



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

6420 Churchill Way | Dallas, Texas | 75230 | t 972.239.5371 | believerschapeldallas.org

The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Acts 7:54–8:1

“The Stoning of Stephen”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] We’re turning to Acts chapter 7 in verse 54, and reading for our Scripture reading verse 54 through the 1st sentence of chapter 8 in verse 1. For those who may not have been here, over the past few weeks, we have been studying the life of Stephen, in a sense. We have taken a look at Stephen and his ministry, before he was seized by men and brought before the Sanhedrin. And then, in our last study, we looked at his magnificent sermon, given for us in the first 53 verses of chapter 7 of Acts. And now, we look at his stoning.

And Peter [*sic*; Stephen] has just reached the climax of his message, and it’s a very harsh climax, one might think, but a very true one. He has accused his audience of being stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, accusing them of always resisting the Holy Ghost, “Just as their fathers did, so are you,” he said. Then he asks the question, “Which of the prophets have not your father persecuted? And they have slain them, those very ones that showed you the coming of the Just One, beforehand, and now you have become betrayers and murderers of the one that the prophets spoke about.” And then, to make it as bad as it possibly could be, so far as they are concerned, because they put a great deal of trust in keeping the law and living by the Law he said, “You have received the law by the disposition of angels, and you have not kept it.” Then in verse 54, Luke continues the story.

“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. And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’”

Now, if you have an Authorized Version, you’ll notice that word ‘God’ is in italics. There is no God in the original, simply the statement that Stephen was calling upon and God is supplied as being true to the context. Perhaps it means, simply, calling upon our Lord, and saying “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” And then, Luke says:

“And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, ‘Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”

And now, the first line, the first sentence of verse 8:

“And Saul was consenting unto his death.”

May the Lord bless this reading of his Word. Let’s bow together in a moment of prayer.

[Prayer] Our Heavenly Father, we are deeply touched by this incident that we have just read about. And as we reflect upon the life of this, evidently, young man, Stephen, full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and as we look at his life, so often we think that Stephen was taken away in the prime of his testimony; and sometimes we think that perhaps Thou shouldest have let him stay with us, for

surely he would have been a fruitful servant. But Lord, we forget that Thou art in control of the affairs of life and what a marvelous testimony this young man did give and how wonderful for him that having given his testimony, as the first of the great Christian martyrs, he should be taken immediately into Thy presence, in evidence of Thy love and concern for him. We are grateful, Lord, for the sense of the control of history that we see in Thy hands. And we thank Thee that the same experiences may be evident in our own lives.

And as we face the future, O Lord, enable us to face the future in the faith of Stephen, who sensed and knew that spiritual things are the most real things in our lives. Enable us, Lord, to evaluate our lives in the light of the spiritual things, in the light of the eternal things, and enable us to serve Thee wholeheartedly in the time that Thou dost give us. We pray for this assembly of believers and friends and visitors, and we ask, O God, that Thou wilt minister to each one present, many needs are represented here. O God, we pray that Thou wilt through the Holy Spirit, confront and give conviction and conversion through the power of the Holy Spirit as the need may exist. If there are those here, who do not know our Lord, may they leave with the knowledge of Him.

For those of us, Lord, who do know Thee, but who need to serve Thee more perfectly, we pray that Thou wilt give us fresh views of the reality of our Triune God and the reality of spiritual things. Deliver us, Lord, from worldliness and fleshliness, and enable us to give ourselves more completely to Thee. We thank Thee and praise Thee for the church of Jesus Christ. We pray Thy blessing upon every member, wherever they may be today, in whatever church they may be in. And for those, Lord, who are preaching the true Word of God, bless them richly. Give them fruit. May the whole body be strengthened and built up and increased, in accordance with Thy will. We pray for this assembly, for its leaders, its elders, who need our petitions, its deacons, its members and friends. We thank Thee, especially, for those whose names are in our calendar of concern and, Lord, we ask that Thou wilt minister to them in these hours of trial and difficulty. Lord, be to them what Thou hast said that Thou art in the Scriptures, “the Shepherd of our souls.” May their hearts turn to Thee and receive from Thee in their experience of difficulty and tribulation. We pray for our country. We

ask, Lord, Thy blessing upon our President, and for those associated with him in government. We commit this meeting to Thee and we ask, Lord, that we may have the experience of Thy presence with us.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.

[Message] Today, we are concluding our brief study of Stephen, the preaching deacon, Mr. Crown, because that's the name of Stephen. Remember, *stephanos*, the Greek Word that means crown. We've said that he was an important and remarkable New Testament character, from three standpoints: from the practical, everyday living standpoint, Stephen is the first Christian martyr; not the first martyr for divine truth, but the first Christian martyr, the first church martyr.

Theologically, he was the first great Christian apologist, too. And some of the great apologists afterwards follow in Stephen's shoes. He was perhaps the most enlightened teacher of his time, outstripping the pillars of the church, James and John and Peter. It seems, from pondering Stephen's words that he understood better than any of them the fact that the Christian church is not under the Law of Moses, as a code. And, also, that we worship God, now, not in a particular place, as the Lord Jesus had said in his interview with the woman of Samaria, “Salvation is of the Jews, but the time is coming when men shall worship Him in Spirit and in truth, and there will be no particular location upon the earth, where worship is to be carried out.”

If you read the Old Testament, you'll see how important Jerusalem was. That was the place where worship was to be carried out. But, now, worship is to be done in spirit and in truth, wherever the disciples and believers of our Lord exist.

Historically, Stephen is also the link between Peter and Paul, joining the Hebrew Christian disciples of Jerusalem to the Greek Christian disciples in Antioch. And as we read through the book of Acts, we will note that the headquarters of the Christian movement will move from Jerusalem to Antioch. It's from Antioch that the sprint of the Gospel will take its course.

Now, we looked at his seizure, when in the synagogues of the Hellenistic Jews, he had been teaching and had been teaching in such remarkable power that they were not able to resist the wisdom and spirit with which he spoke. We saw that men illegally took him before the council. And there before the council, he delivered his great sermon. And as men looked at Stephen, as he stood before the council, they thought that they saw an angel. One cannot help but think that, evidently, in Stephen’s case, there was some fulfillment of that magnificent text in 2 Corinthians chapter 3, when Paul wrote to the Corinthians and said to them, “But we all with open face beholding, as in a glass, the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.”

Evidently, the Lord was helping Stephen as he stood before the council and gave his magnificent testimony to the Lord Jesus Christ. What he did, in a sense, was to go back and interpret Israel’s history from the standpoint of heaven, and then in his sermon, laying great stress upon the fact that the law is no longer the code by which believers live, and that Jerusalem is no longer the place. He preached the Lord Jesus Christ. He preached him, we said last Sunday, in his types. For when he told the story of Joseph and Joseph’s rejection, and then the story of Moses and Moses’ rejection, and then he led up to the climax and said that “They have persecuted the prophets who showed before of the coming of the Just One.” It was evident that against this background he was trying to show them that they were reacting just as their fathers had done to the revelation of God, in Old Testament times.

Well, it was a kind of sermon that courted death. It was the kind of sermon that a man, in the days of the Christian church preaches only after he has already been called to another church or else he has an independent source of income and is not dependant upon the congregation at all. It was a sermon that courted death and that is, of course, what he received. The death came. So, now, today, we’re finishing up the story of Stephen and we come to his stoning. And there are some other lessons that appear here, too. They are of perhaps a more practical nature.

I don't really like the word “practical.” You know, when you go to theological seminary, you study practical theology, and then you study systematic theology, also. Now, to my mind there's nothing more practical than systematic theology. And, I'd like to say, for the benefit of those of you in the audience who may have gone to theological seminary and studied practical theology, if practical theology is taught properly, it should be taught systematically. So when we talk about practical theology, we're really talking about things that concern everyday life not things that are practical and systematic theology is impractical. It's not that at all.

But these lessons are lessons that touch our daily life in a very significant way. For example, we learn in Stephen's life the reality of the unseen, the supremacy of the spiritual over the material. Our life, we should remember, is really just a vapor. We tend to think we have so many years to live. Now, I don't tend to think that. I get up in the morning and I look in the mirror and I say, “You don't have many years left.” [Laughter] But I remember, when I was your age, and I got up and I looked in the mirror, and it never dawned upon me that there might come a time when I was old. Oh, I knew that that would be down the way, but it was so far away I put it off from me.

It's good for us to remember, when we are young, that our life is but a vapor. I've taught in theological seminaries for thirty-five years now, and I very frequently in the years of teaching, I would say to the young men who were sitting in front of me, “Now, I'm going to be in heaven before you. And I'm happy over that. That I'm going to be in heaven before you.” And they would all laugh and smile. And, I'm sure they thought, yes, that is true. And, generally, of course, it is true. But I would say to them and say to you, too, there are many of my students who are in heaven, and I'm not there yet.

In fact, when I first began teaching, about the first year or two, when I finished teaching, one bright young man, with great prospects, became head of a theological seminary and Bible college. He's been with the Lord for twenty-five years now. So we never know when our time in the will of God will come.

Stephen is a great lesson for us. The things that really count are the things that are unseen and spiritual. Let us never forget that. Our life, the Psalmist describes as a vapor. Now, a vapor doesn't stay with us very long. And looked at in the light of eternity, we have a very short time to live. That's one thing we learn. So many Christians go through life with one foot in the world and one foot in the things of the Lord. They live carelessly; they live at ease. I know I've experienced that. It's one of the things that I would like to finally gain the victory over, so that I could really look at my life and say, “I think that by the grace of God I'm living to the glory of God now.”

Another thing that we learn from Stephen is what happens when a Christian dies. It's a beautiful incident in that it tells us exactly what happens when a Christian dies. His spirit goes to be with the Lord. His body falls asleep. In other words, the body is placed in the grave; we go to be with the Lord. The Christian church has never believed in soul-sleep. The great mass of the Christian church, in orthodoxy, has never accepted such a thing as limbo or purgatory. We have believed that when we die, our spirits go to be with the Lord. Our bodies are placed in the grave, awaiting the bodily resurrection. So to put it in a catch-phrase that you may remember, I'm sure that you've already heard it before, the Christian church believes not in soul-sleep but body-sleep, the body sleeps; we go to be with the Lord, as believers in him. And for those who are not Christians, there is no such thing as soul-sleep for you. You are reserved and held under punishment for the day of the final judgment. And then you face an eternity of separation from the Lord God. The Bible speaks of it in the terms of the lake of fire, everlasting judgment, and such other terrible expressions as that. Stephen lets us know what happens to a Christian, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. What a magnificent future we have. And, of course, we learn from Stephen how a Christian should die. He dies courageously. He dies at peace. He dies boldly. He dies proclaiming the grace of God in the Lord Jesus Christ. “And God sustained His servant, and gave him a magnificent vision as he died.”

Well, looking at our passage, you'll notice the rage of the council in verse 54, “When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart and they gnashed on him with their teeth.” As Stephen

preached, the temper of the council moved from an initial interest; for he was a new voice. We're always interested in hearing a new voice, aren't we? They heard Stephen. I know that some of them were initially interested in the things that he said. Then as Stephen continued and it became more evident that he was going to press upon them the necessity of making a decision in their lives, their initial interest turned to consternation. And, finally, it rose to what might be called an animal rage, for the words that are used to describe their attitude are words that would be used to describe a buzz saw.

His words cut upon them and in them, like a buzz saw. In fact, that expression, “They were cut to the heart,” was a word the root of which is used to describe the death of Isaiah, as one who was sawn asunder. So they were cut to heart like a buzz saw. And the teeth of those who were hearing him, speaking figuratively for the word is used of “the clattering of wolves teeth,” when they are angry, and also of “chills and fever,” which most of us have experienced at one or another time, they actually were gnashing upon him with their teeth and grinding their teeth in anger at the things that he was saying.

George Bernard Shaw, who would never have been a member of any good evangelical church, not only because he would not have wanted to be, but also because they would not have wanted him as a member in spite of the fact that he was well known to all of us, summed up the contents of Stephen's message in this way, “A quite intolerable speaker named Stephen delivered an oration to the council in which he first inflicted on them a tedious sketch of the history of Israel, with which they were presumably as well acquainted as he, and then reviled them in the most insulting terms as “stiff-necked and uncircumcised.” Finally, after boring and annoying them to the utmost bearable extremity, he looked up and declared that he saw the heavens opened and Christ sitting on the right hand of God. This was too much. They threw him out of the city and stoned him to death. It was a severe way of suppressing a tactless and conceited boor. It was pardonable and human, in comparison to the slaughter of poor Ananias and Sapphira.”

Now, there is a great man’s attitude toward Holy Scripture and towards Stephen. My, how ignorant can you be of divine truth and yet be an intelligent man. In the first place, Stephen didn’t bore them at all. They were, obviously, so caught up in what he said that they were willing to put him to death at the end. They heard the things that he was saying and, therefore, they reacted as they did. And, furthermore, as one well-known commentator points out, one thing that the Jewish people loved to do was to go back over their past history. It was not a tedious thing for them to hear someone interpret the history of Israel to them. They were very much interested in that because they were the covenant people, the people to whom God had given the great covenants of the Old Testament.

You see, it’s possible for even a wise man to totally misunderstand Holy Scripture. That’s something we need to remember. It is not because we are wise that we understand Scripture. It is when an individual comes to the recognition that he is lost and then to the acceptance of the Lord Jesus as personal Savior, through the illumination of the Holy Spirit that leads to regeneration and faith, he comes to understand things. Until that takes place, even the wisest of men are in spiritual darkness. The natural man receiveth not the things of the spirit of God; they are foolishness to him. Neither can he know them for they are spiritually discerned. Mr. Shaw was a natural man; he did not understand.

Well, then, Stephen has his great vision. He’s controlled by the Spirit, so we read, “Full of the Holy Ghost, he looked up steadfastly into heaven and saw the glory of God.” Remember, he began his sermon with a reference to the God of glory, who appeared to Abraham. And, now, at the end of his sermon, he looks up and sees the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God.”

It was, of course, a magnificent moment of comfort for Stephen because in the midst of the most terrible experience, he has the encouragement of seeing the glory of God and seeing the Lord

Jesus into whose hands he had committed himself, standing at the right hand of God, as if to welcome the first Christian martyr to heaven.

I think, there’s also something else about this “standing.” You go back in the Old Testament and you will find that the Lord Jesus is referred to as Son of Man in Daniel chapter 7 in verse 14. There, Daniel is given the vision of the Son of Man, who comes to the Ancient of Days, sitting upon his throne, and receives a kingdom. And then later on, other details are given which indicate that receiving of the kingdom is something that will, ultimately, be manifested at the advent of the Son of Man.

Now, I don’t know whether you know this or not, probably, in your reading of Scripture you’ve seen this; the favorite term that Jesus used of himself was the term Son of Man. He used that term more than any other to describe himself. Scholars have puzzled over that for generations. They are still puzzling over it. If anyone was going to say, “I’m going to write a doctoral dissertation on Son of Man,” he would be told by any self-respecting New Testament scholar, “You will never be able to read the literature on that topic. There is too much and it is still being written upon.” Son of Man, the clue, many recognize in that Daniel passage. The term, Son of Man is a term that describes the Lord Jesus on the way to the reception and manifestation of his kingdom. And that’s what Stephen sees. He’s the only one who calls our Lord, Son of Man, after our Lord speaks of himself as Son of Man.

There are a couple of expressions, later on, that are similar, but this is the only time in which anyone addresses our Lord as Son of Man. Now, since the Son of Man is the one who receives the kingdom and manifests his kingdom in his Second Advent, and brings his kingdom, overthrowing the enemies of God, I suggest to you, just as a suggestion, that when our Lord stood up at the right hand of the Father, and welcomed Stephen, he was not only welcoming him as the first Christian martyr, but he was encouraging him and others that the time is coming when the Son of Man will arise from the right hand of the Father, come at the direction of God, and finish his mediatorial work by overthrowing the enemies of God, establishing his kingdom, and serving as the Messianic King.

So this was, I say, a magnificent vision. He says, “I see the heavens opened, I see the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

Now, I say, there may be some significance in the fact that our Lord stood to welcome him. One well-known Scottish preacher said, “Faith sometimes acts in a very willful way upon our Lord. He rose to greet this first martyr for, you see, he’s sitting at the right hand of the throne of God because he’s finished his redemptive work. But, he rises to greet Stephen.”

Well, faith does sometimes, it seems from the human standpoint, act in a very willful way upon our Lord, but we know enough theology, I hope in Believers Chapel, to know that there is nothing that transpires apart from the decretive determinative will of God. And we may sense through our prayers that certain things are done in a remarkable way, but, afterwards, we learn that God had planned things that way.

Now, there follows then after this comment of Stephen, when he says he saw the glory of God, and he saw the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God, there follows the lynching of Stephen. That’s a very hard term to use, but that is exactly what it was. Lynch law comes into effect. And we know, of course, that the Jews did not have authority to put a man to death; and so, it might appear as we read this, and so far as I know that’s the way it was, that they were so carried away with anger at the things that Stephen was saying that they illegally put him to death. And the master of ceremonies at the lynching of Stephen in his stoning is the apostle-to-be, Paul himself.

The custom of stoning was a very brutal custom. It was the custom for those who were the witnesses to appear and witness against the individual. And after they had witnessed against the individual, they were the ones who were to cast the first stones. And when the decision was reached to stone, as a result of the sin of blaspheme and other specific sins, the individual who had been charged and accused and convicted was then taken out of the council to the place where he would be stoned. Usually it was a place that had a cliff, or at least a large pit, and about ten cubits, according to Mishnaic Law, later. About ten cubits from the pit, he was asked if he would confess. And he was assured that if he were to confess his sin that he would have a place in the world to come. In other

words, he would be saved spiritually, even though he must die physically. Then when they came closer to the pit, he was stripped of his clothes and then someone pushed him into the pit. He was turned over so that his face was up, and then a large stone was taken and dropped upon his heart.

Now, if the individual died when the large boulder was dropped upon his heart, then nothing else was done. But if he was still living, then the whole congregation was required to stone him to death. And Stephen experienced the stoning to death. So they cast him out of the city, they stoned him, the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man’s feet, whose name was Saul and they stoned him. And as they stoned Stephen to death he called out and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

Now, I want you to notice how similar this is to the words of our Lord. They are very interesting because in the first place, remember, that Jesus when he died said, “Father, into Thy hands I commit my spirit.” Our Lord addressed the Father. Stephen addresses the Lord Jesus. Isn’t it striking? The Christian church never felt any difficulty in our Lord addressing the Father and Stephen addressing the Lord Jesus because the early church regarded the Lord Jesus as possessing the same nature as the Father, as being himself very God of very God. And so for Stephen to address our Lord as “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,” the early Christians thought that that was perfectly proper. They were not Unitarians. If they had been Unitarians, then, of course, they would not say, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” He did not have the authority to do that. Unitarianism is something that an individual can live by but it’s not something that a person can die by. Unitarianism is contrary to the teaching of the Word of God.

Donald Grey Barnhouse many years ago was preaching in the West, preaching on what happens to individuals after they die. He commented upon the fact that he had passed a church in Detroit, which had the name The Church of the Divine Paternity. And, underneath, there was a sign that said, “We believe in the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and salvation by character.” And then, Dr. Barnhouse said, “That is a Unitarian kind of church. We believe in salvation by character. We believe in the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man.” Then, he

went on to say, “We’re saved only by the work that Jesus did. We often sing,” he said, “Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe, sin had left a crimson stain, he washed it white as snow.” And then, Dr. Barnhouse paraphrased the way some sing it. “Jesus paid it ninety percent, only ninety percent to him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain, he washed it light pink.”

Our Lord has accomplished the whole of the saving work that should be accomplished. Dr. Barnhouse was getting along in years when he preached this sermon. I imagine he was about fifty years of age. [Laughter] And he said, “If I should happen to be hit by an auto and am in the hospital, you might say, ‘He’s sinking.’ You’d never be more wrong. I’ll be rising,” he said. “If I died you might look upon my body and say, ‘He certainly looks natural.’ You’d be right. I’d never be more natural than then. For only my body is there; while my spirit is with the Lord.” Then he went on to say that to illustrate the truth that in death we come into the presence of the Lord in a very special way, he said, “Let’s imagine a family that has a son who is away, perhaps serving in the service, and you may hear the parents say things like, ‘When John comes home, he will do this,’ or ‘When John comes home, he will do that.’ But, finally, when John comes up on the porch of that home, they will say, ‘Why, John, you’re here.’ They move from the third person to the second person.” And he said, “Have you ever read Psalm 23, with that in mind? ‘The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness, for His name’s sake.’ But now the Psalmist will speak of death. ‘Ye, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.’ Nor ‘for He will be with me,’ but ‘for Thou will art with me. Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.’ It’s almost as if when he thinks of death he thinks of a more personal relationship with the Lord.”

So Stephen says, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” When the time comes for us to die, Unitarianism will not help us. What we need is faith in the Triune God and faith in the second person, our magnificent Savior, who is God over all, blessed forever, as the Apostle Paul puts it. And, I want you to notice another thing about this marvelous statement of Stephen’s. He said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” So far as Stephen was concerned, there was no other mediator than the

Lord Jesus. He did not shout out, “Ave Maria, blessed Virgin, help me?” Mary cannot help in that moment. He did not say, “O, Michael and all the angels,” though we name churches after such, “Help me?” “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

As a matter of fact, he doesn't say anything about his good works. He doesn't say, “Lord, I thank Thee that Thou hast seen my good works and now you will receive me into heaven in the light of them.” He doesn't say, “Lord, I thank you, that if I were living in nineteen hundred and eighty-four, I would be a member of Believers Chapel and I know you would receive men and women from Believers Chapel.” No. It's nothing but, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” He is trusting simply in our Lord. I like, also, what follows. We read, “And he kneeled down and cried with a loud voice, “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.” They killed his body, but his spirit vanquished them. The real conqueror in Stephen's death is Mr. Crown, himself. You might have thought that Stephen was overcome and that the physical overcame the spiritual, because didn't they put him to death, didn't they throw him in the pit, didn't they stone him to death, and there was nothing left but that physical body? Stephen's voice is stopped. Does not the physical overthrow the spiritual? Well, no, that's not true. Stephen still speaks. We don't even know about those individuals who threw stones at him, for they are reserved unto the Day of Judgment, so far as we know. It's Stephen who has really conquered. He's the real conqueror. You see, when it comes to determining who has won and who has not won, the final verdict is not written at sundown; the final verdict is written by the Lord God.

Now, one final note in chapter 8 in verse 1. Well, I really should say something about that last sentence of verse 60, “And when he had said this, he fell asleep.” Now, sometimes we're inclined to read that as if that is a reference to his spirit. That is not a reference to his spirit. That's a reference to his body. Remember that the New Testament way of expressing the death of a Christians, is to say that he has fallen asleep. That great Word *koimaō* is a term that is used, metaphorically, of a Christian's death, physical death. So that when an individual has fallen asleep, the reference is to his body. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. So as I mentioned in the introduction, Christians believe in body-sleep, not soul-sleep. You see, he has just said, “Lord Jesus,

receive my spirit.” And so when he had said this, he fell asleep. It’s clearly a reference to his body. His body fell asleep. His body is placed in the grave. And when the resurrection takes place, guess who will be there. Stephen. And I’ll be there, too, and so will you, if you have believed in the Lord Jesus. Stephen will be resurrected when we are resurrected. What a privilege. What a privilege to be resurrected with the apostles. For you see, only one person has been resurrected at this point, the Lord Jesus Christ. He’s the only one. He’s the first fruits of the resurrection.

Now, I know you are thinking, “Perhaps, well, people have died and have come back.” Yes, but not resurrection. Not come back with a glorified body. Only the Lord Jesus has received a glorified body. Only the Lord Jesus has been resurrected at this point. He’s the first fruits and then those that are Christ’s at his coming. And so the whole church shall be caught up together with the apostles and others and we shall be resurrected then.

And, finally, I say, in verse 1 of chapter 8, “And Saul was consenting unto his death.” You might think, well, the story has ended with the mangled body of Stephen. No, the witness is dead but the truth lives on. And, as a matter of fact, in Stephen’s very dying, he has sewn the seed of a tremendous harvest and he is sowing it, the Lord God, is sowing it in the heart of perhaps the hardest man in that crowd, Saul.

He later calls himself, “Less than least of all the saints.” He calls himself, “The greatest of all the sinners.” But when Stephen dies, efficacious grace is beginning its work in the heart of Saul; and it will lead, ultimately, to his conversion and a great harvest of souls.

Tertullian was right when he said, “The more ye mow us down, the more we grow. The seed is the blood of Christians,” traditionally rendered as, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

Now, let me conclude with just a few Words. Stephen, then, is a witness to the reality of the unseen and the supremacy of the spiritual. He saw the glory of God. Even Saul did not see the glory of God. Stephen saw the glory of God. Stephen is also a witness to the manner of a faithful

Christian’s death. It may be in the midst of service. Stephen died in the harness, so to speak. He died with his serving boots on.

When I finish the sermon this morning, Mrs. Ray, the church secretary came and said, “Did you read that in the paper this morning, about the preacher in Louisiana who died while he was preaching, just a couple of weeks ago?” So I went home between the service and I cut the article out. “Last Sermon: Visiting Minister Dies While Preaching in Louisiana Church Service,” he was a man who was preaching and then, to illustrate a point, he went over and sat down, I’m not going to do it [Laughter] he went over and sat down to illustrate how it is that so often people really do not work. He said he’s tried of seeing preachers and ministers pushing churches, trying to get them to do something. And he said, “I’m tired. I’m going to go over and sit down.” And he went over and sat down, just to illustrate the point. In fact, he said it was just to illustrate the point. Incidentally, he had said in the course of his sermon that he knew that this might be the last time that he would ever be able to address this congregation, because he was a minister in a church in the North, and he was down in Louisiana. And he said, “I know this may be the last time that I’m going to be able to preach here and so I want to be able to preach as powerfully as I can.” Well, anyway, he walked over. He leaned back as if he was resting. And he died. In fact, they couldn’t even figure out for awhile if he was still living because they thought, his head didn’t drop or anything like that. He just sat there, but what an illustration for a congregation. He was taken to the hospital. The service was finished. And several people, so the account says, gave themselves to the Lord.

Well, Stephen was a man who died in a similar way, except his was forceful. We might say it was terrible for Stephen to die then. Just think of the potential of Stephen, who understood so much Christian theology and was so full of the Holy Spirit and faith and boldness and courage, what the church lost when they lost Stephen. Not a thing, really. It was the will of God. You may think, well, what a pity. Or, we may say, “What a mystery!” But, what a privilege, really, because we are still talking about Stephen, and admiring the faith and courage of this man, and praising the Lord God who is responsible for it.

Your death, too, may be a puzzle; but you can be sure that, ultimately, there is a reason for it, in our sovereign, loving, merciful Father’s plans. It may be a painful death. Stephen’s was a very painful death. And in Stephen’s case, he died in the presence of his enemies. You probably won’t have to do that. You probably will die with your head upon a downy pillow. But he did not have the privilege. Your death may be painful. It may be. But, nevertheless, the Lord God will be with you. He was with Stephen. What a calm, confident, fearless way to die. Stephen had many good reasons for asking why. “Lord, I’m a deacon. I’m a preaching deacon. And the church needs me. I’ve been chosen to take care of the widows. Why am I being taken?” But he trusted the church militant, to the Captain of the church, the Lord Jesus Christ. No quivering lips, for Stephen. Bold and courageous, he committed himself to the Lord God.

Isn’t it interesting, how people die and how they are born and begin to live? When we come into this earth and world, we come in weeping. Well, really, our children cry, don’t they? And then when we come in weeping, people are smiling. It’s a baby or it’s a girl or it’s a boy. But when we go out, people are weeping, because they are losing us but Christians are smiling.

I love that story. I’ve told it before, but I love this story of the well-known Christian, who lapsed into something like a coma a few days before he was to die. And everybody began to wonder if he really was dead. He stayed in that state. He was not making any move at all. And the family was gathered around his bed. He was a preacher and a good preacher and they began to talk. And some of them said, “Maybe he’s already gone?” And they were trying to figure it out. And, finally, one said, “Feel his feet?” Nobody ever died with warm feet. And suddenly, the eyes flickered, and the voice spoke and said, “John Hus did.” [Laughter] For those of you, who don’t know any church history at all, John Hus was burned at the stake. He hadn’t lost his sense of humor, as he was passing out of this earthly existence. [More laughter] When you stand by a Christian’s bedside and very often they know what’s happening and they are looking forward to the presence of God. I’ve stood by the bedside of some in which they were praying, “O Lord, receive my spirit now.”

So Stephen was calm, confident, fearless. His mind is filled with the Lord God. He talked about Joseph. He talked about Moses. He talked about the infinite greatness of the Lord God. And when a person is so filled with the Lord as Stephen was, it's time to go. He didn't talk about the ritual. He didn't talk about the sacraments. He didn't talk about priest-craft. He didn't talk about baptism. He didn't talk about the Lord's Supper. He came to the more fundamental things of spiritual life; his relationship to the Lord Jesus. And his death was of a peace with his life.

Isn't it wonderful to die, in a life that has been lived in the will of God? So often, individuals die and preachers have a hard time knowing what to say at their funeral. Often, they are professing Christians; and yet, the life has been so contrary to what we would like it to be now as they enter the presence of the Lord. Such a difference, such a disjunction between the kind of life and the spiritual relationship that it should have. It's very difficult, very difficult to preach a sermon, a funeral sermon, for an individual who has made a profession of faith, but who is not really lived, so far as his family and friends can tell, as a Christian.

I always think of the story of an individual, who was giving a eulogy of a man who had died, who was known to be a wicked man, and he was talking about him, and he tried to play up all of his good points. And, finally, his widow turned to his son and said, “John, go up and look in that casket and see if it's really pop?” [Laughter] But, Stephen's life was the kind of life that matched his death. And, you know, in Believers Chapel that should speak to some of us, too. It should speak to us of the necessity of being sure that the kind of life that we live matches our profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And, if I may conclude by saying, Stephen's death was useful to God; he being dead yet speaketh. And, preeminently, he was speaking to Saul, who would be the Apostle Paul. “And Saul was consenting unto his death.” Magnificent death. May God help us to live a life like Stephen's and die a death like Stephen's, as well.

If you are here today, and you have never believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, you cannot die like Stephen died. You cannot die in the faith that Stephen had. “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” May God so work in your life, you recognize your lost condition. Flee to him, receiving the Lord Jesus as

your own Savior and leave this auditorium this morning with the possession of the forgiveness of your sins. If you are here without Christ, we invite you to trust in him. Don't leave without that decision being made. We may not see you next week. You may not see me next week. May God help you to realize how serious it is, to leave this life without faith in Christ.

And for those of us who are believers, may today, the first day of the week, be an occasion in which we ask the Lord God to enable us to live more conformably to the profession of faith that we have made. We need this in Believers Chapel. We need it in the lives of all of us. And may God help us in our community to be the kinds of testimonies to his sovereign grace that will reflect glory upon his Name.

Let's stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Father, we are so grateful to Thee for the life of Stephen. What a magnificent gift to us! We are grateful to Thee, for we know that Thou art the ultimate source and origin of the blessedness of this man's life and testimony. And we thank Thee for the encouragement that it affords us. And, O God, enable us to live in more conformity to the kind of profession that so many of us have made. Deliver us from having one foot in the world and one foot in the things of our Lord. Give us right priorities. And, Lord, if there should be someone without Christ, at this very moment, be speaking to them whether a young person or an old person. Bring them to the trust in Christ that means eternal life.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.