

# Stephen 1st Christian Martyr

by Danny Bond

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*The sermon explores the life and martyrdom of Stephen, emphasizing his faith and the impact of his sacrifice on the early church.*

**Duration:** 43:46

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:33, Matthew 13:41, Luke 12:11, Acts 6:8-10, Acts 7, Acts 28:25

**Topics:** "Martyrdom"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the story of Nebuchadnezzar and the statue he erected, commanding everyone to bow down and worship it. However, three young men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, refused to bow down due to their conviction in their God. They were thrown into a fiery furnace, but they were not alone. They saw a fourth person in the furnace, who was like the Son of God. The speaker then transitions to the story of Stephen, who was filled with the Holy Spirit and boldly declared his faith in Jesus. This declaration angered his listeners, and they gnashed their teeth at him. Despite the anger and opposition, Stephen remained steadfast in his faith and ultimately died for his beliefs.

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## Transcript

Lord, it's so good to know you, how we thank you for the joy that you put into our hearts. Holy Spirit, we do bless you and praise you for the infilling of your love, your peace. We thank you, Lord, that we are here today in a relationship with you because we love you.

And we love you, Lord, because you first loved us. God, as we study your word now, quicken our hearts, open our eyes and open the eyes of our understanding to the truth that is here. There's a man here before us, Lord, that you made, Stephen, a man of God.

And we pray that the same dynamic that went into making him what he was in the early church would go into us, Lord, in these days, in this church, that you would raise up men and women like Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, full of grace, full of power, and full of your word. That, Lord, we might shine as bright witnesses for you in this dark world, in these last days, true witnesses of Jesus Christ. And we ask you, Lord, in Jesus' name, amen.

Stephen, if you don't know it, was the first martyr in the Christian church. He was the first one to die for preaching the gospel. It is an amazing thing to contemplate how death really reveals what kind of people we are.

If you consider the famous French philosopher Voltaire, you've probably heard of him. Many of you probably read some of his writings along the way. Voltaire, who used to say concerning Christ, these words curse the wretch.

He also boasted that in 20 years Christianity would be gone. He said, my single hand that he wrote with shall destroy the edifice that took 12 apostles to rear. Voltaire was proud, confident, cynical.

And when he died, he died in desperation. I am abandoned, he said, by God and man. And he said, I give you half of what I am worth.

I would give you half of what I am worth if you would give me six more months to live. He said, but you cannot. And I will not.

And I will go to hell and you will go with me, he said to those with him. And then he started to scream as he died. Oh, Christ.

Oh, Christ. Oh, Jesus Christ. And he died and he went straight to hell.

Men tend to die as they have lived. It's the exception to have a deathbed repentance. Thank God such things occur, but they are the exception.

Stephen lived like Christ. Stephen died with Christ and others since they have died in the same kind of beauty that God gives those that know him well and live with them throughout their lives. In contrast to Voltaire, you read of John Wesley, great man of God.

He died full of counsel and exhortations for the people that were there with him. And his final words were, best of all, God is with us. I love that.

Best of all, God is with us. And then he just kept repeating it. God is with us.

God is with us. And finally he said farewell and he closed his eyes and went to heaven. What a way to go.

Adoniram Jetson, the great American missionary to Burma, suffered so much in his life, suffered even at his death. And he said to those around, he said, I go with the gladness of a boy bounding away from school. I feel so strong in Christ.

And then he closed his eyes and went to heaven. You see, the way we die tells so much about who we really are. The way we live now with Jesus determines who we will ultimately be and how we will ultimately go when our time comes.

Here in front of us, we see how Stephen went when his time came. It came, I think, more suddenly than he thought it would. Jesus died.

He rose again. He appeared, disappeared for 40 days, teaching and teaching and teaching. And then finally, at the beginning of the book of Acts, he went back up into heaven.

They saw him disappear. And then the angels turned and commissioned the apostles and the brethren, and they went forth preaching the word of God. Stephen was a man in the church who loved the Lord, studied the word, grew and was filled with the Holy Spirit.

God took him from the back of the army, as it were, to the front of the army, just a deacon, but then a great man of God and of evangelism. And he didn't live a very long life, but he lived a full life. He lived a powerful life and he lived a life of courage and boldness.

And he was a blazing light in his day. And on this day that we're studying, he preached a sermon. And when it was done, he was murdered for the message that he preached.

It is a shocking thing to contemplate that it was the religious establishment of the day that was the most popular in the eyes of the people that killed him. And they killed him for preaching Christ. And he isn't the last one that died for preaching Christ.

Many have died since throughout the history of the church. The blood of the martyrs has been the seed of the church. When Jesus said in the passage I referred to earlier, when he said, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

You remember that when he said the gates of hell will not prevail against it? He was talking about death itself. He wasn't talking about the demonic hordes of hell he was talking about. And that's how it's often referred to.

I mean, we know the gates of hell will not prevail and Satan can't stop this. That isn't really what he was talking about so much as he was saying death itself, the process of death that you will face for preaching my name will not stop the advancement of my kingdom down through the history of the church until I come back. I will build my church.

I will build it as people preach, as people die, as they're persecuted, as they're opposed. I will build it and even death itself will not stop it from advancing. Stephen is such an example of that because he knew he was going to die by the end of this message.

And yet he did not recant. He didn't pull back. He didn't water it down.

He didn't soft pedal it. On the contrary, when he saw that they were rejecting what he had to say, he said, you stiff necked, hard hearted individuals. You are just like the fathers.

You always resist the Holy Spirit's work in your lives. And at that point, they didn't want to hear any more. And they manifested their true colors and drug him away to his doom.

But let's read about it in verse fifty four. When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart and they gnashed at him with their teeth. Isn't it amazing how religious leaders can be so proper? They dress so nice.

They speak with such wonderful religious tones so different than hey, can you pass the potatoes at dinner? I don't know why it is that when people get behind a pulpit, they have to become suddenly different at dinner. It's hey, can you pass me the salt and pepper? Man, this is good coffee. Is this freeze dry? You know, and then they get behind a pulpit and suddenly there's this whole different thing.

That to me is always the first sign that something's artificial here and it goes way beyond the tone. But it's amazing. They gnashed him with their teeth.

They're dressed so nice. They look so sharp. They act so proper until they're cut to the heart and then they just turn into a wild, angry mob.

It's not the first time. Behavior like this is often hand in glove with just religious society. But in contrast, he being full of the Holy Spirit, verse 55, gazed up into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

And he said, look, I see the heavens open and the son of man standing at the right hand of God. And they cried out with a loud voice. Now they're already gnashing on him with their teeth and they cried out with a loud voice, verse 57, and they stopped their ears and they ran at him with one accord, quite a picture, fingers in the ear, ears running at him, you know, and they cast him out of the city and they stoned him, verse 58, and witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man.

Here's his first appearance in the scripture and certainly not the last. Saul. And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

And then he knelt down he knelt down, rocks pelting him, and he cried with a loud voice, Lord, do not lay this sin to their charge. Do not charge them with this sin. It's a salvation prayer.

Work in such a way that this sin is not held against them and they're saved. And when he had said this, he fell asleep, he died. Last time we looked at Stephen's defense, this time we'll look at his declaration and then his death.

To begin with, looking at his declaration, as he tells them, he sees the heavens open and all we come to, verse 54, when they heard these things, they were cut to the heart. There's a stark contrast here between Stephen and his murderers, and it weaves its way through the passage. They are filled with anger.

He is filled with the spirit. You see, in verse 54, when they heard these things, they were cut to the heart and they gnashed on him with their teeth. They are filled with anger as they are cut to the heart, Luke writes.

The Greek word is Diaprio, and it means to saw in half. In other words, they have this veneer and that is all it is. It's a front.

It's a veneer of spirituality. And the word of God saws it right in half. It bursts open and the blasphemous, hypocritical hearts that they have are unveiled.

They were cut to the heart, sawed in half, opened up and they began to gnash on him with their teeth. They gnashed on him with their teeth. That is an amazing thing to read in Psalm 35, way back in the Old Testament, Psalm 35, verse 16.

I'm reminded of where it says, like the ungodly, they maliciously mocked and they gnashed their teeth at me. In Psalm 37, verse 12, it says the wicked plots against the just and gnashes at him with his teeth. Certainly that is fulfilled here.

The amazing thing to me is as they are so full of anger, gnashing with their teeth. This is the beyond the third time they have heard the full message of the gospel declared to them. They had been the ones who tried Jesus in this very same courtroom.

Then, if you recall, in Acts 4, 8, Peter stood up and he was filled with the Holy Spirit and he addressed them and he gave them the full message. Peter and John had healed the lame man. Same men, same place.

Then they, in Acts 5, they arrested the 12 apostles. The angel let them out of prison. They were found preaching in the temple.

They were arrested again. They were brought back in. Same place, same group.

The 12 apostles preached to them. They had been doing signs and wonders and miracles. So the message was extremely powerful and irrefutable.

Then this man who's just waiting on tables and in charge of ministering to the widows, he begins to get filled with the spirit and preaching. And God does signs and wonders through this man, Stephen. They see that.

They can't deny that. They arrest him. They interrogate him.

He lays out for them the history of the Jewish people and the salvation plan of God, the fathers, Moses, the law, the temple, God, all of these things in a way they'd never heard it before. Never heard it before. Were unable to discern and divide the Bible the way he had.

So they'd heard it so clear he ties it all into Jesus Christ. And they do not respond because their hearts are more hardened than they have ever been. They have come to the place that is so scary to me.

To where you can become so hard and hard that no matter how many times you hear the gospel from that time, that place in your heart, you become so hard that it doesn't matter how many more times you hear the gospel. There's no reaction. They have come to that place.

Paul, the apostle, later in Acts, hold your place and turn to Acts 28, verse 25. He was to warn such people later on after he was converted. No doubt reflecting on how close he came to being so hard, he would never come to Christ.

So thankful that he had in Acts 28, 25. So when they did not agree among themselves, they departed after Paul had said one word. The Holy Spirit spoke rightly through Isaiah, the prophet to our fathers saying, go to this people and say, hearing you will hear and you will not understand.

Seeing you will see and will not perceive. That is exactly where these men were here on this day with Stephen. What a scary place to be where you hear the gospel and you no longer react to it.

You don't feel convicted for your sins. You don't feel you should turn to the Lord. You just want to do everything you can to shove it away from you.

And that's where these men were. And so they are cut to the heart and they Nash with their teeth. You know something? I think they're still gnashing their teeth.

And I have the word of Jesus on that. In Matthew 13, 41, I'll read it to you. Jesus said in that day, the son of men will send out his angels.

They were gathered out of his kingdom, all things that offend and those who practice lawlessness. And I will cast them into the furnace of fire. Speaking of hell.

And there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. These men are, as it were, a picture of hell. And Stephen is a picture of heaven.

Don't forget. All the while, his face is shining like an angel. He's glowing.

So they're gnashing on him with their teeth. They're full of rage and anger. And he's over there glowing, filled with the love of God.

But hell is a place where you will gnash your teeth. Jesus said they were gnashing their teeth then. And I venture to say most of them are still gnashing their teeth in hell.

And the reason there's gnashing of teeth in hell is because of the intense sense of the sin that condemned you to go there. And that will never be relieved. And this intense anger at God having not responded to his love.

Any individual that fights his way into hell will not respond to his judgment either. You either come because of the love of Christ or you don't come at all. And these men here did not come, except we know there's one in the crowd who was to come later.

And that was Saul. So here they are. They're filled with rage.

On the contrary. And in contrast, this Stephen is filled with the Holy Spirit. Act seven fifty five.

But he contrast. Being full of the Holy Spirit. This is an amazing picture to me.

There is this storm of fury that's howling around him. And you can see the faces on these individuals. And at the same time, we're told his face was glowing as an angel.

And he is calm. He's totally yielded to the Holy Spirit's control. If nothing else, this should tell all of us.

Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit in the middle of this. Should tell all of us the power of the Holy Spirit to work in our lives, to enable us to stand separate from our circumstances and to be able to stand in the Lord's love and in the Lord's peace. Here is a man who was just a man like you and I. And yet he's full of the Holy Spirit under the control of the Holy Spirit.

And what is so tremendous is the way Luke puts it. Act seven fifty five. But he being full of the Holy Spirit being comes from the Greek who Parco and it properly expresses the continuance of an antecedent state, an antecedent state.

In other words, he has been in the past filled with the Holy Spirit and he is filled with the Holy Spirit. Now it indicates here in the present tense, it indicates this man is always living, filled with the Holy Spirit. And we know that's true.

That's one of the reasons they chose him to be one of the deacons. And so he lives his life full of the Holy Spirit. As a result, he doesn't have to make any adjustments when the crisis hits.

I don't know about you, but that is powerful insight for me, because too often we live following our own way, doing our own thing. We fail to seek the Lord and we don't read our Bibles. And then a crisis hits and we wonder why we are so unable to handle it.

Stephen here is peaceful, he's calm and he's about to die. And he is as calm in the way he preaches and behaves as if he was here with us today. And we were all smiling at him.

And that is because he lives in the Holy Spirit day by day and he doesn't have to make any changes when this time comes. And you say you might say, well, you know what? I can see living, walking in the spirit, seeking the Lord. But I don't know if I could handle an angry mob getting ready to stone me to death, gnashing on me, running at me with their fingers in their ears.

I don't know if I can handle all that. Well, let me say this. As Stephen was filled with the spirit, he was also filled with something very wonderful and unique to the hour.

And it's called crisis, grace, crisis, grace. It is that work of the spirit that God reserves for these times where you have your everyday situations. And then as you follow the Lord, you hit unusual situations.

And this definitely is a crisis of unusual proportion. And yet the grace is here. And, you know, something Jesus had promised that it would be.

Hold your place here in tune to Luke 12, 11, Luke 12, 11. I'm so thankful the Christian life has not lived in my power, aren't you? And that the Holy Spirit is ever present to meet our needs as the days go by. Luke 12, 11.

Now, when they bring you to the synagogues and magistrates and authorities, exactly what happened to Stephen here. Do not worry about how or what you should answer or what you should say. Verse 12, for the Holy Spirit will teach you, Jesus says, in that very hour what you should say.

So Jesus had promised that in the time of the crisis, the Holy Spirit will be there in that very hour to teach you what to say and be there to show you how to act. The Christian life is never to be lived without the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. We should never look at any situation and think I have to face that.

I don't know how I'm going to face it. I can't face it. How many times have you in your life said words like this? I can't take it.

You ever said that? Come on, be honest. You lie in church. God won't bless you.

I can't take it. You can't. That's why you say it, right? But Paul said, I have found when I am weak, I am strong because his grace is sufficient for me.

I have discovered, I've learned it, that in my weakness he is made strong. So the truth is for us as Christians in a very intense crisis, you know, Lord, I can't handle this, but you can give me the grace, strengthen me now. And then we see him do it.

And we see it here with Stephen. I'm certain as Stephen was preaching and he sees their faces, they're nodding. Yeah, this is good history.

Man, this guy's tight. He's got it down. He understands Moses and the law and Abraham and the fathers.

He's amazing. Oh, my God. Oh, he's saying he's telling us we're stiff necked and hard hearted.

What? You know, as he sees this, he's realizing, you know, I'm a dead man and I can see him saying, Lord, I feel my face as an angel. I feel my death is near. Oh, God, give me the grace that I need to go through with this.

I can't do this in my own strength. And then we see the heavens open and there is Jesus revealing himself to Stephen in his hour of need. Peter had learned this so well by the time he wrote his first epistles, which was to persecuted, scattered brethren and first Peter 4:14.

He said, if you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you for the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you, isn't that sweet? The spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part, he is blaspheming, but on your part, he is glorified. That's exactly what happened with Stephen.

He was glorified to Stephen as the spirit of God rested upon him. And so the spirit of the Lord grants grace to Stephen as he goes to be with the Lord and goes through this. And so that tells me as a Christian, I don't have to shy away from difficult situations.

I can go into them and through them by the power of the Holy Spirit. They are filled with anger. Stephen is filled with the Holy Spirit.

Further, Stephen is filled with his heavenly sight. The verse fifty five, but he gazed into heaven and he saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, look, look, I see the heavens open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

If you think they got mad at him for saying you stiff necked, hard hearted individuals, if you think that made them mad when he stops and he says, look, I see the heavens open. Jesus is standing in the right hand of God. That was it.

He wasn't a dead man. Now he is totally finished. Why? Because Jesus opened up heaven and revealed himself to Stephen and he saw him and Stephen then made these individuals face the words that Jesus had said to them the night they tried him.

In Matthew 26, 64, as Jesus was there in front of the high priest, in front of the council, Jesus said to him, Matthew 26, 64. Hereafter, you will see the son of man sitting on the right hand of power. Are you the son of God? He says, you have said it.

Then he added to it. And he said, Hereafter, you will see the son of man. I am God and I am man.

You will see the son of man sitting on the right hand of power. And the high priest tore his clothes at that saying of Jesus. He turned.

He said he has spoken blasphemy. We don't need any more witnesses. Look, you've heard him blaspheme, blaspheme yourself, blaspheme yourself.

And then they took Jesus and they sent him to his death. The high priest tore his clothes when Jesus said that. But at this point, they started gnashing their teeth because here was Stephen.

Jesus has said you will see the son of man sitting at the right hand of power. And here is Stephen, one of his followers. His face is glowing as an angel as he looks up into heaven and the very words they had called blasphemy come out of his mouth.

And he says, Look, I see the heavens open and the son of God on the right hand of power. That is amazing to me. He saw it.

He said that he saw it. They saw only the roof as they looked up. Look, I see the heavens open.

All they see is the roof. They look back at him and he's glowing. It's obviously he sees something heavenly and he's glowing with his face like an angel.

They see only the roof and it brought about an outburst greater than the one that Jesus had brought about with his words. And they began to yell and stop their ears that they might not hear anymore. And while Stephen is filled with heavenly sight, they are completely spiritually blind.

And so we read they stopped their ears and ran at him with one accord. They chose to silence the truth by killing Stephen. Remember when Jesus said to these people, You are blind guides and you lead the blind.

The blind lead the blind and they both fall into the ditch. These are the blind guides right here. And they go running one after the next, having rejected and killed the Messiah.

It's not surprising they reject and kill one of his most faithful herald Stephen right here. And so they run at him in a blind fury. They ran at him.

They ran at him. You see that they ran at him. And Luke chose a word in the Greek that vividly portrays their fury and it's used elsewhere.

You remember when Jesus went to Gadara and the man we know him as Legion. He was in the caves cutting himself. He was possessed and he cast out a thousand demons out of this man.

And Jesus cast the demons out of the man. But he cast them into the pigs. The swine.

And then you read that the swine, after the demons went into them, they ran madly down the hill and drown in the Sea of Galilee. That's what happens when you get doubled ham, you know, demon possessed pigs anyway. So the mad rush of the herd of swine down into the lake.

When you read that account in Mark and Matthew, the same term is using the Greek to rush madly. So they're running at him in a mad, frenzied rush. Exactly.

Had those swine ran madly demon possessed into the lake. It's used the same word is used in Acts 19:29 to describe the frenzied mob that rushed into the theater at Ephesus to kill, try to kill Paul and his companions. So it's this mad, frenzied state and they rush at him and they ran at him, casting aside all their dignity, all their propriety.

This high, prestigious court in Israel is reduced now to an angry, murderous, howling mob. And it's all because they don't want God taking their life, saving them from their sins and turning them into gracious, kind, loving men like Stephen. They want power and popularity and money.

That's it. So his declaration leads to Stephen's death. These men sought only to see him dead.

He sought only to see them saved. What a contrast. What a contrast.

They cried with a loud voice, stopped their ears, ran at him in one accord. In verse 58, they cast him out of the city and they stoned him. So they took him and they drug him out of the city, most likely to Calvary, Golgotha, a place of execution.

Most likely, he died right near where Jesus Christ did. And this is in keeping with the injunction in Leviticus 24, 14. If you have a blasphemer, you take him outside the city and you stone him.

So they would have tried to give the appearance that's what they were doing. However, most likely they drug him outside the city to the area to look like they were doing the right things. But this is a mad, frenzied mob.

And, you know, they didn't do it in an orderly fashion. According to Leviticus, if it was true blasphemy, you were to have the witnesses throw the first stones, the prime eyewitnesses of the person and the crime they had committed, perhaps the false witnesses through the stones. I'll tell you one thing.

If they were false witnesses and they had false witnesses, if they had to throw the first stones, you bet those guys were feeling bad by the end of the day that they took some money to tell some lies and then they have to be the first ones to throw the stones for this man, this human being in front of them to die, to murder all about some money. I doubt if they did it that orderly, although they did take Saul and they laid their coats down at his feet. So they weren't angry enough that they couldn't stop and take off their fine robes.

So they rushed at him, evidently got someone to drag him away. And then they said, you get him out of here. We'll take our robes off.

We don't want to soil them, you know, in the murder. So they take him over to Saul and they, here, hang on to our robes for us. Keep a sharp eye on this.

We've got to go kill somebody. And then these guys are, you know, sin makes you really warped as a human being. It really does.

Makes you really warped. They thought only to see him dead. Stephen is so Christlike.

He sees only to see them saved. In verse 60, he kneels down and he cried out with a loud voice saying, Lord, do not charge them with this sin. He's so filled with forgiveness.

Even at this point, he's dying. You can see the brethren watching. You know, we tend to forget that there would be other Christians watching and you can see them standing there going, oh my gosh, they're going to murder him.

All he did was tell them about Christ. They're going to murder. They're going to do it.

They're going to murder him. And as they begin to stone him, it's the effect of like pitching hard balls at him, only rocks, rocks about the size of hard balls. They begin to stone him to death.

It is amazing to me. We read he knelt down. It seems to me he fought his way to his knees, wanted to die on his knees.

This man loved the Lord so much. He wanted to die on his knees. And so he knelt down.

And there he prayed for their salvation, just like Jesus. Remember, Jesus prayed, Father, forgive them. The centurion at the base of the cross was saved that day.

He heard that prayer. Father, forgive them. He says, Father, he says, Lord, do not charge them with this sin with a loud voice.

And then the Bible says he fell asleep. That is a euphemism in the New Testament for death. It is a gentle time for death in the New Testament.

And there are those that try to make a doctrine out of soul sleep. That you sleep in the grave. That is not true.

Lord Jesus, he says in verse fifty nine, receive my spirit. He went straight to be with Jesus. His body went unconscious and died.

His spirit, he went straight to Jesus. He commended his spirit to Jesus and then he went to him. I like that a lot because Stephen is ready to die.

Someone has well said a Christian ought to be ready to preach, pray or die in a minute. Preach, pray or die in a minute. Stephen is ready to go.

Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. You know what is amazing to me is that he says, Lord, do not lay this into their charge so much like Jesus. Father, forgive them.

Only here it's Lord, do not lay this sin to their charge. Then it is Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Jesus on the cross.

It's just like Jesus on the cross. Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit. It's just like it with one major exception that you have to see.

He committed his spirit into the hands of Jesus right in front of them, right in front of them. I see the heavens open, the son of man on the right hand of God. Then they take him out to kill him.

He kneels down. He prays for them. And then he says, Lord Jesus, while he's dying, he doesn't budge one inch.

It only becomes more real. Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. I have seen you now.

Lord, take me. And there he testifies of the deity of Christ. Jesus had said, Father, receive my spirit.

Stephen says, Jesus, receive my spirit. He obviously sees Jesus as equal to the father. He is confessing the deity of Jesus Christ in front of these men with men with his dying breath.

And he goes to be with him. You know, something fascinating here is that we find the appearance of Jesus to Stephen that puts him right up there with Isaiah, with Ezekiel, with Daniel, with Moses as men in the Bible who saw the Lord. And it puts him in front of Paul and John, who saw the Lord in his ascended glory because he's the first one who has to die for the faith.

He is the first one who gets to see the risen, ascended, glorified Christ. God is good. He's a rewarder of those who diligently seek him.

And yet I see here that even though he has all of that, the appearance of Jesus in the heavens does not stop the stones. Now, follow this. In the Old Testament, you remember when Nebuchadnezzar put up this huge statue and he got all the people in the nation out to look at it.

He got a band out there. The band was playing. And he said, I want everybody at the sound of the band to bow down and worship this idol I've made.

And so he says, strike up the band. And they all began to sing. And then they bowed down to worship the idol, with the exception, hundreds of thousands of people.

There they are, level, bowed down before the idol. And here are three young men standing like this. At attention, they would not bow because of their conviction before their God.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. And the king heated up the fire, you remember, and he threw them in. It was so hot that the guys that threw them in got burnt up.

And here they are. They were tied up, thrown in the fire. They went into the fire and then they saw one inside the furnace, like unto the Son of Man, in there with them.

There weren't three in the fire, there were four. There was a fourth and it was Son of God. And they went in tied up.

They were in the fire and then they were moving around in there. They're having some kind of a chat with the Lord in the fire. He's like, here, let me take those bonds off, you know, and tie those ropes.

It's kind of hot in here. Don't worry, I won't scorch you. I'm here.

And so they're in there and they see them moving around in there. And the next thing you know, they take them out. They don't smell like smoke.

Their clothes aren't charred. They're not burnt. They're not blistered.

And the ropes are gone. They go in bound. They come out loose.

And it's all because of Jesus inside. Now, here's the amazing thing. Jesus, in that case, did not let the fire touch them.

In this case, you could say the fire did burn Stephen in the sense that he did not hinder the stones. He did die. And the truth is, that is the way it is most often.

The appearance of Jesus and the love of Christ manifested here did not stop the stones. And Stephen was stoned to death, calling on the Lord Jesus. Stones fell.

They beat about his head. They stopped his eloquent tongue. They dashed into his heaving lungs, bruised his tender heart.

And there is the mangled corpse. Christ did not preserve the flesh, but he went in his spirit to be with the Lord. If the Lord didn't preserve Stephen's flesh from the stones, ought we to expect it? That's the thing I want you to see.

So often we're saying, Lord, stop this thing. Lord, get me out of this thing. And then God doesn't stop it.

At that point, we need to go back to Stephen and see him full of faith, on his knees, confessing Jesus to the very end. He sees him alive after his crucifixion. He's being stoned to death.

You know what he's thinking. They crucified him and I see him alive. They're stoning me and I will be alive with him in a minute or two.

You see, because Jesus lives, we will live also. He shut his eyes to earth and he opened them to heaven. He shut his eyes to earth and he opened them to heaven.

And his prayer was effectual for at least one of them. In verse 58, they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And a witness, the witnesses laid their clothes down at the feet of a young man named Saul.

And then chapter eight, verse one, Saul was consenting to his death. Saul later became the Apostle Paul. He stood there and he heard that prayer, Lord, do not lay this into their charge.

Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. You know, he had to stand there and look at it and say, this has to be true. This has to be real.

The man does signs and wonders in his life. The man preaches before the best in Israel. No one can withstand his wisdom.

The man shines like a face of an angel. He says he sees the risen Christ. He dies talking to Christ.

Then he says, receive my spirit. And he dies full of love and forgiveness for all of us. Later, Paul was on his way to Damascus, Saul, to persecute the Christians, to arrest them and imprison them.

Do you remember what Jesus said when he appeared to him? He said, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting them? No. Why are you persecuting me? Then he said this amazing thing. He said, it is hard for you to kick against the goads.

What is that? It's Stephen in his mind every day, dying full of the love of Christ, with the radiance of Christ, praying for him as he dies. He probably looks up at him and he's gone to be with Jesus every day of his life. The fact that he persecuted people, he had to remember that witness of Stephen.

And it never stopped speaking to him. Kicking against the goads for Saul was the death of Stephen and the love of Christ. The witness of Stephen that could not be denied.

The church owes the conversion of Saul, of Tarsus, to the death and witness of Stephen on this day. Stephen lived like Christ and he died like Christ. I want to finish with some similarities in the two.

Both in life and death, they were so much alike. Jesus was filled with the spirit. So was Stephen.

Jesus was full of grace. So was Stephen. Jesus boldly confronted the religious establishment of his day.

So did Stephen. Jesus was convicted by lying witnesses. So was Stephen.

Jesus had a mock trial. So did Stephen. Jesus was executed, though innocent of any crime.

So was Stephen. Both were accused of blasphemy. Both died outside the city, buried by sympathizers, and both prayed for the salvation of their executioners.

Was there ever a man more like Jesus than Stephen? The answer is no, because he was just like him. Jesus said, greater works than these you will do, because I go to the Father. And he said, and I will send you the Holy Spirit and he will be your helper.

You will do what I did, because he will be in you. I've got to get back. I got to get out of this body, go back into heaven so I can come back down through the Holy Spirit and get back into yours.

And that's the explanation for Stephen. What Paul called Christ in you. The hope, the certain hope of future glory.

That's it. Do you have Christ in you today? If you do, then you will live a life similar to Stephen's. You will see God take you from anonymity into a life where you begin to affect others.

And it will be because of the love of God in Jesus Christ. Once you come to know him, you are never the same again. Thank God, huh? Father, thank you that we will never be the same now that we've come to know Jesus Christ.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you love us with an everlasting love. And now, Lord, fill us with the power of your Holy Spirit. Lead us and guide us.

Lord, do for us what we could never do on our own. Work in us to make those changes we could never make in our own power. And give us a love for those that don't know you, a passion, Lord, and the courage and concern to tell them about you.

Open up many doors for us to share Christ and Lord, we will buy your power. May your joy be our strength and we will give you all the glory. We look toward being blessed, Father, for we ask these things in Jesus name.

Amen.

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