



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Acts 6:1 - 7:60

"Stephen: The Paul Before Paul"

TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee for the privilege of the study of Thy word and we ask that Thou will be with us as we consider again the life and ministry of that great man, the Apostle Paul. We give Thee thanks for him and for his ministry and for what he has meant to us and to countless millions down through the years. May we learn something of the principles that dominated him, and especially the spirit that dominated him as he served Thee. We pray Thy blessing on each one here. May the needs that we have, not only doctrinally but spiritually and practically, in our daily lives be met. We commit the time to Thee. In Jesus' name. Amen.

[Message] This is on a little too strongly, so if the person, a little bit more.

[Laughter] Tonight, our subject as we continue our study of the Apostle Paul is "Stephen: The Paul Before Paul." And for those of you who have your New Testaments with you turn with me to the 6th chapter of the Book of Acts, and we will say the things that we want to say tonight against the background of chapters 6 and 7 of the Book of Acts. I'd like to begin with a word of introduction, as usual, then we will talk about the encounter in the synagogue, the encounter that Stephen had before the Sanhedrin, and finally we'll

conclude with just a few comments in support of the lasting impression that Stephen had upon Paul.

Remember, in our previous studies we have considered the apostle as a man of Tarsus. We dwelt a little bit upon his background, his early years, his training. And then we looked at him as the man of Jerusalem, looking specifically at his training in spiritual things at the feet of Gamaliel, and some of the things that are related to that. After the apostle's training in the city of Jerusalem, evidently he went back to Tarsus, and he was there, it seems, during all of the time of our Lord's ministry. Or at least, so far as we know from Paul's writings, he did not have any personal contact with our Lord before his encounter with him on the Damascus Road; so momentous events had been transpiring in the Holy Land during the apostle's sojourn at Tarsus.

Now the news of the ministry of the Lord Jesus must have come to the apostle, and so he must have heard about him, and no doubt he heard the things that were very negative to him. We know that as a very active and vigorous Jewish man who advanced in Judaism beyond his contemporaries, as he says in Galatians 1, he would have gone up to Jerusalem regularly for the feasts every year. And so he must have heard a great deal about the Lord Jesus. But of course, the things that he heard were exceedingly negative. We read in the gospels that one of the things that the leaders in Judaism sought to do when Jesus came to town was to ensnare him. For example, Matthew says in the 22nd chapter in the 15th verse of his gospel, "Then went the Pharisees, and took counsel how they might ensnare him in his talk." In John's Gospel we read, "The Pharisees heard the multitude murmuring these things concerning him, and the chief priests and the Pharisees sent officers to take him. The officers came to the chief priests and Pharisees, and they said unto them, 'Why did ye not bring him?' The Officers answered, 'Never a man so spake.' So all of the things that the apostle heard from the Jewish leaders must have been about one hundred percent negative to the ministry of our Lord.

Well, if he had talked with Nicodemus there may have been some softening of the comments, but we can just imagine that the apostle only heard things that were bad about him. And so he probably rejoiced in the crucifixion and the other sufferings which our Lord was exposed to, and finally accomplished at Jerusalem. But the resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit with the conversion of the thousands to this, what Paul thought, this false teacher, this blasphemer, must have stunned him and must have upset him as it did many of the Jewish leaders. If it were true, you see, that Jesus Christ really had come forth from the grave, and if it was true that he was alive, then it followed very obviously that the crucifixion was a heinous crime and in proclaiming the resurrection, the apostles were laying a terrible indictment against the perpetrators. And of course, Paul stood with them. So he must have been upset and stunned and shocked by the reports that came to him about the resurrection, about many being attached to this false teacher, and about the preaching that was going on in the land.

Furthermore, they not only preached his resurrection, although that was their primary thrust, it appears from the Book of Acts, but they preached his second coming, too. And that had a great appeal to the people who were responsive to the message and brought a great deal of terror, no doubt, to the Ecclesiastics who were responsible in any way to the things that they were saying. Furthermore, accompanying the preaching of the resurrection and the second coming and the other things that had to do with the ministry of the Lord Jesus, were those miracles that the apostles and others were performing in testimony to the great events that were transpiring.

There is a great deal of debate over how long the miracles persisted. We actually have no first hand indication of the miracle persisting beyond the apostolic age. But some of the early teachers in the fathers did comment upon the fact that they had heard or that they themselves believe that those miracles were continuing. Chrysostom, writing in the 4th century, testifies to the fact that the miracles were continuing, and Justin Martyr and Iranaeus, who wrote in the 3rd century, and Iranaeus possibly in the latter part of the

2nd century, saying that they persisted in the 2nd century. Augustine, by the time of the 4th century, Augustine evidently does not know of the miracles persisting but he knows of some who are looking for them. And so he writes in *The City of God*, "'Why,' say they, 'are those miracles, which you declared were wrought, not wrought now?' I might indeed answer that they were necessary ere the world believed to the end that the world might believe. Whoso still seeks for the prodigies that he might believe is himself a great prodigy in that while the world believes, he does not." So Augustine said there are lots of people looking for miracles, and they're asking why we don't have miracles. And he said, "Well, the miracles were given in order that people might believe, but now they are looking for miracles, but they're a miracle, because many people are believing without the miracles and they're not believing. They're waiting for miracles." So you can see that by the time of Augustine, the idea of the miraculous had largely vanished. The reason for that is the reason that he gives.

The miracles were designed to authenticate the apostles' ministry. And when the apostles' ministry had received its full stress, then the miracles died out. And through the centuries miracles did not take place, and we have no evidence of miracles taking place from those earliest days until the claimed miracles of the 20th Century. Some claimed a bit in the 19th, but actually not until the earlier part of the 20th Century. I've always argued that if you believe in the sovereignty of God, and if you believe that he does accomplish what he intends to accomplish, the fact that we have no miracles in those centuries is evidence of the fact that he did not intend those miracles to take place. And therefore, for an individual to say that everything that was done in the 1st century ought to be done now is just very, very bad theology. And it reflects, of course, a failure to understand the fact that the God of the Bible is not a frustrated deity and he does accomplish his purposes.

Well, what happened in the land, then, afterwards? Well, the things of the ministry of the Lord Jesus had taken place, and Paul had spent a great deal of time in

Tarsus. Things were still happening in the land. The gospel was being preached by Peter and some of the men in Jerusalem. There was, of course, in the earliest stages of the Christian movement, evidence of voluntary socialism. Some Bible teachers have said that there is evidence of the initial stages of voluntary socialism, which apparently led to poverty. Because, as you know, the apostle later on in his epistles constantly talks about the poor in Jerusalem, and with tongue-in-cheek they have suggested that perhaps the reason for that is the voluntary socialism which some had manifested in the city of Jerusalem. I see that some you are not smiling at all. You don't understand the humor of that. Well, maybe you're all socialists, and you don't think that it's funny to think that the voluntary socialism led to poverty, but that is the point of the statement anyway. Well, I guess maybe you are all Englishmen, and you need to be told what the point is.

[Laughter]

Anyway, that brings us to Acts chapter 6, and we read in Acts chapter 6 in verse 1, "And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them. And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith."

In Acts chapter 6, when the writer of the history of the early church, Luke, begins the chapter, he begins it with the expression, "And in those days." That indicates a change of subject. He's introducing a new epic in the history of the church, and it will lead from the Hebrew disciples in Jerusalem to Greek Christians in Antioch. So you can see this movement in the Book of Acts. Remember, there were two kinds of Jewish people. There were those who were brought up in the land, they were trained in Judaism, and they spoke the language of the land, perhaps a form of Hebrew or even Aramaic. They were Hebrews of the Hebrews. But then there were Hebrews who had gone beyond the land and were living in places all around the Mediterranean Sea and in other places as well. And nevertheless they were Jewish, and they too were adhering to the faith. But they were speaking the other languages like Greek, and many of the customs that were practiced in the land, they were not practicing. So there were Hebrew Hebrews, and there were others who were Hellenistic Hebrews. And that's the point here when in chapter 6 we read that "There arose a murmuring of the Grecians," that means the Grecian Jews, the Hellenists, against the Hebrews, the Hebrew Jews. And it was due to the way in which the money was handled.

So Luke now is going to record a significant advance in the movement of the gospel. He's going to show how, instead of Jerusalem being the center of the Christian activity, it's going to spread out now, and soon Antioch will be the headquarters of the movement out into the world beyond Jerusalem. The Hellenistic group at Jerusalem took the lead in this, so Luke introduces his story by telling this incident that brought them to the fore. So chapter 6 begins with the difficulty about the alms and describes the appointment of the seven and the beginning of the acts of Stephen. In fact, if you wanted to entitle this section you might call it, "The Acts of Stephen."

Notice that the church selected the men, and the apostles appointed them, and it is evidence of the fact that in the early church, what the apostles did was the significant

thing. They felt free to delegate authority to the church, but in the early church, they did not have congregational rule. And, as a matter of fact, in the New Testament there is no such thing as congregational rule. Rule by elders is the biblical pattern, and one sees that here or at least sees it reflected here in this particular chapter. Occasionally, Acts chapter 6 is looked at as if the church is the one who really is taking the lead in this, but as you can see, it is the apostles who are directing or delegating the church to do certain things under their authority.

Now, among those that are chosen was Stephen. In fact, he is the first deacon, so Iranaeus, of the earliest of the Christian writers, says. He is first in the list here. He is a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. Now, let's read on from verse 7 through verse 15, and we'll notice the encounter that takes place in the synagogue. Remember, that since there were Hellenistic Jews who spoke the languages outside the land, and since there were Hebrew Jews who spoke Hebrew, it would be natural for them to have their own synagogues so that those who spoke the Hebrew language, the Aramaic or Mishnaic Hebrew, whatever was spoken by them, the Hebrew of the land. And then those who spoke Greek and other languages would meet in their synagogue. So we read in verse 8 now, verse 7 I'll read again.

"And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith. And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people. And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people. (In the original text, there is some question about this, but this probably one synagogue in which these people were meeting.) And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spoke. Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God. And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the

council, And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the Law: For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us. And all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel."

Well, this is the advance of the gospel described in verse 7. It is a brief report of progress, one might say. But in verse 8 we come to the activity of Stephen, a man whose broader Hellenistic outlook is able to see the doctrinal outreaches of the truth. Stephen is the Paul before Paul, and if, as is probably, Paul was at his trial, this is even more certainly true. The work of Stephen is seen in verse 8, and in his words in the following verses. He "did great wonders and miracles," but then he also was responsible for a certain kind of teaching. Stephen, by the way, had an opportunity to get up on the synagogue and to carry on his debates with men, simply because in the synagogue there was no one man ministry. If the synagogue had been organized like most of our churches, then Stephen never would have had anything to say. He would not have been able to say anything. He would not be able to stand up in the meeting and teach the word. It would have been under the control of the leaders, and he would never have been able to utter his objections. But in the early church, which followed the pattern of the synagogues, there was freedom for ministry. They had a meeting in which all gathered together, and they observed the Lord's Supper, and they had a time for ministry of the word, and a time for the exercise of their priesthood, which I understand some churches occasionally have. And it seems to me a very good idea. It's the kind of thing that made possible the debates that Stephen engaged in. And it's the kind of thing that made possible, also, Paul's great sermon in Antioch in Pisidia. He was able to stand up in the meeting and speak.

So here in the synagogue of the Hellenists, Stephen got up, and evidently he spoke about the significance of the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, and what had happened as a result of him. And others got up and debated with him. So, so far as I can tell, there must have been several debates, and since the apostle was from Cilicia, it's probable, too, that he would occasionally drop in on the synagogue, and this particular synagogue. And it's possible, we don't know this for sure, that he was in the city in the time in which Stephen was there. And it's even possible that he, who advanced in Judaism beyond any of his contemporaries, might have been there for some of the debates, and even might have tried his hand in arguing against Stephen.

It makes a very interesting supposition. I can just imagine that it would happen, because this often happens, you know. A Bible teacher will have a certain knowledge, and someone will have a friend that he engages in conversation with over spiritual things. And this friend asks questions that he's unable to answer, and so he goes to his friend who is the Bible teacher, and tries to get his questions answered. And then occasionally he will say, "Well, would you come and talk with them?" And I've sat in on many of these things. People have asked me would I come, and would I have a meeting. I've met with Jehovah's Witnesses, and we've had debates and Seventh Day Adventists and that kind of thing. So I just have a hunch that in the synagogue there, when they weren't able to do anything with Stephen, they said, "But Paul is in town, Paul from Cilicia is here, and he knows the Jewish faith. He's way above us. Let's get him here and let him debate with Stephen." But we read in verse 10, "And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spoke." So Stephen, who was able to speak because there was no one-man ministry, was able to speak with such power and such authority in the Holy Spirit that they were unable to answer the things that he was saying.

Now, the 10th verse may have come to us from Luke via Paul. Because Paul was a good friend of Luke, remember, and later on when Luke was writing his history, the Book of Acts, he may have said, "You know, I went into that synagogue when Stephen

was there, and I want you to know that I was unable to do anything with him. And no one could answer him, and that had great influence on me." I'm just assuming that he may have said something like that, because we do read here, "And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spoke." So someone told Luke that, and it may well have been the Apostle Paul.

By the way, one of the earlier manuscripts, which has what we call technically a western reading, goes like this, "The wisdom which was in him, they were not able to resist the wisdom which was in him, and the Holy Spirit by which he was speaking, because they were being reproved by him with all boldness, being unable then to look the truth in the face." That's in one of the early manuscripts. In fact, that tradition of New Testament manuscripts is one of the earliest, maybe the earliest. And so that's a striking testimony of expansion, paraphrase characteristic of that kind of text, but expansion of the fact that Stephen frustrated those who were trying to argue with him.

Well, there follows then the encounter before the Sanhedrin. The arrest of Stephen follows. False witnesses were procured to testify against him. It appears from the evidence that Stephen's claims were closely related to the words of our Lord in Mark chapter 14. Now, if you have a New Testament turn back to Mark chapter 14, and notice this particular verse, verse 58, Mark 14, verse 58. Now, the Jewish men here are saying what they have heard Jesus say. Verse 58, "We heard him say, I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands." So notice, that in our Lord's teaching the associated the destruction of the temple with it, and also destruction of the teaching of Judaism, because it was bound up with the temple.

Now, as you look at Stephen and the charge that was laid against him. Well, he was evidently charged with two specific accusations. First of all, "We have heard him speaking blasphemous words against Moses, and God," verse 11 of chapter 6. "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God." Now, what do you think that means, "Blasphemous words against Moses, and against God?" Now, we

know Stephen well enough to know that he would not blaspheme the Law of the Old Testament, because so far as we know, Stephen had the same opinion of the Law that the apostle did. The Law was holy, just, and good. But he must have said something to cause them to have this twisted idea that he was speaking blasphemous words against Moses. I suggest to you that what he was saying was simply this, "We are not under the Law of Moses any longer. Since Jesus died, and since the veil of the temple has been rent in twain, we are no longer under the Mosaic Law as a code, we are under the Holy Spirit and we are responsible to follow him as he is set forth in the teaching of the apostles and the teaching of our Lord applicable to us. So they interpreted that. They misinterpreted that as being blasphemous words against Moses. For to say Moses is not our guide is to speak blasphemy in their eyes, since they don't recognize the tremendous change of age that took place when the Lord Jesus died.

Now, there are lots of people who are critical of dispensationalism, and some things about dispensationalism are not so good. But there is one thing about dispensationalism that we should praise them for, and that is that they have properly stressed the distinction in the ages of the Law and the age of the church. That's a very important principle and one cannot read the New Testament if he does not constantly remember that when Jesus died on the cross the age of the Law was done away with, and the age of the church is to begin. And when the coming of the Holy Spirit takes place on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is the new guide for the Christians. Now, that's a very important principle. If dispensationalism had only stressed that one thing, it would have been a good thing that it taught the things that it has taught. So let us not forget that.

The second charge that is laid against Stephen is, this is verse 13, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the Law." Now, you can see that if you put those things together, "blasphemous words against Moses," well that's explained by verse 13, "against this holy place and the Law." But I did not say

anything about "blasphemous words against Moses and God." Now, surely Stephen, from what we know of him, did not say any blasphemous words against God. What did he say? Well, in verse 13 it says he spoke words against this holy place. Now, what is this holy place? Well, that of course, is the temple, and the temple area. So when they heard him saying that the temple is going to be done away with, as our Lord prophesied not a stone would be left upon it. And further, that the Law has been done away with, and therefore all of the ceremonies that were carried out in connection with the Jewish Old Testament ritual, they would be done away. That is the same for them as speaking against God, for it is God who instituted the Mosaic ritual. But not understanding those principles you can see then why they laid these charges against Stephen.

Of course, well some people preach hard and some don't. Some batter pulpits to pieces and others are a little different. Have you ever seen John Knox's pulpit in Edinburgh? It's got a big hole in it. It's where he used to hit the pulpit like this, and you can see the hole in the pulpit. It's a round place. He would hit it constantly like this. Well, I don't know that his whole pulpit ever fell down two feet when he did that. [Laughter] Anyway, the two charges arising out of his words about the temple are really one if we make a couple of deductions. And that is, that Stephen's words against Moses were really for the removal of the temple and the overthrow of the legal system. And they were against God and the holy place, because as I've said, he was trying to show that those rituals were not going to be carried out any longer.

The concluding thing that I want you to notice in chapter 6 is found in verse 15 where we read, "And all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel." Now, that is very significant and there may be some connection between this incident and Moses experience in the Old Testament, remember, where he went in before the Lord. He removed his veil. He was given instruction, the Law, by God. He came out and he spoke to the children of Israel, and they of course were astonished to see the brightness of his shining face. He had spent time in the

presence of the Lord. So Moses put on a veil when he talked with the children of Israel. Paul says later that they "might not see evidence of the vanishing of the Law." He sees significance in it. So in a sense, what we have here is a new prophet, a new prophet, Moses had promised one, whose face shines with the light of the new covenant instead of the old covenant. And the test for Israel is will you respond to this new prophet of the new covenant as you say you did to the old Prophet Moses, whose face faded with the light of the old covenant. And when we remember that Moses had prophesied that a new prophet would one day rise up, the Lord Jesus, we can understand that God is still speaking to the nation here giving them last opportunities to respond in repentance.

Years later, I think the Apostle Paul learned the secret of the shining of the glory on Stephen's face, and that it was related to the new covenant, because in 2 Corinthians 3 that's what he talks about. And furthermore, don't we read in Acts 22:20, "And when the blood of thy martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, and consenting unto his death, and kept the raiment of them that slew him." I wonder if there is any relationship between this event and the description of Paul that is given in one of the second century documents. It's called "The Acts of Paul." It's not an inspired document, and it relates only tradition about Paul. But in it there is a description of Paul, which goes like this, "Full of grace, for at times he looked like a man, and at times he had the face of an angel." So even in the second century there is some connection made between Paul and Stephen.

Well, whether there was any kind of connection like that, we know there was a connection in their theology. Later on, what did they say of Paul? In Corinth, in Acts chapter 18 they said, "This fellow persuadeth men to worship God contrary to the Law." So you can see this strain of teaching concerning the Law. It's evident in our Lord's ministry, but it is particularly evident in Stephen, and then it's evident in Paul. And of course will be fully explained in the writings of Paul in Galatians, and 2 Corinthians, and also in the Epistle to the Romans. Augustine says "The church owes Paul to the prayer of

Stephen," but the church also owes a significant facet of Paul's theology probably to Stephen also.

Now, that brings us to the sermon of Stephen which is found in chapter 7. It's a lengthy sermon and we don't have time to read through it. He's answering the charge that he had spoken words against the temple and against the Law. And so, in answer to the first charge he simply points out that God dealt with men before there was a temple. So it's not necessary to be in fellowship with God to have a temple. In other words, the temple came on the scene later. And the divine unfolding of salvation was in evidence, and was being carried out before there was a temple. In answer to the second charge he reminds his audience that God has dealings with the people before Moses. And in fact, he said Moses pointed forward to someone else who would come to Jesus Christ.

Well, let me just describe the sermon. First of all, his defense is given. This is really the topic of his sermon, but the defense is found in chapter 7, verse 1 through verse 50. The entire sermon is something of a historical retrospect to show that grace supercedes the sacrifices and the ceremonies. Campbell Morgan wrote, "The argument itself was an interpretation of history from the heights." So what he did was just to look back and say, "Take a look at your history and see what your history tells you." Arthur T. Pierson, many years ago at the ecumenical conference of foreign missions in New York City, said, "History was *his* story, if a man can climb high enough to read it." That's very true. If we could just remember as we read the Bible that we are reading the divine interpretation of human history. Everything that happens is really his story. Everything is part of the overall plan of God. That means Mr. Reagan is President by the plan of God. Jimmy Carter was President by the plan of God, bad plan you might say, [Laughter] but nevertheless it was the plan of God, so all of these things are designed to teach us spiritual things. So if we look at history properly we will see the hand of God in it. That's what Stephen does; he looks back and he says, "Look at your own history and you will see that what I am saying is not contrary to the word of God." He works through the

patriarchal period to indicate that God worked before the temple, and there was opposition then, too. He said it's characteristic of people to oppose God. Men are sinners, of course. He then takes up the Mosaic and legal period in verse 17 through verse 43. He points out that Moses' experience parallels Christ. And furthermore, Moses himself said his revelation was not final and there was someone else who was to come.

And finally he refers to the tabernacle temple period in verse 44 through verse 50, and indicates that the tabernacle, not the temple, was appointed by God. Even Solomon and the prophets show that the temple was not permanent. Someone has said, "The temple was a royal whim tolerated by God." God never said, "Have a temple." It was something he only tolerated, because David had the idea of building a temple. And God said, "No, I'll not let you, you're a bloody man. You won't build it." Solomon built the temple, but it was not God's direct intended will in the sense that that's what he preferred, as the account makes very plain.

In fact, Israel was never better with a king, they were better without a king. And the fact that they wanted a king was an indication of failure on their part. He was their king, the Lord Jehovah. And of course, that's always best. I think I see a little of that in our churches. We like to have a local king. Some churches cannot get along if they don't have the pastor. Someone says, "Who's your pastor?" "We don't have a pastor?" "You don't have a king? How can you get along if you don't have a king?" Well, that's so foolish, so ridiculous, because if you'll just study through the Bible you will see that that was not God's preference. He wanted them to be under him. He was their king.

Well, Stephen's just given them a lesson in Bible teaching, but then in verse 51 through verse 53 we read of the attack of Stephen. I'll read these words, because they are very vivid. He says, "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears." By the way, that's the very term that Moses used of Israel in the Old Testament in Exodus chapter 33.

"Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers: Who have received the Law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it."

So they were guilty of disobedience to the Law, and they were guilty of externalizing the Law. They are following in the footsteps of their fathers. And their fathers are the ones who announced beforehand the coming of the Messiah, who is of course the Lord Jesus Christ.

Well, the death of Stephen is described in verse 54 and following, and so the second death, but the first martyrdom takes place in the Christian community. They couldn't answer him, but they could break his bones, and they did. And Christ rose to meet him as he made his way to heaven. We read in verse 54,

"When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul."

Well Stephen, of course, died the death of a martyr. The first of the Christian martyrs. George Bernard Shaw said it was "a pardonable way to suppress a tactless and conceited bore." But I would dare say that George Bernard Shaw is sorry that he made

such a statement now, while Stephen is enjoying the glory of the presence of the Lord. And where G. B. Shaw is I do not know.

It was the custom to stone to death in a very unusual way. I will say this for the Jewish people, they tried to make it impossible for a person to suffer the stoning, but this is what happened. When then trial was finished, the convicted man was brought out to be stoned. It was to take place outside the court, and when he was ten cubits from the stoning place they called upon him to confess. And if he confessed that he had been wrong, then they would say to him that "You will have a share in the world to come." In other words, "You'll go to heaven." But four cubits from the stoning place they stripped him, and then they took him to a place like a cliff or a large hole that was at least twice as deep as his height. They stood him by the side of it, and one of the witnesses pushed him in, and then they turned him over on his face, and then another witness would take a tremendous stone and drop it on him on his heart, hoping that if he had not been killed by what happened previously, that this would stop his heart. But then if that didn't, then all the witnesses would throw giant stones upon him and thus stone him to death. This is the kind of execution that they carried out in the case of Stephen.

Well, yesterday I read a very interesting little review by B.B. Warfield of the life of George Pervis, a Princeton Theological Seminary professor who died as a relatively young man. And he wound up his story of the life of Professor Pervis, who was also an outstanding preacher, by commenting on his early death. "It would be cruel for us to begrudge him at last his well earned rest. His body is at peace in holy ground. His spirit is at peace where angels kneel." I love that expression, "His spirit is at peace where angels kneel." Well, that's where Stephen is, and the Lord Jesus rose up from his seat in order to greet him.

Well, let me just say one or two things in just a moment. What is the evidence of the lasting impression of Stephen upon Paul? Well, one gains the impression from some of the things that are said right here in this account, verse 58 for example, and cast him

out of the city and stoned him and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet whose name was Saul. By the way, a young man, a neanias man, the Greek word is neanias, was a man anywhere from twenty-four to forty. Furthermore, Paul alludes to this later on. It must have made an impression upon him. In Acts chapter 22, in verse 20, and one also might compare Acts chapter 26 and verse 10. Stephen's death had a negative effect upon Paul, and that is evidenced by the immediately following words in chapter 8, "And Saul was consenting unto his death." And then verse 3, "As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison." It's almost as if the death of Stephen, with his ministry, just enraged the apostle even more against the Christians. And the word translated here made havoc is a word that was used of animals ravaging a vineyard, and of savaging bodies, human bodies, too. And I think it probably is a reflection of the fact that Apostle Paul, this proud Pharisee, this proud Hebrew of the Hebrews, had been bested in those debates in the synagogue, and he was just taking it out on those who were followers of Stephen. And it won't be long, of course, before he will identify with him, and he too will be dragged out of cities in order to be stoned to death.

For the positive impact, well we are left to conjecture in the final analysis. It's true that Stephen prayed for Paul. He said, "Lay not this sin to their charge." He prayed for other murderers as well. Augustine remarks concerning this. He says, "Si sanctus Stephanus sic non orasset, ecclesia Paulum non haberet." Now, for those of you who remember a little bit of your Latin, that means, "If holy Stephen had not prayed, the church would not have Paul." I find myself thinking, too, that Paul's conversion is closely related to Stephen's testimony. We know the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. And in the case, the church had evidently broken with traditional Judaism.

Stephen was indeed a man before his time. He was the Paul before Paul, a great man, a great deacon, a great evangelist, and a great servant of the Lord. His life ought to be an inspiration to all of us, and to make us realize that it is important for us to stand up

for the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's true, Stephen lost his life at a very young age, but who remembers the Jewish people who were the ones who stoned him to death. We remember Stephen; his name will sound down through the ages of eternity as the first Christian martyr. What a place in the history of the church. Let's bow in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are thankful to Thee for the testimony of Stephen, this man full of faith and full of the Holy Spirit. Oh Lord, give us something of that, too. Give us the courage of our convictions. Enable us to be unafraid to give testimony to Jesus Christ. Lord, use us to that end...

[RECORDING ENDS ABRUPTLY]