

Blood Of The Martyrs Is The Seed Of The Church

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[0 : 00] Let's turn for a wee while to the chapter that we read in Acts of the Apostles. And if we look at chapter 7, verse 54, and I'm not going to read all this, but I want to, today what I'm thinking of is this section from verse 54 in chapter 7 through to verse 8 in chapter 8.

Let's read at the beginning. Now when, in verse 54, now when they heard these things they were enraged and they ground their teeth at him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

And so on. It's remarkable how situations and pictures can change. And we find that in life so often. You can have very harrowing experiences that you'll find that the picture changes quite suddenly and quite dramatically. And to a certain extent that's what we have in these verses.

Because from verse 54 of chapter 7 we find that Stephen, who has been put on trial, we find that there is this almost like an explosion of anger and hatred and violence and murder.

[1 : 31] And where persecution begins, breaks out. Then at the end of verse 8, in chapter 8, we have that there's great joy in the city as people are coming to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And life is often like that. There's this great turnaround. And we've always got to remember that the Lord is actually in control of everything. And there will always be periods in the history of the church when the church seems to be threatened.

And the church appears to be in decline. And I'm sure many a time Christians have said, you know what, I think we're finished. And there would have been many times throughout the history of the Christian church when they would have said that very thing.

We're finished. But the Christian church is not finished. And will never be until the Lord returns. Until such day as the Lord will take all his people home to be with himself.

And in fact, the church, although it might be in decline in certain parts of this world, is also growing at a rate beyond which it has ever grown before.

[2 : 44] There are more Christians now than at any other point. So the fulfillment of that prophecy that was given in Daniel chapter 2, where we had that great statue of the head of gold and the chest of silver and such like, and where this stone came and broke down this great image that was there.

And Daniel explained that that huge image that was seen there was picturing the various empires, starting with the Babylonian Empire and then to the Persians and then to the Greek and then to the Roman.

And at that particular time, this stone was going to come down and smash this image. And that stone was going to grow and grow and fill the whole world. And that's exactly what's happening.

That the gospel of Jesus Christ is spreading throughout this world. And there are millions of people being converted and turning to follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

But side by side with that, just as there was then, there is persecution. It is part of it. Because this is the nature of this world, the enmity that is in the pits of hell that floods into human heart, is so opposed to the gospel.

[4 : 03] And so there is, in a sense, this war is ongoing and will continue on until we find the return of the Lord. But the Lord always overrules things.

And even though things may appear dark and threatening for a time, God still overrules everything. Now if we pick up the story of Stephen, we find in chapter 6 that Stephen was full of grace and power, doing great signs and wonders among the people.

And some of the Jews opposed him, but Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit. And it tells us that in verse 10, that they couldn't withstand the wisdom and spirit with which he was speaking.

But then, through to form, when you find certain people like that, when they have no argument, when they come against somebody who they realize, this person is going to tie me in knots, I

cannot withstand him, his reasoning is, I just can't deal with it.

So often, as happens, these bullies, they resort to violence. And no longer are they going to argue. And so that's exactly what happens. They turn against Stephen, and they drag him, as it were, through to a court.

[5 : 24] And Stephen, in a sense, is there going to be fighting for his life. He's brought forward in trial. And it tells us that as they looked at Stephen, his face seemed to be like the face of an angel, because of the glory of God.

That's what it tells us, verse 15 in chapter 6. And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. You would think at that moment, these men, and remember, this is the same council that tried Jesus.

Here they are again, they're trying Stephen. And as they look at Stephen, they see his face is shining. Because the Spirit of God is in him in such an amazing way, that it's like the glory of the Spirit of God is breaking out in him.

So that his face is beginning to really, there's a radiance and a glow and a shining. And you'd say to yourself, if you were a member of that council, you'd say, Hey, we better back off.

It's very obvious that God is with this man. Look at his face shining. This is not natural. We're seeing something supernatural here. These men couldn't see like that.

[6 : 44] They didn't reason like that because they were so full of prejudice. They were so bigoted against that they couldn't see. You know, that's what prejudice and bigotry does.

It makes a person unable to see the truth. Unable to see what's staring them in the face. And they couldn't see. Yes, they could see Stephen's face shining. But beyond all that, they were just so filled with hatred against him.

And it's an awful thing. And it's the very same hatred that they had against the Lord Jesus Christ. Because you've got to remember that although Stephen was a beautiful Christian, and the glory of God, the glory of the Spirit was shining through him, we've got to remember that Jesus was on another level altogether from Stephen to Stephen.

And yet they couldn't handle Jesus. They put him to death. Their hatred was so awful. And do you know something? We've always got to guard against a hard heart. A hard conscience.

You know, it's a very dangerous thing. And we've always got to ask the Lord, Lord, give me a soft heart. Give me a tender heart. Give me a teachable spirit. It's something we should always be asking the Lord.

[8 : 03] Lord, give me that teachable spirit that will be ready to respond to your word. That is willing. And when I'm not willing, Lord, make me willing.

Make me willing to hear what you're saying. Because often there's an inbuilt prejudice against God and against his word within the natural heart.

And it's only God's grace that can break that and mold that. And so we need to be asking the Lord for this teachable spirit. Well, at that particular point, these men did not have a teachable spirit.

That heart was hard. That conscience was hard. And so then we find in chapter 7, we find Stephen's speech or Stephen's sermon. And it really was a powerful, remarkable sermon.

And he's recounting God's dealings from the very beginning where he called Abraham way back and run through the history of Abraham, the history of the captivity in Egypt, of the children of Israel there, of them being taken out of Egypt, the wandering through the wilderness of Joshua, taking them back into the land of promise, right down to David and to Solomon and so on, right down to the present day.

[9 : 17] And of course, when it came to the end, when it tells us, when they listened to him, in verse 54, their anger knew no bounds.

See, they're so incensed. Now, when they heard these things, they were enraged and they ground their teeth at him. Now, that's some anger, isn't it?

But you start, you're so angry that you start grinding your teeth with the anger. You know, I have a feeling that that's something of the anger that will be in hell.

Because there is that picture of grinding, of gnashing of teeth. And it's a picture of hell. And people often wonder what hell is like. I have no idea. And people have this idea that it's just a burning flame.

I don't believe that it's just like a burning flame. But it's a place where the wrath of God will be. And the wrath of God has begun to be displayed in this world.

[10:18] But only at a very small measure. And if you go to Romans 1, we see something of the wrath of God. And part of all these things is that there were the anger and the hatred.

When you see this world and where God's restraint is removed. And we see injustice and hatred and anger and all these things. I believe that's part and parcel of what will constitute along with other things, obviously.

But there's this idea of this grinding of teeth and anger. Just real anger. And so we see that's what these people are displaying at that particular time.

Now, of course, the trial of Stephen was a mockery. Just as the same as the trial of Jesus was a mockery. It was the... They just went through the motions because there was only going to be one outcome.

But, you know, it's quite remarkable that at one level we find a pattern in Stephen's life and Stephen's death that was similar to Jesus.

[11:22] Because we find that Stephen makes a prayer similar to Jesus. Because you remember when they were hammering the nails into the hands and the feet of Jesus to put him onto the cross.

Jesus said, Father, forgive them. Because they don't know what they do. Well, here we find that Stephen, although they're stoning him. And I can't think of a much more painful way of dying than being stoned to death.

Stephen says, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. Isn't that beautiful? Isn't that wonderful? And it's here we see the marvelous grace of God at work.

And you know, the wonderful thing is this. That God, the Father, listened to the prayer of his son. And he listened to the prayer of Stephen.

And although we don't know who all came to faith amongst those who were carrying out these deeds. With regard to the death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[12:29] Remember the centurion. And the centurion was the man who was overseeing the execution of Jesus. He was in charge of it. And he stood facing the cross as Jesus was on that cross.

And he heard Jesus speak the seven times from the beginning. Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. He heard all the different sayings of Jesus. And when Jesus had breathed, at the end he said, remember how he cried out, it is finished.

And then he said, into your hands I commend my spirit. It tells us that when the centurion saw this, as he stood facing the cross, he said, truly, this was or this is the Son of God.

This centurion, because of what he saw and because of what he heard, he came to be fully convinced and believe this was and is the Christ.

And so the very prayer of Jesus has been answered there in his death. And also the prayer of Stephen. Because he prays, Lord do not, you would, now this is grace.

[13:43] Because a normal aspect of life is when you're hurt, when you're being, when you are the victim of injustice. The natural reaction is revenge.

I'm going to, I'll tell you something, I will get him, I will get them. That's what revenge is. That's the human heart. I'm going to let them off with this. And you could almost imagine, naturally Stephen would be saying, Lord, deal with them in judgment.

Bring your curse down upon them because of what they're doing. No. It's the very reverse. Do not lay this sin to their charge. Don't hold this against them.

And those who were executing, there was a young man there who approved of this execution. He was right in with them. And in fact the stunners who took off their outer clothing, they put them down at this young man.

He was watching over that. And he was 100% with them. That was Saul. And in fact from that moment on, Saul became, it was like it ignited something in the heart of Saul.

[14:51] That day something clicked in the heart of Saul. It was like when you strike a match and all of a sudden there was this, there was like petrol. And the whole thing went boom.

Well that's what happened in the heart of Saul. When Stephen died. He just couldn't get enough of persecution. He became virtually a ringleader in it.

And that's what it tells us in chapter 8. And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem.

And it tells us then in verse 3. But Saul was ravaging the church. And entering house after house. He dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

And you see, again the prayer was answered. Because this man in chapter 9, in fact it tells us, But Saul still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.

[15:52] See, his very breath was murder. It was like Saul from that moment, the moment of Stephen's death. He said, this is what I'm about. I'm going to kill and maim and destroy every Christian.

I'm going to obliterate this cause. And yet Stephen's prayer was answered. And that's grace. You know, there was one time there was a preacher preaching outside.

And he was preaching about the death of Stephen. And a heckler passed by and he says, Why didn't God do something for Stephen as the stones were raining down on him?

And the preacher said, He did. God did do something for him. He enabled Stephen to pray for his persecutors. He gave him that much grace.

That he was able to pray for his persecutors. And it's very important that we stop and we think, How do we view those who may consider themselves as opposed to us?

[17:00] Do we have hearts of anger? Do we have spirits that say, Oh, we wish the worst. Or have we spirits that wish them best? Have we a heart that prays for them?

Because that reveals an awful lot of what is within our heart. But the wonderful thing is that before Stephen died, He made this statement in verse 56.

And he said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, And the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. Now, it's a wonderful description, seeing the heavens opened. And whenever that description is given in the Bible, It is always a fore-runner of God going to come, Where he's coming in power. Where he's going to display himself in some way. That's what we find, for instance, in Mark. In Mark chapter 1, It tells us that the baptism of Jesus about John, He saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him.

We have God making a great statement, An amazing statement in Malachi, Where he is asking, Excuse me, His people to, With regard to the tithe, Of giving the tithe to him.

[18:18] And he said, Prove me. It's not often God says, Prove me. But he does on this occasion. He says, Prove me now herewith. You give that to me. Prove me.

And he says, I will open the windows of heaven, And pour down such a blessing upon you, That there isn't room enough to contain it. It's like when you open the windows of heaven, It's not like just there's a wee gap.

It's like they're wide open. And God is going to pour down so much, So much blessing. Well, Stephen was given, As he was facing death, And as the death was starting, He was given this display.

It's like God opened up heaven, For Stephen, Where he was given a glimpse, Of where he was going, And who was there. And who did he see? He saw Jesus.

And he terms him, Here, He said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, And the Son of Man. Now this, Of course, Was one of the designations, That was given in the Bible, To the Messiah.

[19:23] We read about it in Daniel, The Son of Man. It was a designation, That Jesus gave himself, As the Son of Man. The Son of Man has come, To seek and to save, Those who are lost. And that, Of course, Is adding, All the more, Because, When Stephen says, I saw this, I see the Son of Man.

This is the very person, Who the Jews have been, Looking for, Down throughout the centuries. The Messiah, The Son of Man. And Jesus kept saying to them, I'm the Son of Man.

And here is, Stephen saying, I'm seeing the Son of Man. Now, There's huge significance in that, When you think about it. Because, Jesus, Remember, Is dead, As far as the Jews are concerned, Jesus is dead.

The Son of Man, As they, As he used to call himself, In his work, He's dead, As far as they're concerned. And Stephen is saying, I'm seeing him. Heavens are open, And I'm seeing him.

And that is, An absolute, Vital truth, Not only for Stephen, But for the early church, And for us as well. Because it means this, Remember that, Jesus came into this world, With the primary purpose, Of dying, In our place, In our room, In our stead, Of taking the punishment, And the guilt, Of our sin, Upon himself, To make us right, With God.

[20:54] Now, He died, On the cross. He was buried, He was put, Into this rock tomb, And this, The door, Was sealed over it. And as far as the Jews, Were concerned, That was to be the end of him.

Now, It's, What I say is very important, Because, If, Jesus, Didn't rise, This is Paul's argument, In Corinthians, If Jesus didn't rise, From the dead, He said, You're still in your sins, So am I, We're all in our sins, If Jesus, Simply died on the cross, And he's bearing, The punishment of sin, But he hasn't risen, We're still in our sin, Your faith is vain, Take for instance, If somebody that you know, Has committed some crime, And he's, He's going to be put into prison, He's in prison, Somebody used to see every day, And all of a sudden, There, You've heard he's gone to prison, And you never see him, Day after day, He's not in his house, He's not in the street, He's not in the shop, He's nowhere, Because he's in prison, Then after a while, You see him again, He's back out, He has served a sentence, The punishment that he got is over, He's done his time, It's finished, It's over, And that's exactly how it is, With regard to the Lord Jesus, He came, He had no sin in himself, But he bore our sin, The punishment was upon him, He was taken down in his death, He was buried, But he rose again, Which indicates to us, That the sentence has now been lifted, The sentence of our death, Has been lifted from us, Because Jesus has done it all, And he's now out, He's risen, So it is for us, We now are free as well, So this is who Stephen is seeing, And he's seeing Jesus at the right hand of God, Of course that's a place of authority, And power, But also Stephen sees something beautiful, He sees Jesus, It tells us, That he saw him, The son of man, Standing at the right hand of God,

Now normally the picture that is given to us, Is of Jesus sitting at the right hand, And it has been suggested by many people, That the picture that, Or what Stephen saw, Of the son of man standing, Is that Jesus had got up, To welcome, He had got to come off his throne, To welcome Stephen home, It's a beautiful picture, And that's what the Lord does, That he welcomes, His people home, And that we believe is, What Stephen is seeing, And the angels, Would have been around Stephen, As he was being stoned, Ready to carry, His soul home, But then as we saw, The following on from that, The fires of persecution broke out, But this is where God is at work, It tells us, In verse 1, And Saul approved of his execution, And arose on that day, A great persecution, Against the church in Jerusalem,

And they were all scattered, Throughout the regions, Of Judea, Samaria, Except the apostles, In other words, What happened, When the fires of persecution, Broke out, Everybody ran, The people took off, Everybody left Jerusalem, They were running here, Running there, They were going to different parts, And remember one of the terms, That Jesus gave his people, He said, You are the salt of the earth, Well at this particular moment, It's like taking the salt dish, And sprinkling salt, All over the place, Because that's what's happened, And God's people, Like salt, Are being scattered all over, Now at that moment, It looks like chaos, But it's not, Because what did they do, Everywhere they went, They were preaching, And they were telling people, About Jesus, And so, The gospel of Jesus Christ, Was being spread, In all the different areas, And people were coming to faith, And then we find, With this we close, We find this man, Philip, Who was one of the seven, Who was taken along with Stephen,

[25 : 13] He goes down to Samaria, And he goes down, What does he do, He goes down, To preach, Jesus, That's what he, That's a great message, Philip went down, To the city of Samaria, And proclaimed to them, The Christ, That's our message, Jesus Christ, And him crucified, That's what Paul said, He was determined, When he went to Corinth, I was determined, Not to know anything among you, Save Jesus Christ, And him crucified, Where we, Give the great gospel, That God so loved the world, That he gave, His only begotten son, That whosoever believes in him, Should not perish, But have everlasting life, Jesus said, If I be lifted up, I will draw all men unto him, And that is surely our aim, Every Lord's day, Is to raise up Christ, In order that, People will be saved, And so, Philip preached, He preached Jesus, To them, That's what we read,

Philip went down, To the city of Samaria, And you know, I love that, Where Philip goes, Remember, In the time of Jesus, It tells us, That the Jews, Had no dealings, With the Samaritans, They didn't like the Samaritans, Remember when Jesus, Met the woman of Samaria, His disciples, Jesus, His disciples were amazed, That he was speaking to her, That's the beauty, About Jesus, And the gospel, That there, There's no barriers, There's no barriers, Regarding race, Or culture, Or religion, Or status, Or position, These things don't count, It's all, It's a level playing field, With regard to the gospel, Every person, Is an individual, Who is important, Before God, And the gospel, Of Jesus Christ, Goes out, To all, And that's why Philip, He went down to Samaria, Most Jews, Wouldn't think about that, But that's where he goes,

Straight away, Down to Samaria, And he preaches the gospel, And see the result, Verse 8, With this we finish, So there was much joy, In that city, What a change, From the battering, And the stones, And Stephen, What a change, To the fires, Of persecution, In Jerusalem, Now we're seeing, People being converted, And there's much joy, You know there's a lot of people, Who think, That once a person, Becomes a Christian, Poor us, You've signed up, To a heavy life, And the moment, You become a Christian, That's it, You just might as well, Wave bye bye, To happiness, And joy, That it's all over, Nothing could be further, From the truth, Because a Christian, Faith, Is a faith, Of joy, It's part of, The ministry, Of the Holy Spirit, Producing joy, Within our heart, Joy, Is part and partial, Of the Christian's life, And it's a deep rooted joy, It's not a fleeting, It's not the, Just a fleeting laughter, It is deep rooted, And in fact, It is part of heaven, Forever, In fact, When, The soul enters heaven, Jesus tells us this, That he will say on that day, Enter, Into, The joy of the Lord, That's how you're welcomed, That's how Stephen would have been, Welcomed into glory, Enter into the joy of the Lord, At your right hand, There are pleasures, Forevermore, Isn't that wonderful, That's what the psalm tells us, So it's not a world, Of doom and gloom, That doesn't mean that, We're not realistic, And that there are sorrows, And trials, And pains, In this world, Of course there are, But there is a deep rooted joy, There is a satisfaction in Christ, There's a peace in Christ, There is this joy, Within the heart, Even when it's tough, But this joy, Will be fulfilled, And this joy, Will know no bounds, In the world to come, Do you have Jesus Christ, Do you, When you think about it, Do we come into church, And go out, Unaffected, Or do we come in, And do we ask the Lord, Lord change me, Here's an opportunity, To be changed, And the Lord is able, To do that, For you, For me today, Let us pray, Lord we pray to bless us, And we give thanks again, For your word, We pray that we will know, The transforming power, Of your grace, We give thanks Lord, For your patience with us, We give thanks oh Lord, That you do not deal with us, According to our deserving, And we pray that you will bless us, Bless the cup of tea, Coffee in the hall afterwards, And we pray that you will take us all, To our different homes safely, Cleansing us from our every sin, In Jesus name we ask it, Amen, We conclude singing, [30 : 21] In the 16th Psalm, Psalm number 16, And this is from, Sing Psalms, It's on page 17, Psalm 16, Page 17, And the tune is Golden Hill, From verse 8, Before me constantly, I set the Lord alone, Because he is at my right hand, I will not be overthrown, Therefore my heart is glad, My tongue with joy will sing, My body too will rest secure, And hope unwavering, For you will not allow my soul, And death to stay, Nor will you leave your Holy One, To see the tombs decay, You have made known to me, The path of life divine, Bliss shall I know, At your right hand, Joy from your face will shine, Psalm 16, Psalm 16, Page 17, Verse 8, To the end, And the tune is Golden Hill, He fought me constantly,

I set the Lord alone, He fought me constantly, Before my right hand, Where my right hand, You are all I.

I am not, Le'o her throne, Therefore my heart is glad, My calm, With joy will sing, My body too will rest secure in all unwavering.

For you will not allow my darling here to stay.

Nor will you leave, dear Holy One, to see the dooms we came.

[32 : 54] You have made known to me the path of life divine.

There shall I know what you write and joy from new days will shine.

Now may the grace, mercy and peace of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit rest and abide upon each one of you now and forevermore. Amen. Amen.