

The Martyrdom of Stephen

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- [0 : 00] We sing now to God's praise from Psalm 36, Psalm 36 and from the middle of verse 6.
- Lord, thou preservest man and beast, how precious is thy grace! Therefore in shadow of thy wings men's sons their trust shall place.
- They with the fatness of thy house shall be well satisfied. From rivers of thy pleasures thou wilt drink to them provide.
- Because of life the fountain pure remains alone with thee, and in that purest light of thine we clearly light shall see. Thy lovingkindness unto them continue that they know, and still on men upright in heart thy righteousness bestow.
- Let not the fruit of cruel pride come and against me stand, and let me not remove it be, Lord, by the wicked's hand.
- [1 : 10] There fallen are they and ruined at work iniquities. Cast down they are and never shall be able to arise. We sing these verses from the middle of verse 6.
- Lord, thou preservest man and beast, how precious is thy grace! Lord, thou preservest man and beast, how precious is thy grace!
- There fallen shadow of thy wings, And sons their trust shall place.
- They with the fatness of thy eyes Shall be well satisfied.
- From rivers of thy pleasures thou wilt drink to them provide.
- [2 : 42] Because of life the perfect pure remains alone with thee, And in the purest light of thine we clearly light shall see.
- Thy lovingkindness unto them containeth at thee know.
- And still on men upright in heart thy righteousness bestow.
- Let not the fruit of cruel pride come and against me stand, And let me not remove it be, Lord, by the wicked's hand.
- The fallen are they and ruined, That worth iniquities.
- [4 : 46] Thus done iniquities. Thus done iniquities. Thus done iniquities. And never shall be able to arise.
- Let us turn to the book of Acts, Let us turn to the book of Acts, chapter 7.
- And we can read again 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, And so on.
- I would be surprised if there was anyone here tonight Who doesn't know the story of Stephen.
- [6 : 04] You certainly know the name, And you know that the record of his death is brought before us in the book of Acts.

And very probably you understand that this is an account of what is considered to be the first New Testament martyr, Whether it is right or proper to describe him as such.

He is in this account a witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. And the word martyr, or the word from which martyr comes, Is the Greek word which is simply the word for witness.

And it has been developed, or it has come down with the association that it is descriptive of the death of somebody who dies for their faith originally, their Christian faith.

Although there are other believers who probably suffered for their faith, even though it might have been a false faith.

[7 : 33] And they would claim their suffering to be the martyr's suffering. But originally it belongs to such a context as the one we have here.

And there are a number of things that we can and we have to consider before we consider the actual death of Stephen or the immediate context.

Because we are reminded of a number of things which in the mystery of God's providence shows to us the extraordinary overruling of God in the providence of his own church.

We read how the passion of Stephen came to the fore in chapter 6.

He stands out, and it's not clear why he stands out over and against the other six that were chosen along with him to take responsibility within the church of Christ for diaconal work.

[8 : 56] And I put it like that because there are those who are of the opinion that the office of deacon is not fully formed at this point.

But clearly at the very outset of the New Testament church, there were many roles that were still to be formulated in an official way.

And although the original helps us understand that the nature of the work that was entrusted to those named, along with Stephen, were given the task of fulfilling diaconal work.

And that meant work that they could do that should not prevent those who were in the role of the eldership and the preachers of the word.

And prevent them from fulfilling that role. As we read, there was, with the growth of the New Testament church, the word disciple there, I think, were used enough to hearing it now.

[10 : 27] Because what's expected of the church in our own age is that we disciple new believers.

Now originally that word disciple would have been applied to those immediate followers of Jesus Christ. But as you can see from here, the word disciples apply to all who have come to faith and all who have joined with the church and followed the teachings of Christ.

So they are disciples. And with the growth of the church, the number of disciples increased. And the more onerous came the task of supplying the varying needs of those disciples.

Not only did they need spiritual input into their lives, but very often they required temporal provision to be made for them as well.

And very probably part of the reason for that was with their embracing the Christian teachings and the gospel.

[11 : 43] They would suffer deprivation at times. And they would be excluded from some of the privileges that they might previously have enjoyed. So the church had a burden to look after them.

Looking after the widows, looking after orphan children, and looking after those who were, by reason of different deprivations, unable to look after themselves.

So the church, the apostles decided in their wisdom, as we believe, led by the Spirit, that this role should be delegated to others.

And Stephen was one of those who was appointed to fulfill that. But the description that he has given, I'm sorry for being sidetracked there, but Stephen seems to be highlighted.

Now whether that is because of what was about to take place with regard to him, or whether he stood out beforehand, is not immediately clear.

[12 : 55] But he is described, and probably the others also had qualities that marked them out in order to fulfill the role that they were to carry out.

But we do read about that they were sought because they were full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom.

And Stephen is spoken of as somebody who had that. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost.

He seems to be singled out there. And again in verse 8, Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.

He seems to have more spiritual gifts identified as being his. He was marked out in that sense.

[14 : 03] So we have to realize that that is part of what marks him out. And because of the early stage of the development of the church, there are questions with regard to the role that he fulfilled.

Because the original calling was one to diagonal work. And it was to allow the elders to fulfill the work of prayer and ministry.

And yet we find that Stephen is somebody who also fulfills that role. That he is somebody, because of being full of the Holy Spirit, is someone who did great wonders and miracles among the people.

And he is clearly involved in some kind of teaching ministry. Why that is, or how it came about, is not explained. It just is something that is true often.

And we find that because of his ability and his gifting, that he comes into conflict with those who are of the local synagogue.

[15 : 26] Now, historically, it is suggested that the nature of Stephen's background, he was a Greek Jew.

And that meant that he was from Greece, but he had been either raised within the Jewish faith or converted.

I don't think he was a proselyte. I think he was raised within the Jewish faith. But it is suggested historically, and that's not, I don't think you can find this in your Bibles.

But that he was, like Paul, a disciple of Gamaliel. That it is certainly the opinion of some that such was his gifting that he was taught and instructed in the things of God.

And the ability that he possessed was in keeping with that. And you can probably discern that in the way that those who were opposed to him, that they sought to master him with their own arguments.

[16 : 44] But Stephen, it seems, again and again, is somebody who defeats them in the arguments that they present against him.

Which creates further consternation and anger on their part. And we see the result of that in the outcome that is presented to us.

They were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spoke. And that resulted in them producing false witnesses who accused Stephen of speaking error and speaking that which was inconsistent with the teachings of the scriptures concerning Moses and concerning God.

And that is interesting, that he said things that was against Moses and against God. Not against God and Moses, but against Moses and against God.

And that was probably the worst thing that he could be accused of. But that's the background, if you like, to the events that take place.

[18 : 19] We see in chapter 7, the account given to us of what he taught. Now it's hard to say that what's written there is a sermon as such.

Because as far as sermons go, and when you contrast or compare them to the sermons of Peter or Paul, they're not similar.

Because, for example, what you would find is that there is little mention of the person of the Lord Jesus in what he has to say. He speaks about the history of the Jewish people.

He talks about the providence of the Jewish people.

By virtue of the strength of the Jewish people. By virtue of the strength of the argument that he makes, they are quite clear in their own mind. That what he is bearing testimony to is the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[19 : 46] And the place he is bearing testimony to is the person of the Holy Spirit. And the place he ought to have in the lives of those who have rejected God's word. And rejected the one that God's word has to say.

So one of the commentators puts it. He was, Stephen was a witness to Jesus.

Even though he is not deliberately avoiding using his name. But everybody knows that he is testifying to the way God brought the passion of his son into the world to fulfill the role that he had for him as the savior of sinners.

So Stephen was not only a witness to that, but also, as you see in these verses, a witness against the Jewish nation because of their unbelief.

He speaks, as we saw, about Abraham, about Joseph. And all of these things undergirding or identifying the necessary faith in the Lord Jesus.

[21 : 16] And undergirding that faith with God's sovereignty in overruling for good in the affairs of his own church.

But eventually Stephen speaks the truth very directly against the Jews.

He might have been suspicious that he was leading up to this. But eventually he comes up with a statement that clearly moves them to wrath against them.

You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears. You 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 showed before of the coming of the just one. Of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers.

[22 : 24] Who have received the law by the disposition of angels and have not kept it. It's a very plain condemnation. And they know who is being condemned.

And you know that they know by the reaction that they give. When they heard these things they were cut to the heart. And they gnashed on him with their teeth.

So this is the whole of everything that I've said. It leads up to this moment.

And the fact of the matter is it is clearly underlined. That Stephen was somebody who was full of the Holy Ghost.

Somebody who was spirit-filled. Somebody who had the unction of the spirit in order to speak as he did. And probably who understood that at this moment that he was coming to a point where his death was imminent.

[23 : 42] You know he wasn't insensitive to the reaction his words would have. And the fullness of the Holy Ghost is something that has to be at the forefront of our understanding what was to happen.

You know he is singled out because of this. He is demonstrating it in the testimony that he bears to the sinfulness of the Jews and their guilt in condemning the Lord Jesus Christ.

And their guilt as far as he is concerned is highlighted by virtue of his own understanding. And the light that the spirit gives to him offered.

So when it comes to the point that you're actually introduced to this most awesome experience.

Where he lifts his eyes to the heavens and he sees what he sees. He sees the heavens opened. He sees what no other could possibly see.

[25 : 09] One of the commentators tells us about the reaction that he encountered. The message was clearly offensive to men. To these men who heard it.

But he said the message of the gospel very often is. Not everybody will receive the gospel message without reacting in a way that is very, very often extreme.

And in this case what this divine was saying. If you take the. If you cast your pearls before swine.

If your pearls are the pearls of. Of Christ's. Indisputable role.

As the saviour of sinners. If your pearls have to do with. With the grace of God in Christ Jesus. If your pearls.

[26 : 23] Have to do as his was. With. The imputed righteousness. That Christ alone. Has to offer.

Then do not be surprised. If these pearls. Are trod. Throdden under foot. And those who are. Are pressing them under their heels.

In a desperate attempt. To get at those. People who proclaim the truth. Such as their bitterness and enmity. Against the truth that they've heard.

That was the way it was. For Stephen. But despite the hatred. Despite the animosity. Despite the. The understanding that he had.

Of its source. He looked. We read. Steadfastly into heaven. And. I suppose.

[27 : 22] When theologians look at this. They want to. They want to know. How could he see into heaven? If I look into the heavens. Tonight. And I look. I look at the nearest star.

I can barely see that star. Except for its. Afterglow. I need. I need. A mechanical device. To make any kind of.

Of impression upon it. But Stephen looked into the heavens. So. This. Looking into the heavens. Was something that could not. Possibly have taken place.

With the natural eye. And what he saw. Nobody else saw. That's. Clear. From. From the. Testimony. That we have here.

He looked. Steadfastly. And only. By the power. Of the Holy Ghost. Could he do that. And. As somebody.

[28 : 18] Puts it. When you look back. At the beginning. Of chapter 7. Which we didn't read. Men and brethren. Fathers. Harken. The God of glory. Appeared unto our father. Abraham.

When he was in. Mesopotamia. Before he dwelt. In Haran. The God of glory. Appeared. Unto Abraham. And as we have seen.

Before. The appearance. Of God. In his glory. We can see. God. In his glory. But we can't. See the God.

Of glory. It is not. Physically. It is not. It is not. For human eyes. To see. What the human eye. Is not meant to see. Because we cannot do it.

Because we are. What we are. By nature. But we are told. That he saw. The glory of God. And that he saw. Alongside.

[29 : 14] The passion. Of the Lord. Jesus Christ. And that itself. Is. A remarkable. Vision. If you like. If it is a vision. I don't suppose.

We can determine. One way or the other. Whether. What he saw. Was a vision. Was. What we would call. A vision. Or was his eye. Enabled.

To see. God's glory. Glory. And to see. The son of man. At the right hand. Of God's glory. But he certainly.

Saw it. And he certainly. Described it. In that way. And. What we have to just.

Say. Is this. That the spirit. The holy spirit. Is the mover. The vision. Is impossible. At a natural level. The Puritan.

[30 : 20] Thomas. Manton. Says that. When you think. About the miracle. And it is a miracle. It was. Not that he saw.

Into heaven. But that his eye. Was enabled. And no one else. Could see. What he saw. What he saw.

No other eye. Could see. His eye. Saw the majestic. Glory. Of God. Which was. Previously. Hidden. To him.

As well as anybody else. Perhaps. Many. Are at ease. With. With this. Of course. But.

A question. That. That. Often. Accompanies. What we have. Here is. Not only. Did he see. The glory. Of God. He also.

[31 : 17] Saw. The son. Of man. Standing. Standing. And. If you are. Familiar. With. The new. Testament. You will.

Only. Find. That. Mentioned. Once. And it is. Here. That the son. Of man. Stood. In every. Other. Occasion. It.

Speaks. Of him. As sitting. At the right. Hand. Of the majesty. On high. Sitting. At the right. Hand. Of God. So the question. Is asked. Why was. Jesus. Standing.

At this point. What is. Its significance. And we are not told. I suppose. We don't have an answer. The. The answer.

Maybe. And some. Have suggested. That. He. Was. Standing. Because. At that point. Stephen. Was.

[32 : 14] In intense. Need. Of the. Intercession. Of the. Son. Of man. Such. Was. His. Danger. When he. Was. Assailed. By the.

Enemies. Who were. Intent. On his. Destruction. That the. Son. Of man. Stood. To indicate. To him. That he was. Interceding.

For him. Or another. Reason. That has been. Presented. Is. That Jesus. Stood. Because. He was. Anticipating. The imminent. Arrival. In glory. Of his. Servant. As if. To say. To. To. Stephen. That he. Was. Awaiting. His. Entrance. Into glory. But all of. His. Opinions. And there are more. I suppose. That are. They are speculative.

[33 : 06] But. The scripture. Chooses. Not to. To highlight. The reason. For them. Other than. To state. The fact. That. What he saw. Was this.

He looked. And saw. The glory. Of God. And saw. Jesus. Standing. On the right. Hand. Of God. Behold.

I see. The heavens. Open. And the son. Of man. Standing. On the right. Hand. Of God. And. You. You'll. See. The impact.

Of that. On those. Who were. Listening. To him. Because. He was. As if. It were. Hammering. Home. The truth. That he.

Was. Declaring. All the way. Through. The words. That he. Spoke. He. Was. Bringing. To their. Attention. That the. Christ. Of whom.

[34 : 00] Stephen. Spoke. Was. The son. Of God. That he. Was. The one. Who had. Access. To glory. And who. Belonged. In glory. And who. Had.

Been. Elevated. To the right. Hand. Of glory. By his. Father. If he. Was. His. Father. He. Was. Divine. Because. His. Father. Was. Divine. And they.

Understood. That. And they. Were. Stimulated. To. Greater. Ire. They. Cried. With a. Loud. Voice. And. Stopped. Their. Ears.

And ran. Upon. Him. With. One. Accord. One. Thing. They. Didn't. Want. To hear. Was. This. They. Didn't. Want. To hear. It. They. Didn't. Believe. It. They. Didn't. Want.

It. In. Any. Way. Shape. Or. Form. And. The. Fury. That. Is. In. The. Heart. Of. Man. That. Sees.

[34 : 51] Them. React. In. The. Way. That. They. Did. They. They. Broke. The. Law. In. Order. To. Satisfy. Their. Interpretation. Of. The. How.

Alike. The. Lord. Jesus. And. Stephen. Are. In. The. Death. Of. Jesus. He. Was. He. Was. Condemned.

By. The. Testimony. Of. False. Witnesses. The. Witnesses. Against. Stephen. Were. Testifying.

To. False. Evidence. They. Accused. Jesus. Of. Blasphemy. In. The. Same. Way. They. Accused. Stephen. Of. Blasphemy. The.

Crowds. Were. Insighted. And. We. See. This.

[35 : 53] Really. If. You. Want. To. Understand. It. In. This. Way. You. Can. Remind. Yourself. Of. It. When. You. See. The. Way. People.

Behave. In. Opposition. To. The. Church. Of. Christ. Throughout. The. Generations. It. Wasn't. New. In. The. Experience. Of. The. Church.

Even. The. Old. Testament. Church. It. Wasn't. New. In. The. Experience. Of. Christ. It. Wasn't. New. In. The. Experience. Of. Stephen. Because. They. Were. Experiencing. What.

Others. Had. Experienced. Before. Them. When. They. Were. Faithful. To. The. Truth. Of. God. Recently. Heard. About. Christians.

In. Pakistan. Being. Falsely. Accused. Of. Testifying. Against. Muhammad. Accusing.

[36 : 46] Them. Of. Blasphemy. Inciting. The. Crowds. And. Their. Homes. Are. Destroyed. Lives. Are. Lost.

And. Whatever. The. The. Old. Testimony. To. It. Was. To. Their. Relationship. Of. Faith. To. Jesus.

Christ. And. This. Was. Sufficient. To. To. Stimulate. That. Anger. That's. A. Modern. Day. Experience. Of.

It. You'll. See. It. In. Our. Own. Nation. As. Well. Some. Of. You. Will. Will. Be. Familiar. With. With. Writings. The. History. Writings.

Concerning. The. Covenanters. In. One. Of. The. Books. That. Speaks. About. These. These. Days. The.

[37 : 40] Scots. Worthies. If. You. Read. That. Book. It. Suggests. And. Although. It's. Been. Disputed. How. Accurate. The. The. Numbers. Are. That. Up.

To. Eighteen. Thousand. Believers. Were. Put. To. Death. Because. Of. Their. Adherence. To. The. Covenants. Eighteen.

Thousand. People. And. They. Were. Butchered. They. Were. Put. To. Death. With. A. Sword. They. Were. Beheaded. They. Were. Ostracized. Some. Of. Them. Were. Banished.

Out. Of. Scotland. And. The. People. Who. Did. It. They. Did. It. In. The. Name. Of. God. They. Did. It. Because. They.

Presented. Themselves. As. Executing. God's. Justice. And. They. Had. No. Right. To. Do. It. These. Men. Who. Attacked. Stephen.

[38 : 34] Had. No. No. Right. To. Deal. With. Him. Because. They. Didn't. Have. The. Power. Of. The. Court. They. Didn't. Have. The. Authority. Even.

Of. The. Romans. To. Exercise. A. Capital. Judgment. Against. Them. And. Put. Them. To. Death. But. That. Doesn't. Matter.

That. Doesn't. Matter. Stephen. Was. Their. Enemy. And. They. Put. Him. To. Death. Because. Of. That. When.

We. Look. At. The. God. Of. Grace. When. We. Look. At. The. Grace. Of. God. We. See. It. In. Different. Ways. God. Saw. Stephen.

Saw. The. Glory. Of. God. By. Looking. Into. Heaven. And. We. See. The. Glory. Of. God. In. The. Response.

[39 : 28] That. Stephen. Has. To. Those. Who. Are. His. Persecutors. The. Ability. That. He. Is. Given. At. The. Point. Of. Death. To.

Say. Into. Your. Hands. I. Commit. My. Spirit. Again. Is. He. Not. Like. The. Lord. Jesus. When.

He. Is. Being. Stoned. Lord. Jesus. Receive. My. Spirit. That. Is. Not. Human. That. Is. Not. Of. Human. Origin. It.

Is. Of. God. Doing. It. Is. Something. That. You. And. I. Cannot. Do. You. We. Wouldn't. Be. Expected. To. Do. It. But.

If. The. Point. Ever. Came. When. You. Would. Be. In. A. Position. Like. That. Then. It. May. Well. Be. That. God's. Grace. Would. Be. In. Evidence. In. Your. Life. In.

[40 : 21] The. Same. Measure. That. It. Is. In. The. Life. Of. Stephen. Without. The. Same. Circumstances. Apply. It. Would. Not. Be. The. Case. Nor.

Would. It. Be. Possible. For. Us. To. Pray. In. The. Way. That. Stephen. Prayed. For. For. Those. Who. Were. His. Persecutors.

Lord. Lay. Not. This. Sin. To. Their. Charge. God's. Grace. Is. Required. For. That. Forgiveness.

Is. Not. An. Easy. Thing. To. To. Bestow. In. Any. Situation. If. Forgiveness. Is. Required. But.

Certainly. Not. In. This. Instance. And. Yet. He. Was. Able. To. Pray. For. It. God. This. Is. A. A. Mystery. Connected. With. In. My. Reading. I.

[41 : 13] Was. I. Leave. This. With. You. And. Finish. With. This. I. Think. As. Spurgeon. Was. Of. This. Opinion. Certainly. Augustine.

Was. And. I. Suppose. We. Have. To. Treat. It. With. Caution. But. This. Is. This. Is. What. They. Were. Saying. If.

Saul. Had. Not. Been. There. Stephen. Would. Not. Have. Prayed. If. Stephen. Had. Not. Prayed.

Saul. Would. Not. Have. Preached. It's. A. Difficult. One. Is. It. Not. We.

Are. Told. That. Saul. Was. There. That. He. Was. Holding. The. Coats. Of. Those. Who. Were. Stoning. Him. Whether. He. Lived. It. A. Stoned. Himself. More.

[42 : 07] Than. Lively. He. Did. It. Doesn't. Say. That. He. Did. But. It. Was. Something. That. Was. Required. Of. Those. Who. Who. Were. To. Prove. A. They. Were. Witnessing.

Against. The. Crime. For. Which. He. Was. Being. Stoned. He. remembers. Paul.

Remembers. This. Event. Paul. remembers. His. Involvement. In. It. He. Couldn't. Forget. It. Can. We. Say. That. Certainly.

He. Was. Responsible. For. The. Persecution. Of. Countless. Numbers. Of. The. Church. Possibly. Even. In. Their. Death. Why. Not. Culpable.

In. This. Sense. But. We're. Not. Told. We. Know. That. In. Order. For. Well. This. Is.

[43 : 02] The. Question. That's. Ask. Was. Stephen's. Prayer. Answered. He. Prayed. To. God. For. For. For. For. Don't. Lay.

This. Sin. To. Their. Charge. Was. That. Prayer. Answered. Well. We're. Not. Told. We're. Not. Told. But.

He. Prayed. It. Nevertheless. And. It. Was. An. Honest. Prayer. An. Honest. Prayer. A. Prayer. Out. Of. A. Heart. That. God's. Grace. Was.

Filling. Filling. This. Heart. And. Without. That. It. Wasn't. Possible. This. Man. Of. God. Was. Really.

Remarkable. And. What. He. Did. Was. Remarkable. And. His. Testimony. Is. Remarkable. But. It. Is. The. God. Of. All. Grace. Who. Makes. It. So. May God. Allow us.

[43 : 57] To. Think. Some. More. On. This. Occasion. Let. Us. Pray. Ever. Blessed. God. We. Give. Thanks. For. The. Testimony.

Of. The. Church. We. Give. Thanks. For. The. Many. Things. That. Those. Who. Are. Of. The. Church. Have. Been. Able. To. Do. By. Reason.

Of. Your. Grace. You. Have. Filled. Your. People. With. Strength. That. Is. Without. Measure. To. Face. Challenges.

That. We. Cannot. Even. Begin. To. Understand. And. Yet. It. Is. Your. Doing. Your. Ability. To. Sustain. Your. People. In. All. Kinds. Of. Situations.

Is. Not. Curtailed. To. The. History. Books. It. Is. Still. Ongoing. To. This. Present. Age. And. We. Give. Thanks. Your.

[44 : 51] Word. That. We. May. Learn. From. It. Grant. Mercy. In. Jesus. Name. Amen. Going. To. Conclude. Singing. In.

Gaelic. From. Psalm 84. Psalm 84. At. Verse. Six. These.

All.

■. Around. thermal. ■■.

Thank you.

[46 : 21] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Amen.

[48 : 33] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Lord the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit rest and abide with you all,
now and always. Amen.