashed at me with their teeth.” Psalm 37:12, “The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes at him with his teeth.” This is a behavior that describes anger completely out of control. And by the way, if a man dies that way – in fact, any man who dies without God, without Christ, will gnash his teeth forever. Luke 13:28, Matthew 8, Matthew 13, Matthew 22, Matthew 24 – talks about hell, and it says there will be weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth.

What does that mean? Fury, anger, rage. Hell doesn't produce remorse; it produces anger. It produces fury. That is why it's forever. It's forever, because they just keep sinning. Their fury against God never, ever, ever abates. Hell is full of people in a furious rage, furious because they are there, furious because of the influences that they followed, furious because of the decisions they made, furious at the one that consigned them there.

These people are outraged, and they forever are outraged. They are gnashing their teeth at this moment, in fury against the gospel preacher, and they are gnashing their teeth as I speak now and will forever in the same fury.

If you will not hear the gospel, even a judgment, even a judgment can't overrule such anger. When we look into the future, for example, turn to the book of Revelation for a moment. In Revelation, we

look into the future, the time of the great tribulation when the judgments of God come on the earth, judgments under the seals, judgments under the trumpets and the bowls; we come to chapter 9, for example, and verse 20, and the sixth trumpet. And it says in verse 20, "The rest of mankind, who were not killed by those plagues," the plagues that are described there, the plagues of fire, smoke, and brimstone in verse 18. The rest of the human race, of mankind, "who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, so as not to worship demons, and the idols of gold and of silver and of brass and of stone and of wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk; and they did not repent of their murders nor of their sorceries nor of their immorality nor of their thefts." Judgment doesn't produce repentance when grace is refused.

In the 11th chapter of the book of Revelation, we find judgments are falling all around, and the seventh angel sounds in verse 15, and there are voices in heaven, and "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever." And the twenty-four elders, who sit on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying, 'We give You thanks, O Lord God, the Almighty, who are and who were, and because You have taken Your great power and have begun to reign. And the nations were enraged, and Your wrath came, and the time came for the dead to be judged, and the time to reward Your bond-servants the prophets and the saints and those who fear Your name, the small and the great, and to destroy those who destroy the earth.' And the temple of God which is in heaven was opened; and the ark of His covenant appeared in His temple, and there were flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder and an earthquake and a great hailstorm." That is the seventh and final trumpet of final judgment, out of which come the seven bowls, and the nations are enraged. They are enraged.

When God's grace does not move them, when the glory of the gospel does not change them, judgment infuriates them. In chapter 16, out of the seven trumpet come bowl judgments. The fourth of those bowl judgments is in verse 8 of 16. "And the fourth angel poured out his bowl," a bowl of judgment, "on the sun, and it was given to it to scorch men with fire. Men were scorched with fierce heat; they blasphemed the name of God who has the power over these plagues, and they did not repent so as to give Him glory." They did not repent. "The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast," the antichrist, "and his kingdom became darkened; they gnawed their tongues because of pain, and they blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pain and their sores; and they did not repent of their deeds."

When they have rejected the message of gospel grace, judgment only infuriates them all the more. The seventh bowl, which is the final bowl, verse 17 of 16, the seventh angel pours out his bowl. Verse 18, flashes of lightning, sounds, peals of thunder, a great earthquake, "such as had not been since man came to be upon the earth, so great an earthquake was it, and so mighty. The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. Babylon the great was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of His fierce wrath. Every island fled away, and the mountains were not found. Huge hailstones, about a hundred pounds each, came down from heaven upon men; and men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail, because its plague was extremely severe." When people will not hear the truth and will not listen to the gospel of grace, they are furious with even the judgment of God. They will not bend.

Stephen had indicted them as blasphemers and activated their fury. They are past feeling. They are apostates. They are damned by their continuous willful rejection. They have hardened their hearts against the truth. They have rejected the miracles and the words of Jesus. Not very long before this, they have rejected the testimony, the gospel preaching of the apostles. They have rejected the powerful witness of the early church. They have rejected the messages and the ministry and the miracles of Peter. They have rejected the miracles and the message of this man, Stephen, and their rejection is so fixed and so settled and so deep and so profound and so unalterable that the only response they can possibly have to another message of the gospel that indicts them for their iniquity is fury – absolute, outright fury.

One writer says: “The storm and all its fury strikes. In their madness, they were speechless with rage. They couldn’t find words to give vent to their burning hatred. Satan possessed them. All they could do in their frenzy was to gnash their teeth, which is an expression of impotent rage, of inexpressible frustration. This was not a sudden outburst but a growing tension that gradually rose higher and higher as Stephen spoke, and never died away until Stephen lie before them horribly mangled, blood-spattered, and dead. These dignitaries,” he writes, “had never faced such a prisoner. He spoke like a judge, not a prisoner. He seemed more like an accuser than the accused. His message drew blood, but his conscience had led him to the place where he regarded no price too great to pay for his convictions. Stephen no longer faced an orderly council, a calm, sane conference; but a mob whose eyes were bloodshot, whose minds were irrational with hate, and whose emotions were bent on murder. They were not willing, for any man, to expose, unbear, and reveal the depth of their sin. This, a satanic reaction. Herod killed John the Baptist because John pointed to his sin and rebuked him for it. The Pharisees nailed the Lord Jesus Christ to the Roman scaffold and stained their hands with His blood because He denounced and exposed their hypocrisy. The Jews reacted in the same manner toward the apostles, and Stephen is the first of a multitude no man can number, who, in their unflinching exposure of men’s sins, died an awful death at the hands of the sinners they exposed.”

They were on the brink of judgment. And the threat of judgment only infuriated them. They had hardened their hearts beyond help. As Hebrews 3 says, harden not your hearts through the deceitfulness of sin. This crowd was hard. Hard. Full of anger. But on the other hand, Stephen was full of the Spirit, verse 55. “But being full of the Holy Spirit.” It says about him – I read it to you in chapter 6 verse 3 – that he was a man like the others who were chosen, full of the Spirit. It says it again in verse 5. “He was a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.”

What does it mean to be full of the Holy Spirit? It means to be under the control of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes as a comforter. It comes as a teacher. It comes as a source of power. It comes as a source of wisdom. Notice, it’s a present tense. Being full of the Holy Spirit. This was not some kind of momentary experience for Stephen. This is how he lived. This is the fullness of the Spirit that literally is characteristic of him all the time. He was a man in a preexisting state of permanently being yielded to the Holy Spirit’s power. Stephen had continued to keep being filled with the Spirit, to borrow the language of Ephesians 5.

So, while his audience has gone completely raving mad with anger, he remains calm, fully under control of the blessed Holy Spirit. This is normal for Christians. This is normal. I have never read of the martyrdom of any Christian, throughout the history of the church, who died a raving maniac, who died a screaming madman, who died with rage and anger, who called down fury on the heads of his persecutors. Every story of martyrdom that I have ever read always depicts a lovely calm, a kind of rare transcendent, supernatural peace, a divine strength.

Just being filled with the Holy Spirit provides that, but there's even more. Listen to 1 Peter 4. Verse 14, "If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed." Literally, blessed from heaven, "because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you." Something happens in that hour of martyrdom that is a double portion of the Holy Spirit. Not only is the Holy Spirit living in every believer all the time, and not only are we walking in the Spirit, being filled with the Spirit as we yield to Him all the time, but there is a special dispensation of grace and glory that comes on the martyr, that comes on the believer who is under severe threat of life and limb.

In Luke 12 verse 11, Jesus said, "When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not worry about how, or what you are to speak in your defense, or what you are to say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say." It's almost as if there is a triple portion of the Holy Spirit. One, to possess the Holy spirit; two, to have a blessing from the Holy Spirit who dispenses grace and glory; three, to even be given instruction at that hour as to what you are to say. And all of this explains the very typical attitude, action, and speech of a martyr.

Stephen is already filled with the Spirit. He is given a double portion of the Holy Spirit for the exigency that he is in. Grace and glory rests on him in the moment of his ultimate hour of trial. And then, the Holy Spirit even gives him words to say. And we will hear those words, because they're recorded here."

The contrast – just extreme, full of anger, full of fury, full of rage – is the Jewish council. Full of the Spirit, is Stephen. Couldn't be more opposite. Secondly, I want you to notice two other contrasts. They are marked by spiritual blindness, but Stephen, by spiritual sight. They are marked by spiritual blindness, but Stephen, by spiritual sight. We see what Stephen saw in verse 55. Let's start with him. "But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven." He gazed intently into heaven "and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, 'Behold,'" and here's where the Holy Spirit gave him the words to say. "'Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse." Certainly, to be filled with the Holy Spirit is to be preoccupied with heavenly things. It is to do with Colossians 3 says: set your affections on things above and not on things on the earth.

But there's more here than that. Stephen gazes intently into heaven. We've already seen the

apostles doing that. Chapter 1 verse 11. Jesus' ascension. He goes up, same language. They're gazing intently into heaven, and they're watching Him as he goes. Well, here is Stephen. And his gaze takes him all the way to heaven. He literally is gazing into heaven and saw the glory of God, and saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. I mean, it's an obvious thing to say. He took his eyes off his circumstances and put them on heaven. He knew his danger. He knew there was no way his life would be spared. There was no safety in the crowd; there was no one to look to help him, to rescue him. There was not going to be justice on the part of the council. There was no prospect of any justice or any deliverance or any rescue. He knows where he's headed. So he puts his eyes toward heaven.

And the Lord rewards him. Incredibly. He saw the glory of God. He saw the *Shekinah*. He saw what Adam and Eve saw in the garden when they walked and talked with God, and He was there as light. He saw what Isaiah saw in the vision of chapter 6 when he saw the Lord lifted high and lifted up on the throne. He saw what Ezekiel saw in chapter 1. He saw what the apostle Paul saw when he was caught up to the third heaven. He saw what Moses saw when he was taken up to the Mount and the glory of God was revealed to him. He saw what the apostle John saw in the visions on Patmos. He saw what very few ever saw. He saw what Peter, James, and John saw on the Mount of Transfiguration. He saw a vision of the glory of God. Incredibly encouraging, incredibly wondrous and hopeful.

But not just the glory of God. He saw Jesus standing there at the right hand of God. God manifest in light; God, the invisible God whom no one can see and live, manifested Himself in light. Stephen saw the light, and standing at the right hand of the light, he saw Jesus. Jesus. Jesus.

We're not surprised, are we? Because He said, "I am going to ascend and I'm going to the right hand of My Father." That was His own promise. In Matthew's gospel, we read about it. In Luke's gospel, we read about it, that He took His place. He was to take His place, and He did take His place at the right hand of God.

Back in Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost, Peter said it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says the Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand." Well, the writers of the epistles say that Jesus took His place at the right hand of God. Paul says it. The writer of Hebrews says it again and again and again, that He was highly exalted and placed at God's right hand. The seat of power and honor.

But, there's something unusual. The references to the Lord being at the right hand of God in the gospels, and even in the book of Hebrews have Him sitting, sitting. In His glorified state at the right hand of God, the place of honor and power, majesty. The ascended Christ, however, though usually seen sitting, is now seen standing. What has made Him stand up? Why has He gotten up from the seat? Because He is activated for the care of His suffering servants. He gets up to help His own. He gets up to welcome one of His own into heaven.

Stephen demonstrates spiritual sight in an incredible way. In the crisis moment, God graciously relieved the horror of that moment by a vision which opened to him such joy that the present suffering wasn't even worthy to be compared. So, the dying saint begins to sense heaven, and then he sees the glory of God, and then he sees the Son of Man, Jesus, standing at the right hand of God having stood up to welcome him.

He couldn't hold the wonder in, and he bursts forth in verse 56 and says no doubt what the Holy Spirit prompted him to say: "Behold." That's an exclamation. "I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." That statement unleashed the final explosion of fury. And by the way, those very words were familiar to the Sanhedrin. Very familiar to the Sanhedrin. Familiar to the priests, the chief priests, the high priests – because another prisoner had said that very same thing. Another prisoner had stood before that same court, another prisoner who was charged with the same offense of blasphemy. And that other prisoner was none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. And you will remember the scene as it's recorded by Mark in Mark 14:62. The high priest has put the Lord Jesus on oath, and he says, "Tell me plainly. Are you the Messiah? Are you the Son of the Blessed One?" And our Lord replies, "I am." And then He said this: "And you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Almighty and coming with the clouds of heaven." Jesus had said He was going to heaven. And when He got there, He would be at the right hand of God. That was the final blasphemy that they would tolerate from Jesus. And for that, they murdered Him.

No more blasphemy was necessary. Jesus was found guilty by that statement and condemned to death. They never believed He'd be at the right hand of God. He was an imposter. He was a fraud. He was a false teacher, a false Messiah. He was a blasphemer. And now, shock of all shocks, in front of the same crowd, the same leaders, the same council, Stephen is standing in the same place and he is saying: I see into heaven and Jesus is there at the right hand of God. He's making the very same claim that Jesus made. He's showing the truth of the words of Jesus. He is seeing Him in heaven, at God's right hand. Here is living testimony of Stephen that the Son of Man was where He claimed He was going. To their ears, this is the most blatant outrageous blasphemy. And, unless they are willing to admit that they were wrong about Jesus, they have to kill Stephen. Stephen had spiritual sight. They are completely blind. Jesus even called them blind leaders of the blind.

In their blindness, verse 57, "they cried out with a loud voice," this is an involuntary scream, "and covered their ears," as if they could hide in some kind of religious nobility from such blasphemous words, "and rushed at him." Just imagine them in their robes, in the council, holding their ears, running at him" with one massive impulse, shrieking and screaming. They didn't want God's truth. They didn't want to know the truth. They were hard-hearted, stiff-necked, uncircumcised as he said to them back in verse 51. It was all true. They were blind willfully, and now they were blind judicially. That's why in Romans 11, it says of them what it says in Isaiah 6, that seeing they couldn't see, hearing they couldn't hear, and they couldn't understand. They couldn't repent. They couldn't be saved.

That is pronounced as a judgment at the end of the book of Acts again. Paul has a parting word. The Holy Spirit rightly spoke through Isaiah the prophet to your Father saying, "Go to this people and say you will keep on hearing but will not understand, you will keep on seeing but will not perceive, for the heart of this people has become dull with their ears. They scarcely hear. They've closed their eyes. Otherwise, they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, return, and I would heal them. Therefore, let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles. They will listen." They refused to hear, stopped their ears. They had evil hearts of unbelief. They were apostates. They had turned into a wild, demonic mob. Reason was gone. All there was was fury.

Just a note about the verb "rushed." Same word used of the demon-possessed pigs that ran over the steep place into the sea in Mark 5. It's the same word used of the mad rush of the mob in Ephesus in Acts 19 that wanted to kill Paul. They didn't want to trouble themselves with any judicial process. They didn't want to follow any rules. They just wanted to stamp out his life. So here is Stephen again, full of the Holy Spirit while they are full of rage. Here is Stephen, spiritually, he sees everything clearly, even all the way into heaven, and they are in a black blindness.

There's a third set of contrasts: the contrasts between death and life, death and life. They were killing. But for Stephen it was only the entrance into glorious life. Verse 58. "When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!'"

Even in their rage, they wanted to follow some patterns that had been prescribed. The law required back in Leviticus 24 that anyone who was stoned be stoned outside the city. The law also – Leviticus 24 – provided that stoning was the appropriate sentence for blasphemy. So, they're going to stone him as a blasphemer and they're going to do it outside the city. That was really a very simple, superficial overture to the law. Because the truth is: they had no right to kill anybody. They say around the trial of Jesus, John 18:31, we can't kill anybody. We don't have the right to do that. The Romans, you're going to have to do it. They admitted they had no authority to execute. But they set that aside. They brought some witnesses. They had witnesses. Accusers. They would've had to have had probably two or three witnesses to blasphemy.

Deuteronomy 17:7 says the hand of the witnesses shall be first upon him to put him to death. And afterward, the hand of the people. So, if they're going to stone someone for blasphemy, the first stones are going to be thrown by the witnesses who give first-hand testimony to the blasphemy.

According to the Mishnah, Jewish law, and this is quoting, the drop from the stoning place was twice the height of a man. One of the witnesses pushes the criminal off from behind. So, he falls face

forward. Then he is to be turned on his back. If he dies from the fall, that is sufficient. If not, the second witness – the first witness pushes him over. The second witness takes a large stone and drops it on his heart. If this caused death, it is sufficient. If not, he is stoned by all the congregation of Israel.

Well obviously, the push didn't kill Stephen, and the stone by the second witness didn't kill him. Because, verse 59 says, "they went on stoning Stephen." Young and strong, he didn't die easily. The witnesses, by the way, in verse 58, laid aside their robes. They set their outer robes down so they could be more accurate with the stones and throw them down harder. They laid their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

All they have in mind is death. All they have in mind is death. So, they went on, verse 58, stoning Stephen. All he had in mind was life. As he called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!

Absent from the body, what? Present with the Lord. Far better to depart and be with Christ. Lord Jesus, receive my spirit! Essentially, that's what Christ said. On the cross, He commended His spirit to God. "Into Your hands I commend My spirit." He said what his Lord said.

So now, the Sanhedrin has so much blood on its hands, and the blood of the very, very best: the Son of God. And the blood of the best of men, full of faith, full of wisdom, full of the Holy Spirit, the great preacher, an evangelist who brought them gospel truth. Their hands are bloodied. No wonder a few years after this, the Lord destroyed the entire city, and all of them who were still alive with it.

Lord Jesus, receive my spirit! His body was on the ground. Down in verse 2 of chapter 8, it says "some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him." They buried him because the Jews didn't bury him. Consequently, they didn't follow the law because the law required a burial. Some others buried him.

There's no limbo here, folks. There's no purgatory here. Lord Jesus, standing up in heaven, receive my spirit. When a believer dies, the spirit, the real person, goes to the presence of the Lord. The body, into the grave, awaiting the resurrection at the rapture, when the Lord comes for His own. Absent from the body; present with the Lord. In heaven are all the spirits of just men made perfect, the book of Hebrews says. The resurrection is yet to come in the future. They had death on their minds. He had life on his mind.

There's one final contrast at the end. It's a contrast between hate and love, between hate and love. The hate, obviously, we see it all the way through in the fury of their stoning him. This humblest of men, sent by God to preach salvation to Israel. All they wanted to do was kill him. But in the middle

of this blast of hate, we see the beauty of love. Verse 60. “Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them!’ Having said this, he fell asleep.”

That is really the ultimate moment in Stephen’s testimony, isn’t it? He pulls himself up under the crushing stones into a kneeling position to pray. Who’s he going to plead for? Save me? Lord, stop them. Save me. No. What does he pray? He prays for forgiveness for them. Forgiveness. This too, like his Lord, lay not this sin to their charge, Christ said on the cross. Don’t hold this sin against them, Lord. This is a rare prayer. Zacharias, the son of Jehoiada, prophet and priest, was put to death in the very temple court itself between the altar and the sanctuary. One of those, the Jews killed. But as Zechariah was breathing his last breath beneath the pile of stones that smashed his life out, do you remember his prayer? He said, “Jehovah, look upon it and require it.” Give them what they deserve. Their deaths were similar. Zacharias prayed for judgment. Stephen prayed for forgiveness. What love, what sweet grace.

One of my heroes of Scottish Reformation history is George Wishart. I remember finding the little stones in St. Andrews where he died as a martyr. But when George Wishart was to be executed, the executioner hesitated because George Wishart was such a gracious man. Wishart, according to his biographer, came over to the executioner and kissed him and said, “Here is a token that I forgive you,” and went to his death.

That’s how Christian martyrs die: full of love. And with that, he fell asleep.

His death that day had a massive impact. It launched a persecution, verse 1. But more than that, it affected a man named Saul, who never forgot it, never forgot that day, never forgot that testimony. That man’s martyrdom. And when he gave his testimony to Timothy, Paul said this: “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me because he considered me faithful, putting me into ministry, even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor, and a violent aggressor. Yet, I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was more than abundant with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. It is a trustworthy statement deserving full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.” Never been a worse sinner than me. I think that day set Paul, first of all, on a course of persecution until the Damascus Road when the Lord got a hold of his life, and he looked back and saw the whole story of Stephen in a completely different way.

Augustin, the early church father, said, “The church owes Paul. The church owes Paul to the prayer of Stephen.” Lord, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. Forgive them. And the Lord forgave one: Saul. Stephen, in a sense, was expendable, for Saul. And Paul was expendable for the world.

Let’s pray. Father, thank You again for the wonderful, spiritual adventure of looking at the life and ministry – so brief – of this man, Stephen, who sweeps across a couple of chapters but leaves an

indelible mark on all our lives. May it be that we live a life of such stark contrast from the world around us to be marked by the fullness of the Holy Spirit, to be marked by love, to be marked by spiritual sight. Lord, might we be like Stephen. Not just at the hour when we might have to sacrifice our lives, but all the time. May it be that we are living regularly in a way that is opposite all the world around us, and may You use us to draw someone to the Savior. That's our prayer. We offer it in the name of Christ. Amen.

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