The Stoning of Stephen
Scripture: Acts 7:54-60
Code: 1724

1972

For our study this morning we come to the closing portion of the seventh chapter of Acts, and this is not only the closing of the seventh chapter of Acts, but it's the closing of the life of Stephen. This is a very dramatic and a very interesting and a very instructional part of the Word of God. I think very often it is passed over and kind of filed because, as so many passages, we know a little bit about it, therefore, we think we know everything about it.

And even I find myself having difficulty narrowing it down. There is much theology that can be taught from this, and I'll just trust God that we'll get back here again and again as days go by and not try to do it all this morning. But in these verses that deal with the stoning of Stephen, what hit me most dominantly as I read it and reread it and read it and meditated on it and studied it, what I kept seeing, and I always look for some common factor that ties a passage of Scripture together, so that we can consider a reigning thought or something to hang our thoughts on, the thing that kept coming up was the tremendous contrast that weaves through this passage, the contrast between a Spirit-filled man dying and the hate-filled mob killing him.

Everything here is contrast. And the contrast is extreme. It appears almost to be the contrast between heaven and hell, if I could put it as extreme as possible. And the real victim of this passage is not Stephen. He is no victim at all. He wins. He dies, but he dies the victor. They live. They live the loser. The mob is the tragedy. Stephen's was the victory.

Now, you remember the circumstances, and if you have not been here the last couple of weeks and heard the sermon of Stephen and that which brought about the need for that sermon, then you're somewhat at a loss to get into this with all the intensity that's really in it. But let me just pick up some of the pieces so that you kind of feel your way into the text with a little bit of a running start.

The early church has grown. In the time of their growth, they have run into certain organizational problems. They therefore needed to select seven men who could handle some of the administration. They were men who had to be highly qualified spiritually, full of the Holy Ghost. They were men who needed to have good reputations, those kind of men who would be chosen by their peers to rule over them.

And of those men, one was chosen by the name of Stephen. He is listed first, indicating he may have been the first one chosen. He was ranking in terms of spiritual life. He was not a Jewish...I should say, he was not a Palestine Jew. He was a Grecian Jew. That is, he was a Jew that lived outside of Palestine. He was selected to be a key to the structure of the early church.

Now, he spent himself in preaching in synagogues in Jerusalem, but synagogues that were run by foreign Jews. When foreign Jews came to Jerusalem, they went to their own synagogues, where they could hear their own language. And so Stephen began to extend the gospel to these foreign Jews by preaching in these synagogues.

Well, he ran into a lot of reaction, and it was negative. And they came after him with accusations. They said, "Stephen, by offering us this Jesus Christ, and by giving us this new covenant, you're guilty of blaspheming God, Moses, the law and the Temple." And that's the big four in Judaism. You don't blaspheme those.

And so they indicted Stephen for blasphemy, and they brought him to trial before the council. And in the chapter that we have just begun to study, chapter 7, he gives his great defense. He defends himself to the council. And all through chapter 7 he is defending himself, but not only that. At the same time that he gives his defense, he indicts Israel for the execution of Messiah, and he also presents Jesus as Messiah. By the time he is done with his defense, they are on trial. He has accused them of blasphemy.

He says, "I believe in God," in effect, in his sermon, "you don't. I believe in Moses, you don't. I believe in the law, you break it all the time. I believe in the Temple, if you'd have believed in the Temple, it wouldn't have been destroyed. You're now on your third temple. Guess who doesn't believe in the Temple? God has to keep wiping it out." And so he turns the tables completely on them and indicts them, and it's a building thing.

It just kind of builds. And you can see first there's a little agitation. Then there's a little more agitation. Then there's steam, and then there's smoke and then there's fire, you see. And so when you come to chapter 7, verse 51, Stephen climaxes out by saying, "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears." What he means by that is, "You won't bow to God, and secondly your religion is only external."

"You do always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? And they have slain them who showed before of the coming of the Just One, of whom you now are the betrayers and murderers, who have received the law." You have no excuses. You knew the truth "by the disposition of angels," and you haven't kept it.

And so the thing climaxes out in a fantastic indictment where they are the blasphemers, not Stephen. And it's a masterpiece of a sermon. And by the time that comes out, they are in fury. They are in frenzy. And contrasted to their fury and their rage and their frenzy is the majestic calm of Stephen. He stands there serene, absolutely in control, sustained by the Lord, while they are torn into shreds. And so that's the picture of contrast that begins to weave itself through these few verses.

And really what it boils down to, in a general sense, is the contrast between a hostile, Christ-hating world and the gentle, loving, Spirit-filled servant of God who confronts that world. The world gives its worst. The Christian shows his best. Stephen had confronted the world boldly, dynamically. He said the things that needed to be said, even though they were painful, even though they hurt. Even though he knew they were going to cost him his life, he said them because he was expendable for the sake of the truth. They killed him, but God glorified him.

Now, let's follow these contrasts. And if you follow along with us in the text and on that little piece of paper, I'm sure you'll be able to see what is unfolding in this most dramatic picture.

The first contrast between the Christ-hating mob and the man of God is the contrast between full of anger and full of the Holy Spirit. Verse 54, "When they heard these things," and I think that Stephen's sermon was interrupted before it was ever finished, "when they heard these things," you see, they always prided themselves on their obedience to God, worship of God. "We love the law. We love the prophets," and all this. And he had just torn that to bits. "And when they heard these things, they were cut to the heart." That means they were sawn in half.

You see, at first when they listened to him, "Oh, yeah, he's right, sure," and they were nodding, probably, because all he was doing was reciting their history. And they had to agree. And he did that purposely, to keep their attention. But then as the drift of the argument became clear, their interest began to change, and pretty soon it turned into horror, and then it turned into fury. And they were cut to the heart by now. They were sawn in half. The great saw of conviction had ripped them right through the middle, and they knew everything he said was true, and they were ripped apart.

And, you know, in this kind of a rage, it says in verse 54, "they gnashed on him with their teeth." They began to grind their teeth at him. This is the picture of rage mixed with frustration. They didn't know how to give vent to their wrath. And so they just stood there and ground their teeth at him. And, you know, I couldn't help but read that, "they gnashed on him with their teeth," and think they were already in a little bit of hell. Because that's how many people are going to spend forever, just grinding their teeth in fury at God.

You say, "What makes you think that?" Listen as I read Luke 13:28. I'm going to read several passages. Write them down if you want to look them up later, but don't try to follow. I'll go a little

quickly. Jesus, speaking to Israel, Luke 13:28, "There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth when ye shall see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God and you yourselves thrown out."

See, the Jews had waited all along for the kingdom. They had dreamed of the kingdom. The King came, offered them the kingdom, and what did they do to the King? They killed the King. They forfeited the kingdom. Jesus says, "You're going to spend forever grinding your teeth at God when you see you didn't get into the kingdom."

And in Matthew we have it again, in chapter 8 and verse 12. Listen to these words. They're fearful words. "But the sons of the kingdom," you know who that is? That's Israel, the rightful heirs to the kingdom. "Shall be cast into outer darkness. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Then you go on in Matthew to chapter 13, and you have it all over again. Whenever you hear something once in the Bible, it's absolutely important. Whenever you hear it repeated over and over again, it is extremely important. Matthew, chapter 13, and verse 42, well, 41, "The Son of Man shall send forth His angels and they shall gather out of His kingdom all those that offend and them who do iniquity and cast them into the furnace of fire. There shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth." You know, hell's going to be full of mad people, angry people. Verse 50, "and shall cast them into the furnace of fire. There shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth."

Chapter 22 of Matthew, verse 13, Jesus isn't finished. He says, "Then said the king to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, take him away, cast him into outer darkness. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'" You find it again in chapter 24 of Matthew as He's still talking about the kingdom. Verse 51, "shall cut him asunder, appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Hell is going to be full of people forever gnashing their teeth at God in fury. And these people were already so hell-oriented that they were already that far along that when they faced the truth of Christ again, they got mad. And you know something? This tells us a little bit about the kind of anger it is, because they could've repented. But they didn't. It's not the kind of anger that leads to repentance. It's the kind of anger that remains bitter and hateful.

You say, "Well, isn't it true that if people go to hell, if they were given a second chance, wouldn't they want to get out?" I don't believe they would. If a man won't respond to the loving grace of God, he'll never respond to God's judgment. It'll only make him mad. He'll only hate God all the more.

You say, "Is there any evidence for that?" I believe there is, in the Book of Revelation. This is a footnote, but let me maintain it for a moment. In Revelation, chapter 9, verse 20, and I'll read several verses from Revelation, it says, "And the rest of the men who were not killed by these plagues," and

that means a third of the world. It just has talked about the sixth trumpet during the Tribulation, when a third of the world is going to be killed by fire, smoke and brimstone. And then he says, "They were not killed, yet repented not." Verse 21, "Neither repented they of their murders, sorceries," that's pharmacia in the Greek. It's the word for drugs. "Nor of fornication," sexual sin, "nor of their thefts."

You see, even after the horror of judgment, when God wipes out one-third of the earth, they're not going to repent. They're only going to get mad. In Revelation 11:15, "The seventh angel sounded. There came voices from heaven saying, 'The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever.' The four and twenty elders who sat before God on their thrones fell on their faces and worshipped God and said, 'We give thanks.'" And all this praise is going on. And verse 18 says, "And the nations were angry." They get mad.

But the classic example is in chapter 16, when final great devastating judgment pours out of God on that great Tribulation population. It says in verse 8, "And the fourth angel poured out his bowl upon the sun, and power was given unto him to scorch men with fire." The sun's going to burn the skin right off men. "And men were scorched with great heat," listen to this, "and repented?" No. "And blasphemed the name of God. And they repented not to give Him glory."

Verse 10, "And the fifth angel poured out his bowl upon the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was full of darkness, and they gnawed their tongues for pain." Absolute pitch black all over the world. You say, "They'll repent then." It says in 11, "And blasphemed the God of heaven and repented not." If grace and love don't bring repentance, judgment never does. It only makes them mad.

Jesus had offered grace upon grace upon grace. Stephen came along and said, "You've rejected it so long, you've had it." And that only made them all the more furious, and so they began to grind their teeth. Hell is going to be full of people who are very, very angry.

Now, I believe that these leaders were apostates. I believe that these leaders were past feeling. I believe they were so hard, they were rocks. I believe they were damned by their continuous willful rejection, and now they were locked in a judicial kind of blindness. You see, when you willfully reject, willfully reject, willfully reject, then God moves in and judicially blinds.

In the case of Israel, it's reiterated in Romans, chapter 11, verses 7 through 10, and that's a very familiar passage and one which we should note with great care. In Romans 11, verse 7, it says, "What then? Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded." Somebody blinded them. "As it is written, God hath given them the spirit of slumber." You say, "Did God blind Israel?" Absolutely. But only after they willfully blinded themselves. Just like Pharaoh. It says, "Pharaoh hardened his heart, Pharaoh hardened his heart, Pharaoh hardened his heart," bang, "God hardened Pharaoh's heart."

You see, grace runs its course, and then it runs out, and God moves in judicially and confirms that blindness. "God hath given them the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see, ears that they should not hear. And David said, 'Let their table be made a snare, and a trap, and a stumbling block, and a recompense unto them. Let their eyes be darkened, that they may not see, and bow down their back always.'"

These people had heard the truth. They had heard Jesus. They had seen His miracles. They had heard the apostles. They'd seen their miracles. They'd heard the witness of the early church, the message and the miracles of Peter and John, the message, the miracles of Stephen. They had seen it all, and they had rejected and rejected and rejected. And Stephen here is simply now not inviting them anymore, but indicting them. And the point of his sermon here is to bring about judgment. That's why you don't hear any invitation in it. It's indictment. It's giving a basis for judgment.

And they reacted as all people do to judgment. They got mad. They got mad. You see, even Paul said, "It is the grace of God that bringeth," what? "Salvation." Judgment upon an apostate only makes him all the more angry. And yet, in all their fury, they were at least direct enough, as we shall see in a moment, to maintain some kind of logic in the execution of Stephen. And so they got mad. They gnashed on him with their teeth. The storm in all of its fury begins to break on Stephen's head.

In their madness, they were speechless with rage. They couldn't even find words to give vent to their burning hatred. All they could do in their frenzy was grind their teeth, an expression of impotent rage, of inexpressible frustration. And I don't think this was a sudden outburst. I think it was a growing thing that gradually grew higher and higher as Stephen continued to speak, and actually it never died away until Stephen lay before them, horribly mangled, blood-spattered and dead.

You see, these dignitaries had never quite faced such a prisoner as Stephen. He spoke like a judge, not a prisoner. He seemed to be an accuser rather than the accused. And he hit the nail right on the head. He hit them right where they lived. And he was right on. And they didn't want anybody to expose and unbare their sins. And so they reacted satanically.

You'll remember that Herod killed John the Baptist because John pointed to Herod's sin and rebuked him for it. You'll remember that the Pharisees nailed Jesus to a cross because He demanded...He denounced, I should say, and exposed their hypocrisy. The Jews reacted in the same manner toward the apostles. Stephen was the first of multitudes of men who, in their unflinching exposure of the sins of others, have died for it. And so they were mad, full of anger.

You know, the Bible warns people like this. If you're getting to the place in your life where you just get mad when somebody tells you about Christ, you're standing on the brink of judgment. The Bible says in Hebrews 3, "Harden not your hearts. Don't be hardened to the deceitfulness of sin lest you obtain

an evil heart of unbelief." So they were hard.

But, in contrast, I love this, they were full of anger, but Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit. Look at verse 55. "And he, being full of the Holy Spirit, looked up steadfastly into heaven." Isn't it a beautiful contrast? They were completely ripped apart. They were torn up. Stephen was together. He was full of the Holy Spirit.

And I like this thing. It says in verse 55, "But he, being." It's saying this, "But he, being continually full of the Holy Spirit." Stephen didn't have to make any adjustment in his life to die. You see? He didn't have to get it all together in the last moment. It had been together for a long time. He was being full of the Holy Spirit. He was full of the Holy Spirit in chapter 6. That's why they chose him. He's still full of the Holy Spirit in chapter 7.

And that's what Paul was saying, you see, in Ephesians 5:18. When Paul gave the command, he said this: "Be filled with the Spirit." The actual Greek is, "Be being kept filled with the Spirit." Be being. We are to be continually being controlled by the Spirit. And that was Stephen. He was full of the Spirit all the time. It wasn't some sudden shot. It was a preexisting, permanent state.

Some people would tell us that if you're filled with the Spirit, you do ecstatic things. If that were true and you obeyed the Scripture, then you'd be doing nothing but that all the time, because this is not a sudden shot experience. It is that which is to be the continuous pattern of the life of the Christian. Unfortunately for most of us, we yield and then we don't yield, we yield and then we don't yield, and it's kind of a rollercoaster thing. But Stephen was being full of the Holy Spirit.

And to be filled with the Spirit, beloved, we've talked about this many times, let me just say this, means to be controlled by the Spirit, yielded to Him. That's all it means. And Stephen was controlled by the Spirit. And because the Spirit was in control, you see, the normal reactions didn't take over. You see, the Spirit was in control. And so he responded in a godly, trusting, faithful fashion. He didn't respond in the flesh. He responded in the Spirit. And I'll tell you, that's his strength and that's our strength.

There's another thing that comes to my mind here that I want you to see that I think is important. I believe, and this is a footnote, but it's important, I believe that there's a special work of the Holy Spirit for a Christian in a crisis. All right? You got that much? I believe there's a special work of the Spirit for a Christian in a crisis.

And I believe that we do not have to think, now, watch this one, we do not have to think, "I cannot get into a real tough situation, I can't really face the world and be bold and forceful for Christ because I'll never be able to hack it." I believe it is just at that point that the Spirit of God is doubly poured out in a double portion upon you.

You say, "Where do you get that?" Well, if you know me very well, you know I got it out of a verse somewhere, and it's I Peter 4:14. It says this. "If you be reproached," and he's talking about slamming yourself up against the world, against the system, and saying what's true, "If you be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are you." Now you say, "You're kidding. Who's happy? Why would you ever be happy?" Because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. In other words, there's some special divine intervention of the Spirit of God.

Have you ever heard anybody talk about dying grace? I used to wonder. I have read literally thousands of pages of historical information on the death of Christians and the death of martyrs, everywhere from the early church right on through to the present day, when people were being martyred in China, when people were being martyred in other places in our current, modern world for the cause of Christ. And in reading all of this, I have never one time read of a Christian who died a raving, screaming maniac. Have you?

There is something that God does in, I believe, the willing death of a believer in the face of persecution, that grants to him the adequacy to die giving God the glory. And I think that's what God bestowed upon Stephen in a double sense. So I'm saying that to say this. Don't ever shirk from being bold in the world for fear that you don't have the resources to handle it. It's at that point that God pours out a double portion of His Spirit to make it adequate.

So many times we look at the extreme situations as to how we've performed in the minimal situations. And, you know, if we did that, we'd certainly all be defeated, because we blow it so many times. But I believe it's when we really hit the world, and we are totally helpless and at the mercy of them, that God intervenes.

The apostle Paul had so much going for him, and yet he knew this. He said, "It's when I am the weakest that I am truly," what? "Strong." It's when I get into a situation I can't do anything about that God just pours His strength into me. You see? So he says, "You know what I get excited about? I don't get excited about being healthy. I get excited about being sick. I get excited about my infirmities. I get excited about persecution. I get excited about being beaten up. That just gets me excited, because when I am weak, then I am strong."

And I believe it is at that point that when a Christian will face his world, just believe God, that if you'll go out there and be bold in the world, He'll give you the Spirit of glory to rest upon you so you'll be adequate. Now, when I say confront the world, I was talking about this in a convention I was in in Portland. This one fellow came to me afterwards, and he said, "When you mean confront the world, do you just mean keep talking about Jesus all the time, like if a guy in my shop swears, I run over and say, 'Don't swear, because the Lord isn't pleased,' and that I just run around and do that? I mean, is that what you mean?" And I said, "No." I said, "You would just really become obnoxious if you did

that."

Here's what I mean when I say boldness. I mean this. Number one, plan to create opportunities to communicate Christ. Okay? Number two, when the opportunity comes, here's the key, don't water down the message. You got it? Be bold in the presentation. Stephen didn't run in there, knock down the doors of the Sanhedrin, and say, "All right, you guys, shut up, I've got something to say." He was invited. He spoke in response to their questions. So did Peter. You earn the right to say something, and when you say it, boldness is saying what must be said.

When you confront the world, you speak the truth. It's so easy to water down the thing and make it into nothing. We need to speak the truth. And Stephen spoke the truth. And Stephen received, I think, a special, let's call it special grace, for this occasion. You trust God for it. Stick your neck out. Be bold. Let the world hit back. And watch how God sustains you. I promise you He'll do it. So don't shirk the responsibility because you don't feel adequate. When you're in your worst mess, you're strong.

All right, so the contrast is so exciting. Here are they, full of anger, and here is Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, calm, collected, stable, serene. A second contrast comes out of that: spiritual blindness and spiritual sight. They can't see anything. He sees everything.

Now, let's first of all look at his spiritual sight. It's so good. Verse 55, here he is and they're just grinding their teeth and he can see the fury coming. And what does he do? The circumstances are pretty rough. The first thing you want to do in a tough situation is get your eyes off the tough situation. True? If you've got a bad situation, don't look at your situation. Look up. And that's exactly what he did.

"He, being full of the Holy Spirit," what's the next two words? "Looked up." That's good. If you run around looking down all the time, you're never going to get over your problem. Stephen looked up. You say, "What was he looking for?" I know what he was looking for. I know very well what he was looking for.

You say, "How do you know?" Because I read in Acts, chapter 1, verses 10 and 11, these words. In verse 9, Jesus ascended into heaven. It says, "And while they looked steadfastly, He went up. Two angels appeared in white," verse 11 says they said this, "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus who is taken up from you shall so come in like manner as you've seen Him go."

Where did Jesus go? What do you think Stephen was looking for? He was looking for Jesus. You know who he saw when he got up there? Jesus. Look at it. Verse 55, "Looked up into heaven." Heaven just opened up for his view. God pulled back the curtains, "and he saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God." He saw what he was looking for.

I mean, the situation got tough, so he looked to the Lord. That's the only place to look. He had sight. Well, he'd always had pretty good spiritual sight ever since he met Christ, but this was something like he'd never had. I mean, there are only a few in Scripture that actually got a glimpse right into heaven. Ezekiel saw the glory of God. Isaiah saw the glory of God. Remember, in chapter 6 of Isaiah, "The year king Uzziah died I saw the Lord high and lifted up, and his train (of his robe) filled the temple." And he goes into that fabulous thing. The cherubim were there, and all that deal.

Paul saw heaven. He was taken up into heaven, II Corinthians 12. And dear old John on the Isle of Patmos. He had one vision of the glory of God. It was something else, wasn't it? Read it in chapters 4 and 5 of the Book of Revelation. So there've been a few that saw the glory of God, and here's Stephen. And he looks up, and he sees the glory of God. You see, God only manifests Himself in His glory, light, the Shekinah Glory of God. He saw that Shekinah Glory, and to the right of the Shekinah was Jesus, standing. He saw what he wanted to see. He didn't look in vain. God gave him a glorious revelation.

You say...well, something interesting here. And that is the fact that in the Book of Hebrews, it says, "After Christ had accomplished redemption, He went to heaven, to the right of the Father, and He sat down." You say, "What's He doing up?" Well, He sat down in terms of redemption, but He always gets up when His children get in trouble. Somebody said He stands up to help the saints and welcome them home. Maybe He was standing up ready to greet Stephen, as well as help him.

He is seated in terms of His redemptive work. It is accomplished. He is standing in the sense of His sustaining high priestly work. That's still going on, you see? So He gets up to help His own. Stephen looks up and He's standing up. That indicates action, doesn't it? He didn't look up and see Him sitting there resting. He saw Him standing up. "Stephen, I'm coming to your rescue."

So Stephen had spiritual sight. What a vision. And he just lost all the consciousness of what's going on around him. I mean, he was so absorbed in looking into heaven it was absolutely fantastic. Here's the glory of God, and Jesus is standing on the right hand.

And you know something, he got lost in the deal and he started to yell. Stephen. And you know what he yelled? It's terrific. Verse 56, he said, "Behold." You know what that means? "Hey, you guys, look at this." And the only people around are his enemies, and they're in a frenzy. "Look at that," he says. "I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God." And that did it. I mean, they could take so much, and that was the coup de grace. That was the final straw. They absolutely lost themselves at that point.

You say, "Why?" Listen to this. These words were familiar words to that council. What Stephen said took their minds right straight back to a conversation they had with another prisoner. They had this

other prisoner one time on trial. And the same group here, and the trial was in the same place, most likely. They had accused Him of blasphemy, too. And they brought in false witnesses, and the false witnesses didn't come across. And there wasn't enough evidence to kill this one.

So the high priest finally just said to this other prisoner, "You tell me plainly. Are You the Messiah?" And do you remember what that prisoner said? "I am." And in Mark 14:62, this is what He said after He said, "I am." "And you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of the Almighty." Who said that? Jesus said it. And they said, "Real funny. You, seated at the right hand of God?" He says, "I am the Messiah. You'll see Me seated at the right hand of God." And they killed Him for such blasphemy.

You know what Stephen says? "You know what I see? I see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of God." Oh. That's what they killed Jesus for claiming. Now Stephen verifies that it is true. No wonder it says in verse 57, "They stopped their ears and screamed and ran after him." You see? Stephen had hit the nail on the head.

And, of course, they had to kill Stephen. I mean, they either had to kill Stephen or admit that they were wrong in killing Jesus, right? Because Stephen is making the same claim for Jesus that Jesus made for Himself, that "I am who I claim to be, and I have a seat on the right hand of the Father, and I'm going there." And they killed Him for saying it, so they've got to kill Stephen for saying it, too.

Oh, they were furious. It was blasphemy that Jesus even said He'd be there, and Stephen says, "I see Him, and He is there." That's the first statement in Scripture presenting Christ at the right hand of the Father. He said He was going back there, and here's proof positive. He's there. He's there. Stephen saw Him there. Whenever the believer gets in trouble, He gets up. He must be up a lot. That's okay. One of these days, He can sit forever. And so they were furious.

This was the most blatant, final blasphemy. And unless they were willing to admit their former decision regarding Jesus was wrong and they had, in fact, killed their Messiah, they had to kill Stephen. And so Stephen had spiritual sight and they were stone blind.

Verse 57, "Then they cried out with a loud voice." They just started screaming, you know, just yelling. They couldn't stand this. And they slammed their hands over their ears. That is not exactly open-mindedness. "And they ran upon Stephen with one accord." They were together on that one. Blind, blind, blind. Jesus called them blind leaders of the blind, and they would both fall into the ditch. They always resist God's truth, verse 51, always, always, always. And here they hear God's truth again, and what do they do? Slam their hands over their ears. Now, that's ridiculous.

You say, "If you were arguing with somebody over a cause, and there were valid points on your side, and the guy did that, you'd think he was an idiot." They didn't want God's truth. They never had wanted God's truth. They'd resisted the Holy Spirit all along, killed God's messengers, killed His

Messiah, rejected His law. This is par for the course.

At the end of the Book of Acts, the apostle Paul makes some statements that are so interesting in regard to this. Paul says, really, taking it from Isaiah, in Acts 28:26, quoting Isaiah, "Go unto this people and say, 'Hearing you shall hear and shall not understand, and seeing you shall see and not perceive.' For the heart of this people is made fat, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed, lest they should see with their eyes.'" They close their own eyes. "And hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them." They close up. They don't even want to know the truth. And so God confirms them judiciously in their ignorance.

And so they didn't hear, and they were classic apostates. They were what II Peter 2:20 says when it says they had known the truth but they had gone back. They were dogs returning to their vomit. II Peter 2:22. They were, Hebrews 6, people who knew the truth, seen the miracles, been a part of all of it, and they had rejected it, and they had fallen away and it was impossible to renew them to repentance, seeing that they crucified the Son of God and put Him to an open shame.

They were wild. They were derisive. Their reason was gone. They saw only fury. It says, "They ran." The word is "rushed." Interesting, here's a footnote for you. The word "ran" is the same word exactly that's used of the pigs that were demon possessed that ran off the cliff in Mark 5. It's also the very same word used in Acts 19 of the mad rush of the mob at Ephesus upon the Christians. They were a demonic mob. In fury, they just ran at Stephen. And so the contrast.

And that led to the next contrast, death and life. They were killing. For them, it was death. But for Stephen it was life. They thought they were killing him, but it was only just giving him a little trip into eternal life. Verse 58, "They cast him out of the city, and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul."

Now, there are several legal things they did. Leviticus 24:14 said that you had to be stoned outside the city, so they had the presence of mind to take him out of the city. Secondly, Leviticus 24:16 said stoning was the punishment for blasphemy, so they were right on that count, at least determining that this was blasphemy. The third thing was that you could never execute anybody unless you had two or three witnesses, and apparently they managed to get two or three guys that would be the witnesses.

Deuteronomy 17:7 says, "The hand of the witnesses shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people." So the man who witnessed had to be the executioner as well. That's a very wise law. People thought twice before they accused somebody.

Now, how did they stone him? Well, the Mishna, the Jewish codification of law, tells us. There's a little paragraph here, and I'll read it to you. "The drop from the stoning place was twice the height of a

man. It was a precipice of about 10 feet plus. Rocks below. One of the witnesses pushes the criminal off from behind so he falls face forward onto the rocks. Then he is turned over on his back. If he dies from the fall, that is sufficient." That's for sure. "If not"...that's what it says. "If not, the second witness takes a large stone and drops it on his heart. If this cause death, it is sufficient. If not, he is then stoned by all the congregation of Israel." Now, that was the method of stoning.

Well, they wanted to do it up, and do it up right, so they stripped for action. The witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet. They took off whatever might bind them so they could really let it fly. This gives you a little idea of the fury of these people. It wasn't just to kill him. It was to vent the fury that was in them. This is how much they hated everything he stood for. And it wasn't really Stephen they hated. Who did they really hate? They hated Jesus. And Stephen was doing what Paul said. He was filling up in his body the afflictions of Christ. And so they stoned him.

Verse 59 says, "And they stoned Stephen." Notice that the man who was standing there was Saul. The fact that he was the guy standing in the front where they put their garments is a fairly good indication that he may have been the ringleader in the whole thing. And since Stephen had been arguing in the synagogue of the people from Cilicia, and Paul was from Cilicia, it's very likely, as we said before, that he was arguing with Paul, and that Paul, being the kind of activist that he was, was probably heading up this whole reaction to Stephen. And so they killed him.

Death satisfied them. They wanted death. But for Stephen it wasn't death. It was life. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He that believeth in Me, though he were dead," what? "Yet shall he live. And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." There's no death. It's simply going from one thing to the next. And as I've said many times before, if you're a Christian, the biggest change has already happened. Death isn't going to be as big a change as your salvation was. Think about that.

You say, "Well, I thought when you died your spirit went into limbo." I don't find any verse in my Bible that talks about limbo. There is no limbo. Somebody said, "Well, don't you go to purgatory for a while?" You find the word "purgatory" in the Bible and you will be one in all humanity who found it. There is no limbo in the Bible. There is no purgatory. You say, "Well, what about soul sleep?" You can't find soul sleep in the Bible either.

Stephen looked up in death and he said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And there's no answer that says, "See you in a thousand years." Stephen knew who waited for him, just like Jesus knew who waited for Him on the cross, when He said, "Father, into Thy hands," what? "I commend My spirit." Stephen knew who was waiting. He saw Him up there. Don't tell me that the believer's going to look to Jesus in an hour like that and then be separated from Him for some vast period of time or going to have to earn his way into His presence. Don't tell me that. That's foreign to all of Scripture.

Don't tell me that the little girl that I read about on her deathbed talking to her parents just in the moment of death expressed to her parents that she saw the face of Jesus, and His arms were outstretched to receive her. Don't tell me that that isn't the true hope that a Christian has. Don't tell me that I'm going to go to some strange place for X number of years in oblivion. What for? It's purposeless.

The apostle Paul said in II Corinthians, chapter 5, verse 8, "Absent from the body is present with the Lord." And I love what he said in Philippians 1:23. Listen. He says, "For I am in a strait between two. I'm trapped. I've got two good things." He says this. "I have a desire to depart and be with Christ," which is far better than the other alternative. You say, "If you depart, where are you going to be?" With Christ. There's no gap. There's no lost time, lost space interval.

They were killing him, but look at it. Stephen was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." What is the spirit of a man? It's just the immaterial part of him, the inner man. It's just all I am without my body, which, believe it or not, is a whole lot. It's the real me.

I mean, you can cut off my arm and I'm still the real me. You can cut off my leg and I'm still the real me. You keep going, you're going to get to me. But I am the immaterial me that lives in a body. But even if you kill the body, you haven't killed me. And it's the real me, with all my consciousness, that is going to go into the presence of God. There's just going to be one thing subtracted from the real me, S-I-N. Hallelujah. And I'm going to be with Jesus.

This week, we've had some dear friends go to be with the Lord. Pearl Genette, a young 16-year-old by the name of Janet Stewart who came here last Sunday to spend Christmas with her family and with us here at Grace and then that evening went to be with the Lord. And Charles Gray's funeral the other day, we knew where he was. He's with the Lord. We have that hope.

And so Stephen gives us even greater hope by saying, "Lord, receive my spirit. I'm coming." And the Lord's standing up ready to receive him. Don't let anybody tell you there's any such thing as purgatory. There's not. Nor any other waiting place. And so he was entering into the eternal life that he hoped for in his heart.

And that leads us to the last contrast. Death and life, and then hate and love. Oh, they were such a hating mob. They hated him so much, because they hated Jesus. They were venting such venom and fury. Their hate is seen in just the way they stoned him. They took their clothes off so that they could blast him. And you'll notice that it's interesting that it says in 58, "and cast him out of the city and stoned him," and it's in the linear tense. And it's also linear in verse 59, "they kept on stoning him." Which means the fall didn't kill him, and the first stone dropped on his heart didn't kill him. That meant the whole crowd got in and just kept pummeling him with stones. They hated him.

But I want you to see the contrast of the love in the heart of this man. "And he kneeled down." He somehow got himself into a praying position under all that. "And cried with a loud voice." He shouted it, and I think he probably not only wanted God to hear it, but he wanted them to hear it. "And he cried out, 'Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." God, be merciful to them. See, boy, that's something. That's something. You'd think the guy would say something else besides that.

You know, there was an old prophet in the Old Testament, II Chronicles 24, by the name of Zechariah, son of Jehoiada. And Zechariah was both prophet and priest, and he got into a little trouble, and they...the Jews decided to kill him. This is just another one of the prophets they killed. And they killed him between the altar and the sanctuary in the Temple. So they were really uptight at him. They didn't even have the presence of mind to drag him out of town. They did it right in the Temple.

And as Zechariah was breathing his last breath under the stones, you know what he prayed? II Chronicles 24:22, here was his words. "Jehovah, look upon it and require it," which being interpreted means, "God, get them." Now, that's a similar circumstance, but a very opposite prayer. I like the grace of Stephen, don't you? Stephen says, "Father, forgive them." Hey, a Christian can only love like that. You know that? Only because the love of Christ was shed abroad in his heart.

When George Wishart, who was a wonderful Christian, was to be executed for his faith, the executioner hesitated, because he had such a magnetic and beautiful character that he resisted killing him. Wishart, the historians tell us, went over to his executioner and kissed him on the cheek. "Lo, he said, here is a token that I forgive thee." And the execution was done.

Jesus did the same thing, and Stephen does it here. What a testimony. All that hate, and in Stephen's heart is only love. That's the character of Christian love. It loves indiscriminately. It doesn't depend on the attitude of the other one. Would to God we could all die like that. Would to God we could all live like that.

And then I like the way it ends. "And when he had said this, he," what? "Fell asleep." Isn't there a beautiful peace about that? And they were still alive, but grinding their teeth, and would spend all eternity doing it. He just fell asleep in the arms of Christ.

I love Stephen. Now I love him much more after these last few weeks. And I think I've discovered why I love him so much. And it's the same reason I love Paul so much. It's because he's so much like Jesus. Jesus was full of the Spirit, and so was Stephen. Jesus was full of grace. So was Stephen. Jesus was boldly a preacher. So was Stephen. Jesus was lovingly forgiving. So was Stephen. Jesus gave His life for others. So did Stephen.

When somebody tells me, "Be like Jesus," that's hard for me to be. To be like Jesus, it's too...it's too far. So I'm not going to say to you, "Be like Jesus." I'm going to say, "Be like Stephen." That at least brings it down to where we are. Do you know what the apostle Paul said? "Be ye followers of me as I am of Christ." You see, Paul knew there had to be an intermediary step.

Someone always comes up and says, "Well, your problem is you're following man. You should be following Christ." Oh, I hate that statement. That's a dumb statement. Be like Stephen. Stephen was like Jesus.

There was a man who'll never forget it. Verse 8, or chapter 8, verse 1, and Saul was consenting unto his death. There stood that man. You know something? From Stephen came Paul. From Paul came the world. Augustine said, "The church owes Paul to the prayer of Stephen." Stephen was expendable for Paul. Watch this. Paul was expendable for the world. Let me ask you something? For whom are you expendable? Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for Stephen. God, I ask myself the question, for whom would I give everything I am and have? For whom would I live and die, that they might hear, that they might know the Christ? Stephen gave everything, and through it there came Paul, and through Paul I came to You, and all of us did, because he wrote the Word that led us to you. So I thank you for Paul and I thank You for Stephen, and I want to be like both of them, because they were like Jesus. Give me their courage and their boldness. Give that to all of us. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

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