

Bearing the Family Likeness

by Raymond Brown

The sermon emphasizes the importance of being full of the Holy Spirit, having an eternal dimension to thinking and living, and directing our gaze to the victorious Christ.

Duration: 41:34

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, John 16:13, Acts 1:8, Acts 7:51, Acts 7:54-55

Topics: "Sanctification"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on the story of Stephen from the Acts of the Apostles. The speaker highlights Luke's skillful use of contrast in his storytelling. He emphasizes the importance of making an open confession of Christ and being a witness to others. The speaker also emphasizes the significance of being filled with the Holy Spirit and the power of prayer, even in difficult times.

Transcript

...together over this centenary weekend about some of the key passages in the very first church history book that was ever written, and in my view the best of them all, and I've read a few of them, that certainly this story of the early church, written by Luke in the first century, is full of significance for us today. In other words, it's not just telling us about a marvellous story and how it began, but it's laying down for us great principles about how God's work has been sustained and will be sustained through the centuries. And I want you to look at this very dramatic story, it's a very significant moment in the Acts of the Apostles, the story of how one of their choicest leaders, Stephen, lost his life, laid down his life for the cause of Christ.

And I believe it's one of Luke's very important contrast pictures. I said last night that Luke was a key figure in the life of the early church, a man with a wide variety of lovely gifts and qualities. He was a great storyteller.

In other words, he doesn't just announce the details of a story, but presents them, I believe, under the inspiration of God's Spirit, with great artistry. And he's very fond of a contrast picture, where you read a story, but you're inevitably, because of the way Luke tells the story, you have to take sides. And here is one of them.

There are those who, verse 51 of chapter 7, resist the Holy Spirit. And at that point, Stephen has been addressing the most sophisticated audience of Jewish people of the first century, well-versed in all the message of the Old Testament, but he brings it to a conclusion and knows that there's bound to be

resistance when he starts to speak about Jesus, the Righteous One, the Maxillus, Son of God. He describes all those who are merely religious, but have resisted God's Holy Spirit.

Are we among those who resist, say no to what the Holy Spirit is saying to us? Or, like Stephen, here's the contrast, verse 54, but Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God. I want you to think about that. It's one of Luke's contrast pictures.

And he's very fond of that. It's a wonderful and a brilliant literary device to present us with marked contrast, so that we say, well, are we among those who say no to the Holy Spirit, or are we full of the Holy Spirit? And it's at that particular moment, that is, in Stephen's darkest hour, when life was coming to an end and in the most ugly way possible, at that moment Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit and looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God. Now, we've chosen this morning's theme, the family, and I want us to think about some of the features of the family likeness, what it means to be part of the people of God.

It means that we're born again, as we've already heard in that lovely testimony. That is, believing that the Lord Jesus died for us, we have new life in Christ, eternal life. That is a quality of life, not just life that goes on forever, but the life of God in our own souls.

And it means that we have new life in Christ Jesus. And I believe one of the lovely things that the New Testament has to say to us is that when we come to put our trust in the Saviour, the Holy Spirit comes to make His home in our hearts and lives. But that every single day we ought to be asking that the Holy Spirit who lives within us will fill every single aspect of our lives, and that we should be daily filled with the Holy Spirit.

I said last night that Luke could have told us all the things that Paul was communicating to the churches, so vividly and so arrestingly, through his letters and through his preaching. And Luke certainly knew that the Apostle Paul taught that every Christian must keep on being filled with the Holy Spirit. That's what the Apostle Paul told the church in Ephesus, in Ephesians chapter 5 and verse 18.

Be being filled. No, that's not just once. That verb is a verb which describes a continuous action.

Be being filled. Keep on being filled by the Holy Spirit. And that verb is also indicating something that's not an invitation.

It would be very nice if some Christians were kept on being filled with the Holy Spirit. It's a command. It's an order.

It's telling us that every single day we ought to be saying, Well, Holy Spirit of God, You live in my heart and life. I want You to fill every single part of my life. I don't just want You to be the Sunday part.

I don't just want You to be the centenary part. I don't just want You to be the part at home. I want You to fill every part of my life, every aspect of my life.

I want You to cleanse my thought life. I want You to fill my mind. I want You to activate my limbs.

I want You to give me the power I need to testify to You and to be bold and stand up and say that I belong to You. So, here is Luke's skillful contrast picture. It's possible, he says, for people to be very religious.

There was no more sophisticated, intelligent, religious audience in the first century than the Sanhedrin. Leading council of Jews. But he says, You resisted the Holy Spirit.

But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God. Now, Luke wants us to know that the filling of the Holy Spirit was something fresh and real for Stephen in that precise moment. He was being filled with the Holy Spirit.

We already know from the previous chapter that Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit. It's why he was chosen. I want you to choose these deacons, these leaders.

Chapter 6 and verse 3 says, Seven men who are known to be full of the Holy Spirit. Don't we know Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit? And if we haven't grasped that, it says to us in chapter 6 and verse 5, this proposal pleased the whole group, so they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. And we all know that Stephen is full of the Holy Spirit.

But Luke wants us to know of this fresh infilling of the Spirit of God. That is, that at that particular moment of time, what characterized him as a member of God's family, a redeemed child of God, someone who was born again of the Spirit, somebody who was actually on the threshold of heaven, who was going to be the first martyr of the Church. And at that moment of great need, God came to him in mercy and grace, and he was full of the Holy Spirit.

And all the work that has been really done for the Lord through union, halls, witness and work through 100 years, all that lasts for eternity is work that has been done in the power of the Holy Spirit. It's where men and women have been full of the Holy Spirit. It's not when we've been full of ourselves, it's not when we've been possessed with our own notions and ideas, doing things in our own energy, as we're all in danger of doing from time to time, being motivated by all sorts of mixed ambitions of one kind and another, but it's as we're full of the Holy Spirit.

I just want to suggest to you this morning that this passage is once again Luke's brilliant way, not just of telling a story. In other words, we don't do any justice to this story if we just think it is the dramatic account of the first Christian martyr. It is that.

It's reliable history. As I said last night, Luke is an alert and a reliable historian. Here's something that really happened, but he's using this to present us with great doctrinal truths, what it means to be full of the Holy Spirit.

In other words, it's not just a feeling, not just an emotion. This will demonstrate the family likeness and those who are full of the Holy Spirit will have certain features and characteristics. You'll be able to tell someone who is full of the Holy Spirit by certain features in their lives.

They'll bear the family likeness. Well, what are the features? Well, the story tells you. And the features are demonstrated as the story unfolds.

And the first one is this. If we're full of the Holy Spirit, men and women are full of the Holy Spirit, are those who have an eternal dimension, have an eternal dimension to their thinking and their living. What does it say? They were furious.

The Sanhedrin rushed at him and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God. That's the first characteristic.

In other words, the first characteristic of a spirit-filled man or woman is that you have an eternal dimension to your thinking. That is, you know what it is to look up to heaven and see the glory of God. That's not a

natural thing.

The person who is not full of the Holy Spirit, the man or woman who is outside the things of Christ, they're preoccupied with the things of this world. They're concerned about what's happening down here, where the next pound is coming from, what they're going to do in the next hour. They're concerned about what tomorrow's plans are and what they plan to do and what they determine.

They don't have an eternal dimension. It's Luke's brilliant way of saying, not only what Stephen did visually, he looked up to heaven, but he's saying what all God's men and women do. Those who bear the family likeness have an eternal dimension to their thinking.

I don't mean to say that they spend their whole time being stargazers, but what it does mean is that the whole of their lives are set within the context of eternity. That is, they know what it is in every circumstance of life to look up to heaven and think about the glory of God. In other words, they don't just live as if this world is their horizon.

They know that this world is a very limited part of God's total purpose for us. Actually, in the light of eternity, living in this world, we shall see later, it's just like a speck of dust actually. And all of us, if we're allowed to reflect, if we are permitted to reflect on what we've done in this world, I'm not sure that we will, and sometimes I hope that we won't, but if we are, we'll all wish we'd done more.

We shall all think about that tiny speck of dust which was our human experience in this world. And we'd all wish we'd have crowded into it more love for Christ, more dependence on God, more sense of the fullness of the Holy Spirit in our lives, more zeal for witnessing, more commitment to service, more reliance in prayer, you see. But Christian men and women who bear the family likeness, they have the eternal dimension.

They look up to heaven and see the glory of God. In other words, in the context of this world, they know all their human experience is set within the light of eternity. And that determines the way that they live.

It means that they have an eternal dimension to everything. They think about the things of eternity, and what matters most in life. And they know that what matters most in life, actually, is to be rightly related to God.

It's to know that your sins are forgiven in Christ Jesus. It's to know that you're destined for heaven. It's to know that the things of eternity are the things that matter most.

So at that moment, full of the Holy Spirit, Stephen, at that most terrible moment, he could have been forgiven for looking anywhere but to heaven. But it was the most natural thing in the world, when this angry mob were rushing towards him, intent on taking his life in the most gruesome and socially degraded way possible, because to stone him was to accuse him of blasphemy. That was the death, that was the penalty for a blasphemer.

And Stephen was a lover of God. Stephen wasn't a blasphemer. He loved God.

He honoured Jesus. He obeyed the Spirit. So he was not only physically dying in a way that would be painful, but socially, among those people in that context, it was the most awful thing, to be accused of blasphemy in the last minutes of your life.

But he had an eternal dimension. In other words, he was saying, no matter what they think about me here, what matters is that my name is enrolled in heaven, and to be full of the Holy Spirit is to have an eternal dimension to our thinking and living. And those who characterise the work of this family of God through 100 years, there have been time and again when you've just got to look up to heaven and see the glory of God.

It's one of the marks and characteristics, isn't it, of the people of God. My friends, the Lord Jesus did it, didn't he? In moments of his greatest need, he says he looked up to heaven, didn't he? It was that moment when that great crowd had to be fed. How was that possible? Just through the tiny lunch of this little boy, but it says Jesus looked up to heaven.

It says in John 17, in the last moments of his life, when he knelt to pray in that garden, Jesus looked up to heaven. It was characteristic of the Lord Jesus to have this eternal dimension to his thinking. I just want to say to you this morning, is it possible that there's someone here and you've neglected that eternal dimension? You've just been living as if this world is everything.

Well, that's a mark, isn't it, surely, of those who are outside Christ to live just as if this world is everything. We're not hemmed in, thank God, with the narrow confines of this world. No, to be full of the Holy Spirit means that you know what it is to look up to heaven and to see the glory of God, to long for that more than anything else.

Here's the second thing. Not only you've got an eternal dimension to our thinking and living, but being full of the Holy Spirit, we shall constantly direct our gaze, the Holy Spirit will do this for us, direct our gaze to the victorious Christ. And not just that you look to heaven, but you look to Jesus.

It's very specific, isn't it? He looked up to heaven, saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And to be full of the Holy Spirit is to look to Christ. And that's what Luke is saying to us with great skill and artistry here.

It's not just what happened to Stephen, as it certainly did, but it happens to everyone who is full of the Holy Spirit. To be full of the Holy Spirit, what the fullness of the Holy Spirit will do is point our gaze constantly to Christ so that we shall want to adore Christ. And just, you want to look to Jesus.

Those who are full of the Holy Spirit are those who look to Christ. And this is just what he's saying. He directs our gaze, the Holy Spirit, Jesus said, is pleased to do that.

You remember that great teaching in John's Gospel about the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a Christian believer? Well, Jesus says, he will not speak of himself, he will take my things and reveal them to you. The great passion of the Holy Spirit is to point to Christ. And so this is what happens to someone who is full of the Holy Spirit.

Luke is saying, not just characteristic of Stephen's experience, but of everyone. One of the family likenesses is that we want to look to Christ. We all the time want to have our gaze pointed to Jesus so that he is the main focus of our lives.

Very fascinating, isn't it, the description here. You've lingered with it times. Many of you love your Bibles.

This very vivid phrase that Jesus was standing at the right hand of God. That's not the normal way, that's not the usual New Testament way of describing the present work of Christ, is it? The usual way is in the

magnificent letter to the Hebrews, isn't it? That is that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God. Why is that? Well, because the priest stood, didn't he, in Old Testament times, because his work was unfinished.

You only sat down when your work was done. And their work was never done in Old Testament times. But when Jesus had offered that perfect sacrifice of himself and shed his precious blood for our salvation, he sat down, the author of the epistle to the Hebrews says.

His work was done. It's finished. It's complete.

You can't add to it. You can't do anything yourself by your own works or your morals or your dreams or your prayers or your service or anything. You can't do anything to make that work of Christ more effective for you.

It's all done. It's finished and complete. So normally it says of Jesus, he sat down.

It's a reference to the finished work of Christ. But it says here he was standing. And that's very fascinating.

And I believe that's a very, very significant detail. I want to linger with it a minute or two. I just want to ask you some questions.

I don't want to dogmatize. I just want to ask you some questions. I wonder why he was standing at that moment.

Because I think it's saying important things to us. I wonder whether Jesus was standing as a welcoming friend. I mean, you go into someone's home and you haven't seen them especially for a long time and they're sat down and you're welcomed into the room.

I mean, if they've got their physical abilities about them, they stand, don't they? You do that automatically. You stand to welcome a friend. I mean, you'd never dream of you haven't seen somebody for a long time and you go into this room and you'd never dream of just sitting down.

And you say, oh, well, it's casual, isn't it? Physically, you don't have to think about it. You get up. I went to the dentist this last week.

That's a great joy in life, isn't it? Always. And it was a new dentist. I'll tell you something.

You may think this is silly. I don't have a phobia about going to the dentist. It was a new dentist.

I don't want to go to him again. Now, it's not that he did anything. Gave me an examination.

And he looked at all my teeth and he said I was OK and all that. But I'll tell you something. He never stood.

I walked into the room and he sat down and he just never stood. Now, every dentist I've known has always stood when I walked into the room. I don't, because it was me.

But he just stood and said hello. Pleased to see you. Just sit down.

But this man was absolutely casual. How are you, he said. I don't know what you see.

I thought I was rude, you see. And you would think that was rude. Because the natural thing is you just stand.

Especially if you're meeting someone for the first time. They're a new patient, you see. More so with friends.

You go into a room. You stand to welcome someone. I think that's what Jesus was doing.

I think the Lord Jesus is saying to Stephen standing up. Stephen knew that Christ was seated at the right hand of God because his work was finished. But at that moment Jesus was standing to welcome him.

He was the first Christian who was coming into heaven. Jesus stood as a welcoming friend. And my friends, we have no fear of death.

Because Jesus is waiting for us on the other side. That's what it is to have the family likeness. It's to know that he's welcoming us to his heaven.

It's to know that we're safe with him for eternity. Or, I ask you this question. Was Jesus standing perhaps as a compassionate sufferer? Was he saying to Stephen just before Stephen is going to suffer physically, terribly.

Was Jesus standing to say Stephen look at me, remember me. I went through suffering. I know what it is to suffer.

Was he saying look Stephen I can feel for you. I can enter into your pain and your anguish. I know just how you feel.

Was Jesus standing so that Stephen could identify Christ the one who had suffered but was now in heaven. There is a limit to the suffering. Or, was he standing as the truthful witness.

As a witness stands in a court. I mean, he was supposed to be there on trial. But it was a farce wasn't it? This trial.

But Jesus was standing in that court to say look Stephen, I'm standing for you. Nobody else is standing for you. Nobody else is witnessing to the reality of your faith and the genuineness of your holiness and the integrity of your message.

But I'll tell you I'm standing for you. I'm in the court that really matters and I'm standing for you as the truthful witness who knows all about you and I love you and you're one of God's children and you're redeemed and you're safe forever. And I'm witness to that great truth.

Like a witness stands. A witness can't sit down in a courtroom. You've got to stand.

Or, I ask you this question. Was Jesus standing not as the witness but the advocate? Was he standing as the defending advocate who says, look I know that they're all against you. They're resisting the Holy Spirit and they're against you but they're against you in the sense that they're against me.

But I'm standing for you and I'm pleading for you and you have an advocate with the Father and I am Jesus Christ the righteous and I'm standing as an advocate stands to plead the cause of someone in court and in the courts of heaven. Stephen, I'm standing for you. Or, I ask you this question.

Was he standing as the sympathetic intercessor? I said the priest stood and our Lord Jesus is in the presence of God where he ever lives to make intercession for us. And was he standing at that moment so

that Stephen would know as he looked up to the victorious Christ that the Lord Jesus was praying for him at that most desperate moment of his life? I ask you this question. Was he standing as the unfailing conqueror? Was he saying to Stephen by standing look Stephen I'm alive and alive forever more.

I went through the experience of death but I am here in heaven more alive than I've ever been and you will be in God's heaven. I'm standing here as the one who testifies to the fact that death is not the end but those who love me and honour me and serve me will live with me forever. I am the unfailing conqueror.

Well I'll tell you I've asked you the question. I want to accept them all. I don't just want one of them because I think that's what it means this passage it's actually saying to us that when we're full of the Holy Spirit we are those who constantly look to Christ who is the one who gives us all that ever we need in the abundance of his grace and mercy.

It's saying to us that everything we need is actually in Jesus. I think there's something else here. I think if we are full of the Holy Spirit then it not only means we have an eternal dimension to our thinking looking to heaven not only means we turn our gaze to the victorious Christ but it means that we'll be enabled full of the Holy Spirit to make bold confession of Christ in a hostile environment.

It means that we'll be enabled not just to see these great truths for ourselves but say something about these great truths. Now do you notice what it said? It says Stephen full of the Holy Spirit looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Now that could have been the end of it.

In other words this could just describe what Stephen saw. But Stephen spoke about what he saw. Look he said I see heaven open.

He's telling other people what he has seen. And the open heaven for Jewish people and that particular audience particularly would not just mean parted clouds. Open heaven was a vivid Jewish rabbinic way of expressing you'd seen a truth.

Heaven had been open to you. You've seen the reality of a great truth. And so it's saying not only that Stephen saw but Stephen said that he saw.

In other words he told other people about what he'd seen. And it's as we're full of the Holy Spirit and only as we're full of the Holy Spirit that we should be enabled in a hostile environment and sometimes an apathetic environment which well at times can be more difficult than a hostile one. Any kind of response is better than none at all.

But it will be enabled to make open confession of Christ so that what we see we shall be able to say to other people. And that's the third characteristic. And it's been a feature hasn't it of the life of this church across the years and through the decades that it's been a church with a missionary concern.

And not just a missionary concern for people who live in other lands. Vital as that is. But a missionary concern that as we were thinking last night begins at Jerusalem.

That it's been a vibrant testimony to the truth of the gospel in the locality in which this church is set. So that people who have seen the glory of God and people who have seen the beauty of Christ have said that they've seen. Look they've said.

I see. I know that this is true. And I share it with you.

I see heaven open. And the son of man standing at the right hand of God. He talks about Jesus.

And that's the point in which they cover their ears and yell at the top of their voices and grasp their stones and rush at him and cast him out of the city when he talked about Jesus. And that's one of the features of the family of God. The likeness being full of the Holy Spirit is that God's people who are truly his are those who will share their own experience of Christ.

This is how this marvelous Acts of the Apostles begins. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be witnesses unto me. And that means that being full of the Holy Spirit we should be enabled when we do that to bear reproach and rejection in the name of Christ when they dragged him out of the city.

He bore reproach and rejection. That wasn't just a physical act moving him from one part of Jerusalem to the other. It was putting him outside.

It was doing to him what they had done to his Savior outside the city wall beyond the camp. Excluding him, rejecting him, despising him, making it clear they didn't want anything to do with him. And it's only, I say to you, it's only as you're full of the Holy Spirit that you can bear that.

We all like to be liked. We don't like to be rejected. And the person who likes to be hated is a psychological abnormality actually.

And this world wouldn't go around if everybody loved to be hated. There's nothing wrong in wanting to be liked and accepted but there comes a point for all Christians where we won't be liked at every single point because to be a Christian means that at some point or other, I don't mean to say you're constantly unpopular with everybody, something wrong with you in that case, but what it does mean is that there will be points when it will be vital for us to bear reproach in the name of Christ. It will cost us something somewhere or other.

Now look, I must move on quickly. There's another feature I want to share with you. To be full of the Holy Spirit means another feature of the family likeness is you're enabled to pray in life's most desperate circumstances.

You're able to pray in life's most desperate circumstances. It's natural whatever the hostile experience of life, however dark, however painful, however bewildering, it's natural to pray. It says they began to stone him and while they were stoning him, Stephen prayed.

Luke wants you to know that. He wants us to know that a family likeness, a feature of being a Christian is the naturalness of prayer. You want to pray.

It doesn't matter how grim it is, how terrible, how painful the experience may be. While they were stoning him, imagine that. I mean, what would we have done? These great stones are hurling through the air and coming by their dozens.

It was ghastly. But in that moment, Stephen prayed, it says. The most natural thing was to talk to God.

See, that's been a feature of this church's life, hasn't it? You wanted to talk to God. Any blessing that you've enjoyed, it's because you've poured out your heart to the Lord in happy times and tough times and

difficult times, times of uncertainty and so on. That will continue to be your feature.

It must be part of the family likeness. God's redeemed people are praying people. Yes, even when they were stoning him, Stephen prayed.

Can you see what Luke is doing? Luke is not just telling us what happened to Stephen, he's describing what happens to us. We've got an eternal dimension. We don't always look at earth, we look to heaven.

We know what it is to look to the Lord Jesus every time we look at him, to see like Stephen must have done, something new and beautiful and fresh and attractive and compelling about him in all his beauty. It means that we'll be able to make confession, not just to see it, but to say that we've seen it. That we'll talk about Jesus.

It means that we'll be ready to do that whatever the cost. We'll bear reproach in the name of Christ. It means that however difficult it is, we'll be enabled to pray, even in the most desperate circumstances of life.

And here's another feature. To be full of the Holy Spirit is to be enabled to look death in the face with serene confidence. It says Stephen prayed and he said, Lord Jesus receive my spirit.

He knew that the Saviour was in charge of his life. The most natural thing was to pray and to talk to Jesus because the Lord Jesus was the one who held the keys of death and Hades. And he said, Lord Jesus you know the right moment for me to come in and to be with you forever.

Just receive my spirit at the moment when you want to welcome me to your heaven. Now I say to you, that's the family likeness. That's not natural.

A man or woman in the world, they don't talk about death. It's the forbidden subject. I mean, it's not a topic for conversation.

You talk about anything but you don't talk about death. I mean actually, if you've been at a party and you think it's too late and it's time you were all going home but nobody wants to make the first move, you know, and it's half past twelve and you think to yourself, oh dear, I wish you'd finish it. I wish somebody had the courage to go home.

I'll tell you what to do. You talk about somebody who's died. That's all you have to do.

I mean, there's nothing wrong. It's true, isn't it? They've gone. Look, it's not only true.

It's happening all the time, isn't it? Here's the third thing. It's natural, isn't it? Can you imagine of something that's true and it's natural and it's happening all the time but you're not allowed to talk about it? If you say, did you hear about so-and-so? He was ever so healthy. Well, he's just dropped dead.

He's just gone. Well, you can go for your overcoat. Actually, it's all over.

It's all finished, the party. It's all finished, you know. There's a somberness that comes about it.

That's not so with the people of God. That's not so with God's people. You don't talk about heaven as a kind of desperate place at the end somewhere.

It's the Christians' brightest prospect. John Wesley, when his old father was dying, the old man Wesley, old man Wesley, was a strange person in many, many ways but, you know, when he got to the end, he saw all the great realities of the Gospel and he said to his son, John and Charles, the great hymn writer, he said, now speak to me of heaven. Now speak to me of heaven.

That's it. To be able to look death in the face. And the people of God who worshipped here through these 100 years, that's characterized their life.

In other words, their services of thanksgiving for their lives have not been somber and miserable occasions. There have been natural sadness at the parting, of course. But there's a note of triumph.

The early Methodist people captured it, you see. Rejoice for a brother deceased. Our loss is his infinite gain.

That's it. I remember the greatest compliment that had ever been paid to me in my ministry was by an undertaker. He said to me, there are only two lots of cheerful funeral services in this town.

He said, one's at the Salvation Army and the other's at your church, he said. That was one of the greatest compliments that's ever been paid for me. He said, you know, it's really cheerful.

I have to sit at the back when all the men go out, he said. Normally it's a very miserable business. But he said, you speak with such confidence about their life and what they've done and where they're going.

He wasn't a Christian believer. But he said, they're such happy occasions. I'll tell you, that was one of the greatest compliments that I've ever heard, really.

Because it should be. Look, there's just time for me to say two final things and I just leave them with you. I won't expand them, but I leave them with you.

Listen. It's only as you're full of the Holy Spirit that you'll be enabled and I'll be enabled to be genuinely forgiving to those who bitterly oppose us. Now, wait a minute.

This is about living in this world, isn't it? And it's not about just looking to heaven. But it says that we fell on his knees. Stephen prayed.

He prayed for himself. Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. But then he prayed for those who were doing this desperate, ugly thing to him.

Lord, do not hold this sin against them. Now, I say to you, it's only as you're full of the Holy Spirit you can do that. I mean, the natural thing is to wish harm on people who are harming you, but not a Christian.

If we're full of the Holy Spirit, one of the family likenesses is not just to be prayerful and certain and confident about heaven, but one of the family likenesses is to be forgiving. That is why one of the worst offenses within the life of the people of God must be to bear an unforgiving attitude to anybody, really. Because it's contrary to the gospel that we preach.

I want to say one last thing. It's only as we're full of the Holy Spirit that we can be genuinely Christ-like to the end of our days. I think in this marvelous story, Luke is doing something very very wonderful.

He's weaving a marvelous tapestry. He's painting a beautiful picture. But he wants you to see behind it there's actually a bigger and a better picture.

Because if you look at this story, you'll see that Stephen is dying as Jesus died. Actually, if you look at the end of chapter 6 and the end of chapter 7, Luke is doing something very very deliberate. He's wanting you to see that here's somebody who's walking in the footsteps of Christ.

He's dying in the very same circumstances in which Jesus died. Now, his death is not the death and its purpose as the death of Christ, that was unique. That is, Christ died for our forgiveness.

Christ died to make an atonement. Christ died to bear the wrath of God, to bear our punishment and sin. That was unique.

But Stephen did what Jesus said. If you will follow me, you must take up your cross and deny yourself and come and step into my steps. And as I close, I just want you to think about this.

There are about a dozen things in this narrative, the end of chapter 6, the end of chapter 7. Do that sometime. Look at the end of chapter 6 and the end of chapter 7. Between those two passages is the address that Stephen gave. But if you look at the details of the way that he died, the circumstances that led to his death, you'll see that what Luke is wanting to do is say, look, he was following in the steps of Christ.

Look, he was accused by false witnesses, was Stephen. So was Jesus. They accused him of speaking against the law and against the temple, this place.

They did of Jesus. Just the same. Stephen said he saw the Son of Man.

Using those verses from Daniel 7. So did the Lord Jesus. He was brought for trial before the most outstanding religious group of the day, the Sanhedrin. So was the Lord Jesus.

It says that this crowd stirred up the people against Stephen. That's just exactly what they said about the Lord Jesus. Look, they accused Stephen of blasphemy.

They did accuse the Lord Jesus of blasphemy. It says they cast him out of the city. That's exactly what they did to the Lord Jesus.

It says the opponents of him screamed at him. They did that with the Lord Jesus. They called out and screamed and crucified him.

It says that in this experience Stephen prayed for his enemies. That's what the Lord Jesus did. Father, forgive them.

They don't know what they're doing. It says he committed his spirit to the Lord. Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

It's what the Lord Jesus said. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. It says actually that the death of this victim led indirectly to the conversion of a rebel.

That is somebody who was opposed to him. Saul was there giving approval to his death, but in the next chapter we read that this man was wonderfully converted. I believe at that moment his deep conscience

was stirred.

It says of the Lord Jesus that a rebel, a brigand, a robber said, Lord Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom. It says devout people carried Stephen to his burial. So they did with the Lord Jesus.

This is Luke's beautiful way of saying look if you're full of the Holy Spirit you'll be enabled to walk in the footsteps of Christ. You'll be able to live in the way that will honour Jesus. You will live a truly Christ-like life.

I believe we can only be truly Christ-like. That's the family likeness isn't it? To be truly like Jesus. That's surely the most wonderful thing isn't it? Is to be like Christ.

There can't be any greater ambition, can there? In the end for any Christian. I want to say of any experience, of any blessing of anything in our spiritual lives it's only of value if it makes us more like Jesus. If it makes us more like Jesus, oh I'd certainly want it.

Everything. To make us more like Christ. These are what I believe are the family likenesses.

What it means to be full of the Holy Spirit. Let's pray together. Our dear Father we do want to thank you that you have given to us this marvellous book, The Scripture of Truth.

I want to thank you that we have so many things to learn through what you have written for us in this holy and imperishable and authoritative eternal word. May I pray that you'll write your word upon our hearts and lives. Father you know we all want to be in our best moments genuinely Christ-like to the end of our days.

And so we pray that you will fill us up fresh with your gracious Holy Spirit and you'll enable us to look up to heaven and see the glory of God, your glory and to see the beauty of our Saviour. So bless us, continue with us throughout this weekend we pray that everything may truly exalt you. In Jesus' dear name Amen.

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