

The Heavens Opened Acts 7

by John Nelson Darby

John Nelson Darby's sermon on Acts 7 explores the significance of Stephen's testimony and the profound implications of salvation through Christ.

Scripture: Acts 7:55

Topics: "Grace Of God", "Salvation"

Description

John Nelson Darby emphasizes the significance of Stephen's martyrdom in Acts 7 as a pivotal moment in the history of God's dealings with humanity. He highlights how Stephen's testimony encapsulates the rejection of God's grace and the necessity of salvation, illustrating that humanity is lost without Christ. The sermon reflects on the grace of God that brings salvation, the importance of recognizing our lost state, and the transformative power of seeing Christ in glory. Darby encourages believers to trust in God's love and grace, which reconciles us to Him, and to live in a way that reflects this relationship. Ultimately, he calls for a focus on Christ, who is our hope and salvation, as we await His return.

Transcript

This chapter is a very remarkable one in this respect: it is the Spirit of God summing up the whole history of man until Stephen was thus put to death. It is the rejection of the last testimony of God, all the dealings of God with man and the result of it as summed up by the Spirit of God; and what man's condition was as under those dealings; and then the blessed truth that a Christian cut off goes straight into Paradise.

What makes the chapter striking is, that Stephen was the first man that was carried up into heaven this way after Christ; he went to heaven so as to close the then testimony to man upon the earth. It was the turning-point in the history of man under God's dealings, and of what the ways of God were. Stephen went to join Christ in heaven; that gave backbone to his testimony. He recounts everything that had passed since Abraham, right on to the death of Christ, and then goes to heaven.

We speak of salvation - the grace of God that brings salvation. Salvation supposes something lost; if people are lost, I speak of the necessity of this salvation. It is not help we want, salvation meets what is lost. "How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation." It is not merely the change in people, though there is a change in all their ways, habits, and spirit. God had come down and met people in the condition they were in; they could not meet Him at all, but He brought them out of that condition. Christ died "the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God." We were away from God then, and God has been dealing with us to bring us to Himself, because we are not with Himself at all. The death of Christ has nothing to do

with help; if He had not been the Son of God He would not have done it. The testimony we have of the Lord Jesus Christ is, "He came to seek and to save that which was lost."

Now it is the summing up by Stephen here, that brings this out so distinctly and definitely. Man turned out of paradise - the flood - the law, after that we all know the world that now is. There have been these provings, testings, and dealings of God with sinners, which is important, because man fancies he can remedy this. Now God has done everything He could do, and the result is man is proved to be lost; I do not mean finally lost, for God can save him, but as to the state he is in, entirely away from God. He has not got life. Life through whom? "This life is in his Son." "He that hath the Son hath life." If you have not the Son you have not life, there is nothing to be helped. You have not got the thing which puts us into relationship with God. There may be natural conviction of sin, or the law applied to the conscience, or the wonderful grace of the gospel making you feel confounded that you have lived without it at all. He is on the one side guilty, on the other lost. As regards his condition and state he has not righteousness. "None righteous, no, not one." You may be extremely amiable, pleasing and sweet to nature like the young man in Mark 10; the Lord tests him, and directly he goes away from Christ, for he loved money. It is very pleasing, of course, to find amiability and the like, but it is a natural thing in man, as you may find in any other animal, one vicious, another well disposed.

Remark the perfect calmness of Stephen before the Sanhedrim, the way in which he goes through the whole history they gloried in (as God can go through your history and tell you all that ever you did), and brings their own path and conduct to themselves, to shew them what they were and how it had all issued in their state. He begins at Abraham where everything began afresh. People built Babel, not as some have fancied so high that the flood could not reach them, but to make themselves a name that shall not be scattered. Then when they had been scattered they turned idolators, worshipping devils, and then God called out Abraham. Now you must leave your country, and your kindred, and your father's house; grace comes and calls him entirely out from all this. He half went, first, and did not get there. Then when Terah was dead "he removed him into this land." There is no condition whatever connected with Abraham. "In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed," blessing to the Gentiles. God comes in His own grace and promises His Son. Then He sets about to deal with man in every possible way. Four ways - the law, the prophets, His Son and the working of the Holy Ghost. We sinners are not in paradise, even an earthly one - man has been turned out too, for you cannot have corruptions, passions, and lusts walking with a holy God. It cannot and ought not to be. If you could take man and put him into heaven, he would get out of it as fast as he could.

You get these four steps. He gives the law they did not keep it; the prophets, "which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted?" His Son, "of whom ye have now been the betrayers and murderers;" the Holy Ghost, "ye do always resist the Holy Ghost." Everything in which God could deal with man had to be gone through and tried, and that is the way it turned out. This grace, this special mercy that spared them on the intercession of Jesus, and now there was a testimony of a glorified Christ if they would receive it, and they sent back the messenger, "we will not have this man to reign over us." They put to death the humbled Christ, and refuse the testimony of the glorified Christ.

There we get the history of man and the history of your hearts. Who has not had the law practically and broken it? Who has not had the testimony and neglected it? Who has not had Christ presented to him, and preferred money, vanity, dress, or a thousand things? and the testimony of the Holy Ghost remaining without any effect. It is the very history of the world and of the little world of your hearts. I find I am a sinner, that is God's judgment of my state, but there is salvation for the vilest; I should not be here if there

were not. But more; when "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them," when He came into this ruined world in grace, they would not have Him. We forget we are in a world in which the Son of God has been and is not. How came that? God says to the world practically, what have you done with My Son? What can the world say but, we have crucified Him. Was there any reason for it, was He really a malefactor? Was He even like John the Baptist, severe? There He was healing all who were oppressed of the devil, removing every sorrow, even of death, manifesting God, for God was with Him. Ah, said the world we will not have God, and as He willingly gave Himself He could be easily got rid of. And this is what man is! God came in grace into the midst of this world and man would not have Him, and there is this additional fact for us, that he died for us.

Go and introduce Christ where men are having their pleasures, quiet, gentle society, or rough society, what would be the effect? It would stop them directly. Take a man aside for a few hours, he will think of his pleasures or his troubles, but you never heard of a natural man thinking of Christ, for it is never on his heart, and if it is brought to him, his natural inclination rejects it. There is God's account of all of you.

What does wisdom do? Justify God, not themselves. I justify God where the testimony of the condemnation comes; I say God is right, I ought to repent, and I justify God in the testimony of sovereign grace in His Son, I bow my head with thankfulness. When a man is really taught of God he justifies God.

Now we have to see how God meets this state, which is the gospel. Not what I have wrought but "what hath God wrought," and I find "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son;" also, "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." He saves what was lost, makes propitiation for guilt and gives life to those that have none in themselves. Christ has come into this world to shew what God was to the sinner, that wonderful unspeakable fact that "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself." God Himself has come as a man to shew His interest in man, and has gone through it, the Holy one whom sin could not defile, to carry the blessedness of God's own love to everyone who had a need. What brought Him here? Did I ask Him to come? Just His own love. We get this blessed love of God come amongst us. I know God not in speculating about what He may be, but in the blessed knowledge of what He is. If he had not shewn me all my sins, I might say, "If you knew all I was you would have nothing to say to me, I know my own heart but I know God's heart too."

People call God merciful, which means that they hope God will think as a little about their sins as they do themselves; it is awful how little man thinks of sin. They think it horribly bad to wrong their fellows, but they may calumniate God as much as they like. God cannot and ought not to be indifferent to sin; He would not be the holy God if He were. Am I to go defiled into heaven and spoil heaven itself? The love is an idle love that never displayed itself; where love is thorough and real it measures the wants and takes the case thoroughly into account. He bearing my sins in His own body on the tree was made sin for us; whether as regards the tree or the fruit, He stands before God and these sins have been dealt with. I do not wait till the day of judgment to own them or to know that they are put away. Where there is faith, "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ," and we stand, as God has told us, in His presence as white as snow.

When we look at the cross, the more we weigh it the more we see how perfectly God has been glorified. I own that my sins brought him there. The only part I had in the cross was the sins that brought Christ there, and the hatred that put Him to death. If it humbles me in the dust, all the better. The work is divinely perfect between Christ and God about these sins. The wrath was such that even in the thought of bearing it He sweat great drops of blood, and while it bows my heart and my conscience, I find that God has

already dealt with the sins in the grace that put all away, before ever I come to the day of judgment.

I may have been attracted by grace or alarmed by the terror of the Lord; one is the love getting into your heart, the other the light getting into your conscience, and God is both light and love. The work in which He bore my sins and put them away, is perfectly done, in virtue of which God has set Him as man at His own right hand; there I find salvation. The work is finished, I accept it, I am only too glad to have it, but the thing that gives me peace is that God has accepted it, for He has raised Christ from the dead. The glory of God Himself now in the face of Jesus Christ is the witness that the believer's sins never can be remembered anymore. Whereas the glory of God formerly alarmed and frightened us, now God has set Him at His right hand that you might be able to look at it in perfect peace. How could I walk with God if I did not know whether He was going to condemn me or not. You cannot if you are afraid of Him; but I am made the righteousness of God in Him. He is in the glory as Saviour. Oh, the thought that He became Man, that God is unveiled, and came into this world in unbounded love, making the day of judgment a time of triumph for the believer! I say of triumph, beloved. The believer will be perfectly like Christ, "Who shall change our vile body that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body." We are left here to have our senses exercised.

"There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus." I am in Christ. Not only the clearing away of all the wretched things that I have and am in the first Adam, but God has put me into all the blessed things in the second Adam, in Christ. I know before God I am as Christ is. People think this presumption - if you ever think to be with God without it, it is presumption. If you are in the flesh you cannot please God. The Lord Jesus has said (when the Comforter is come), "at that day ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you."

It is lovely the way it is brought out to Stephen; He was full of the Holy Ghost; I do not say every one is, though we have the Holy Ghost. The effect of seeing Christ in glory is that we are changed into the same image from glory to glory. He who is in the glory is the One who bore my sins. Now let me look upon that glory, let me think of it, let me tell it; He "loved me and gave Himself for me," and my heart delights to look at him. The effect is I am "changed into the same image," my heart gets full of Christ. Stephen in a certain sense becomes perfectly like Christ: he says, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge;" the Lord Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." Stephen says, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit;" the Lord Jesus, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

When the soul really sees and knows Christ by faith as the One who has saved us, we get like Him, though of course we have to be on the watch against temptations every day. What is very difficult for us in this world is entire superiority to circumstances. There were the people raging against Stephen, and not only that, when they set about dragging him out of the city, while the stones were flying round him, he kneels down and prays for them. Stephen, through the Lord's grace, is the quiet person, entirely superior to circumstances, always himself with his heart in heaven. There I get the effect of realising the presence of Christ. So far as we are above the circumstances we pass through, we are always ourselves, and we are the right thing in them. It is difficult, I grant, and requires communion with the Lord and diligence of heart in seeking Him in prayer. Supposing the world does kill us, why we go straight to Christ in heaven like Stephen did - a witness for Christ here, and a companion of Christ up there, to whom he goes in blessed joy and gladness of heart.

Now, beloved, where are we as to this? Are our souls trusting in that grace in which the blessed Lord came, till he comes to receive to Himself those who have believed on Him. The Lord give to us to have our eye fully open to Himself, to know and taste that the Lord is gracious, and then we shall be able to wait for

His Son from heaven, the only thought we have, to please Him while here. May we have our eye on Him where He is in glory, so that we may be like Him, and rejoice with our hearts in joy unspeakable and full of glory.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-nelson-darby/the-heavens-opened-acts-7/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net