



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Acts: 7:1-60

Acts

"Death of an Angel"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] We are in Acts, chapter 7, and we're going to cover the entire chapter which is a lengthy chapter, verses 1 through 60. But I am not going to read the entire chapter. What I want to do is give a summary of most of it and then read the end of the text.

Stephen has been arrested for the things that he taught in the synagogue and he is now on trial; and so in the first portion of this text, he gives his defense. It's the longest speech in the book of Acts; and in it, he gives a survey of Israel's history. That's how he defends his teaching. And in it, one of a number of themes is stressed. But one is that the rejection of the men that God has sent to the nation is seen throughout Israel's history, finding its fulfillment in the rejection of Christ. Many men had been sent prophets and others, men who were typical of Jesus Christ; and, historically, the nation rejected them. And that is seen in this last generation, Stephen's generation, in the way it received Jesus Christ. And so having developed that throughout this speech, we then come to verse 51 where he now applies that to the people; and then Luke records their response.

Verse 51: "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him. But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into

heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep.

May the Lord bless this reading of his Word. Let's bow in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for the time and the privilege we have to be together this morning, to gather as the people of God, those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ; and to open up your holy Word, your inerrant Word, and read from it. That itself is a great privilege. And then, Father, to continue our study in it, to consider these things more carefully; and we count that a great privilege, Lord; and to do so in the instruction of the Holy Spirit, we pray for that.

Father, in this text, you reveal so much to us. In your inerrant Word, you reveal all those things that we could not grasp, could not understand apart from that revelation. We would be ignorant of you; of your nature; of your grace; of your love. We would be ignorant of the way of salvation, and yet, we learn that. We learn so much from the text from this particular passage as we consider your grace and we consider our nature, as well what we are like in and of ourselves.

We are a sinful people, and yet, you're a gracious God. So, Father, teach us this morning. May the Spirit of God open our hearts, and illuminate the page, and guide us and direct us in our understanding; and not only help us to understand, but make the applications to each of us individually, as you in your omniscience know, your wisdom know how best to do. We look to you to bless. Bless us spiritually this morning. Bless us materially; physically as well.

We think of those who have asked for our prayers; those who are sick; those who are in need of relief from difficulty, whether it be physical or mental or spiritual. We pray for those who are weighed down by the cares of this life. We pray that you would encourage them and lift them up. And, Father, it's in times of distress that we can turn our eyes to you, just as Stephen did in that moment of greatest distress, and know that the one to whom we look is always faithful, and well able to give help in

time of need. And so in time of need, may those who are in such need look to you; and bless them, Father.

We thank you, Lord, for the nation in which we live. We thank you for the blessings we have received in it. We pray they would continue. We pray that you would bless our government at each level: nationally, the state level, and at the local level. We live in great privilege, we have great opportunities, and we pray that those opportunities and that peace would continue that your church might flourish and have a good witness. May our witness in this city be good.

And so, Lord, we look to you to bless; and we pray that you would do so here in this hour; and then in this evening, when we return and celebrate the Lord's Supper. Prepare our hearts for that. Prepare our hearts for the ministry now. We pray that you bless our final hymn. May it prepare our minds to think and to worship you, we pray in Christ's name. Amen.

[Message] Sometimes people quote the Bible verse, "Let me die the death of the righteous," without realizing that it was the prayer of Balaam, the false prophet. His prayer expressed his envy, and with good reason. There is a difference between the death of the righteous and that of the wicked, and Balaam knew it. The righteous die with the hope of eternal life; the wicked don't. And when that moment comes, the difference is often seen.

It has been said that when the French skeptic Voltaire was on his deathbed, he pleaded with his doctor to give him six more months of life. Without hope of putting off the inevitable, he died crying, "Then I shall go to hell and you will come after me." What a contrast to Amy Carmichael who after years of serving Christ in India, and much physical pain, she told her nurse shortly before her death, "When you hear I have gone jump for joy." That's how the righteous die. That's how they should die, because for them, death is not the king of terrors, but the way of entering the gates of glory.

We see that very plainly in our text of Acts 5 which recounts the last day of Stephen's life when he saw the heavens open up and Christ standing to receive him as the first martyr of the church. A martyr is a person who dies for his or her beliefs; and a Christian martyr is one who dies because of his or her witness for Jesus Christ. In fact, the word "martyr" comes from a Greek word meaning "a witness," and Stephen's witness was given first in his defense of the faith before the Jewish people; and then in

his death, which he died by their hand. He had been arrested for what he had said in the Synagogue of the Freedmen and charged with slandering Moses and the law and the temple. It was untrue, all based on false testimony; but he was compelled to give a defense, which he did spontaneously and forcefully.

It's not a point-by-point rebuttal. Instead, Stephen gave a survey of Jewish history in which he develops two major themes. First, that the presence of God is not restricted to one place, to one land, or one building like the temple. The Jews had great pride in the temple. For them, it was the proof that God was with them, and that added to that conviction. It goes way back, at least to the time of Jeremiah, if not before; because in Jeremiah 7:4 God warns against false confidence: confidence in false words such as, "This is the temple of the Lord; the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord."

That's what they would say every day, expressing their great confidence that God was with them because God was in that temple made with hands; just as people throughout Christendom can go to a beautifully ornate, stately cathedral, or a church with a marvelous steeple and feel that, "This is where God is, and therefore, we're secure because we come here."

Oh, not necessarily. It certainly wasn't true with those of Jerusalem. In Jeremiah's day, the Lord said, "Don't be betrayed. Don't be fooled by such false confidences. Put your faith in the Lord." He called upon a change of heart.

Well, that same attitude was present in Stephen's day. There was great pride in the temple. But Stephen demonstrates in his defense, his speech or sermon that, "God is greater than a temple, and that the people of God and worship today is not restricted to one place."

Second, he shows that the refusal of the Jewish people to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah followed a pattern in the nation that can be seen from the beginning with its rejection of those who foreshadowed him; those who went before him who were sent by God. Well, this is his defense which is called forth in the trial that opened with the chief priest asking if the charges of blasphemy against him were true. Stephen was ready with a reply that reviewed Israel's past in four epics.

First, Abraham in Mesopotamia and Canaan; second, Joseph and the exile in Egypt; third, Moses and the wilderness wandering; and, fourth, David, Solomon, and the temple. The third section dealing with Moses is the longest. It covers verses 17

through 43, and it gives an indirect answer to the charge that he had slandered Moses. It gives that in the things that Stephen says about Moses; but also in the length, the time that he gives to the person of Moses. In the last section, he contrasts the tabernacle with the temple; and in so doing, he answers the charge that he had spoken against the temple.

His opening statement gave no evidence of blasphemy; just the opposite. He begins with the highest reverence for God and for his audience. He said, "Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran."

"God is the God of glory," he says. That's how he describes him. But the appearance of that glory to Abraham – and this is his point: that glory was not in Canaan, not in the Promised Land, but outside of it in a pagan land. Now that is where grace was first manifested to Israel when God called the father of the Jewish people out of darkness, out of unbelief, out of heathenism, to a life of faith; which shows that God is not limited to one geographical place; that God's great works are not restricted to Israel, not restricted to Jerusalem. He is present throughout the world.

He revealed his glory in Mesopotamia and he said to Abraham, "Leave your country and your relatives and come into the land that I will show you." Abraham did that, which itself was a great act of faith. He left his home; he left his people; he left all that was comfortable. He left paganism and he followed the Lord. It was an act of faith.

But then having arrived in the Promised Land, he didn't live like a possessor, he lived as a sojourner. "God gave him no inheritance," Stephen says, "not even a foot of ground." And so Abraham lived as a pilgrim; as one passing through this world, which is how those who are obedient to the Lord live, as pilgrims.

That was aimed at the Jewish leaders who had lost that world view and were settled in the land too much at home in the world. Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, had not part of the world, not even a foot of ground, Stephen says. He had only the promises of a future land and future descendants; and those descendants, the Lord says, would be slaves in a foreign land for 400 years.

But Abraham trusted God. He lived by faith and he became a father of a descendant. He became the father of Isaac, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of 12 sons, the 12 patriarchs. One of them was Joseph and he was a

man of faith just as Abraham was, but his brothers were not and they mistreated him; and in verses 9 through 16, Stephen tells of Joseph, how his brothers became jealous and sold him into Slavery in Egypt; how they rejected the righteous one, the one whom God had sent, the one whom God had raised up to be their deliverer. It was the beginning of a pattern that would be seen all through Israel's history. The nation rejected and killed those whom God sent, its prophets; and, ultimately, its Messiah.

In fact, Joseph can be seen as a type of Christ. His life patterns our Lord's. He was rejected by his brothers; and, of course, our Lord came into his own and his own received him not. Joseph was mistreated. He suffered humiliation at the hands of his brother; and our Lord did as well when he was mocked and crucified. But God exalted his Son, he raised him from the dead, and he exalted him to his right hand.

And God was with Joseph in Egypt as well. He exalted him to be governor over the land, and blessed his family there in Egypt by bringing them down to that land during a famine; and there in Egypt under Joseph's care, the family prospered and it multiplied. It became a great nation over those years. But when the time of deliverance came near, when that 400-year period came to its end, a king began to rule over Egypt who didn't know about Joseph, or at least did not appreciate all that Joseph had done for the Egyptians, and he mistreated the people. He enslaved them and killed them. It was the first Jewish holocaust when Pharaoh was drowning Jewish babies in the Nile.

That was when Moses was born. He was Israel's new deliverer. And Stephen recounts his life in verses 17 through 43. "He was born a beautiful child," Stephen says in verse 20. "He was lovely in the sight of God."

His parents protected them as long as they could. They nurtured him for three months until it was no longer possible and then they trusted him to the Lord's care. They put him in a basket out on the Nile, and providentially, the daughter of Pharaoh found him and adopted Moses as her own child. He was raised in the palace as a prince of Egypt. He received the best education that the Egyptians could provide. And Stephen adds that, "He was a man of power in words and deeds."

This is a more reserved description than some of Stephen's contemporaries gave to Moses. Some of the Jewish writers of that time describe Moses as the father of science and culture. One even described him as the founder of Egyptian culture. That's an exaggeration. But he did do great things; we don't know what they were;

but whatever he did as prince of Egypt, his training in that land and under that system prepared him for his work of deliverer later on. The Israelites were slow in recognizing him as that.

When he was fully grown at the age of 40, Stephen tells us that he went out to see his people. The author of Hebrews tells us that he made a spiritual decision and renounced his princely privileges, considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than their treasures of Egypt: he decided to cast his lot with his people. And so when he went out to visit them, to see them, he came upon a struggle. He came upon an Egyptian mistreating a fellow Hebrew and he sought to deliver the Israelite; and in so doing, he killed the Egyptian. He thought that that would rally the people to him and ignite a revolt that would lead to freedom. Moses evidentially understood that he was the deliverer and that the time of deliverance was near.

But here again, we see the pattern that appeared in Joseph's brothers and would be fulfilled when Jesus came. The people didn't follow Moses; they rejected him. The next day, he tried to reconcile two Hebrews who were fighting. And one who was injuring the other pushed Moses away and he said, "Who made you a ruler over us?" And when he accused Moses of killing the Egyptian the day before, Moses became fearful, he fled for his life across the desert east to Midian and he remained there for 40 years.

At the end of that time, God appeared to him there in Midian in the flames of the burning bush near Mount Sinai and spoke to him there. He said in verses 32 and 33, "I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." God said that the ground of Midian was holy. It's there in Midian, as Stephen tells us, that Mount Sinai stood, where the law was given and the covenant that God made was made between him and Israel.

Now these things didn't happen in Jerusalem, and there's no temple there in Midian; but God was there and it was his presence there that made the ground holy. God can't be restricted to a single land or a single building. He was with Abraham in Mesopotamia, with Joseph in Egypt, with Moses in Midian, and there's great encouragement in that fact. It is a great encouragement to know that when we leave this place, God doesn't stay behind; that wherever we go God is.

It is a great encouragement to know that the work of God penetrates the darkest corners of this world, that he can go into the most pagan of lands and he call the heathen out to himself. He's sovereign and he does those things, and he protects us wherever we go. What great encouragement to know that God was with Moses, he was with Joseph, and he came in that dark place of Mesopotamia and called out Abraham. Stephen's point is that God is everywhere, in every land; and true worship occurs wherever men meet God in faith, not in the temple of Jerusalem alone.

Now the Lord sent Moses back to Egypt to lead his people out of slavery, and Stephen recounts that with a sketch of Moses' ministry, how he did wonders and signs in Egypt, and in the Red Sea, and in the wilderness for 40 years. But in spite of that, the people continued to reject Moses. "They repudiated him," Stephen says in verse 39. That's the same word that's used in verse 27 of the Israelite that pushed him away. So this is a repudiation; a rejection with some violence.

When Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the law, the people were down below breaking it, making an idol, a calf, and worshipping it. That pattern of breaking the law and rejecting those whom God sent continued throughout Israel's history until eventually, judgment fell and the nation was carried off to Babylon. As Stephen says in verse 44 and 43 with a quote from Amos the prophet – and Stephen was in effect saying that his accusers and the court were descendants of those people, not just physically, but also spiritually, because they had done the same thing – just as the nation rejected Moses who did wonders and signs, the Jewish people and their leaders rejected who had done miracles among them. It was they, it was not Joseph who blasphemed God.

Even their devotion to the temple was evidence of that. Stephen had been accused of speaking against it, and so he deals with this matter of the temple in verses 44 through 50 by contrasting it with the tabernacle, the portable tent which was made in the wilderness. They brought it into the Promised Land when they conquered Canaan, and it was the sanctuary of God for hundreds of years through the reign of David. It was not until Solomon became king that the temple was built.

God had never commanded Israel to build a temple. It was David's desire to do that and it came out of a pure heart, and so God honored that. He allowed the building of the temple, but he never commanded it. What he commanded was that the tabernacle be built. He directed its construction; he gave the pattern for it.

So Stephen seems to suggest from that that the temple was inferior to the tabernacle. The tabernacle was designed for a pilgrim people. Its very form and function were instructive in that way, moving from place to place. It was a reminder that we are passing through this world.

This world is not our home. Even when the temple was built and there was that stationary structure, it was not regarded as God's home, at least not in a literal sense. Isaiah made that clear, and Stephen quoted him in verses 49 and 50: "Heaven is my throne and earth is the footstool of my feet. What kind of house will you build for me?" says the Lord, "or what place is there for my repose? Was it not My hand which made all these things?"

Even Solomon recognized that. When he dedicated the temple, he said in his prayer, "Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, the highest heaven cannot contain you. How much less this house which I have built?"

God cannot be confined to one place. God is omnipresent; he is everywhere present. The whole earth is his footstool. In fact, he's beyond this earth; he beyond this universe. Theologians speak of the immensity of God; he is beyond everything. The world cannot contain him; how much less a small temple. He is omnipresent.

He was with Abraham in Mesopotamia; with Joseph in Egypt; Moses in Midian. He traveled with the Israelites; he tabernacled with the nation in the wilderness outside the land. And so if he has a house on earth, it is within his people that he lives; and that evidentially is what Stephen had taught when he was arrested. He didn't denigrate the temple, he taught that God had established a new spiritual age with the coming and the crucifixion and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ; and in that new age, we worship God in spirit and truth. And wherever God's people gather, he is there. He tabernacles among us, not in a house of stone.

Well, that was Stephen's response; that is his defense. He had been accused of blaspheming Moses, and speaking against the law and the temple. His response demonstrated that he was more biblical than his accusers; and all that he said refuted the charge that he'd blasphemed Moses. He described him at his birth as beautiful, lovely in the sight of God, he identified him as the one whom God had sent to Israel as ruler and deliverer, and he magnified Moses' ministry in verse 37 by recalling that he prophesied the coming of the Messiah as a prophet like him. It was his accusers who dishonored Moses and broke the law because they rejected the very one whose

coming Moses had foretold. And so now Stephen applies his sermon, and he does so with great force in verse 51:

"You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

When Stephen began his defense, he was described as having a face like the face of an angel. Now he has spoken like an angel, like one of God's messengers with courage and clarity, "And the people," Luke writes, "were cut to the quick," which is a very descriptive word, a word that's used elsewhere of a saw cutting. It means "to saw through," and Stephens words had done that. Like a saw, they had cut right through the souls of these people and they reacted with rage. They began gnashing their teeth, grinding their teeth at him.

But Stephen was calm. He was full of the Holy-Spirit, Luke says, gazing into heaven, ready for whatever happened when he saw God's glory and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Behold," he said, " I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." What makes that so unusual is that the New Testament makes much of the fact that Christ is a seated priest. The book of Hebrews stresses that fact.

A priest of Levi never sat down in the tabernacle because their work was never finished. They would sacrifice morning and night; morning and night; day after day. The great Day of Atonement would come in October and they would offer the atoning sacrifice for the nation, and there would be great joy, great relief. But then the next year would come and the sins had built up, and they must go again and make an offering on the Day of Atonement, slay the animals, and apply the blood to the mercy seat year after year after year because there was no final sacrifice and so they could not take their seat, they could not rest because their work was never finished.

Christ finished his work of atonement. He declared it finished from the cross. And so in Hebrews 10:12, the author writes: "He having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time sat down at the right hand of God." He is a seated Priest because his work of atonement is a finished work. Nothing can be added to it.

But now he stands for Stephen. Why? Various suggestions have been made, but I like the one that Jesus rose from the Throne of God to greet his first martyr into heaven. It was a great tribute to a faithful servant. Christ promised that, "Everyone who confesses me before men, the Son of Man will confess him also before the angels of God." He did that, and it was the greatest defense.

The Son of Man, the Son of God, stood for Stephen; but it was too much for the people. Enraged by the vision, they stopped their ears, shouted him down, and drove Stephen out of the city where they began stoning him. It was an illegal act since Rome had taken away the Jews right of capital punishment, so it was the equivalent of a modern-day lynching. But as Stephen fell to his knees, he continued to be a witness to God's grace as he died a Christ-like death.

As they stoned Stephen, he prayed for them. First, calling on the name of the Lord, he said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" That's what he does at the very moment of death, he receives our spirit.

There is no delay, no purgatory; we immediately enter into the presence of Christ. That's what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:8, "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." No period of waiting; no time of soul sleep. There's no such thing taught in the Bible.

What Jesus told the thief on the cross is true for every believer: "Today you shall be with me in paradise." It happens without delay. And so as Stephen departed this world, he looked to Christ to receive him, just as Jesus had looked to the Father when he hung on the cross: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." That Stephen would pray to Christ in the same way indicates that Christ is like the Father; he is equally God: Very God of Very God and someone to whom we can pray, and who will be faithful whenever we pray to him.

Well, that's what Stephen did. He prayed to Christ. Stephen didn't pray to Mary, he didn't pray to the saints or to an angel. Nowhere in Scripture do God's people pray to saints or to angels, they pray to God alone. What could Saint Nicholas or Michael the archangel add to Christ? He's all-sufficient. He's the Good Shepherd who promises to lead us safely through the valley of the shadow of death, and he won't fail. He's God Almighty.

It's also worth noting that Stephen didn't pray, "Lord, remember my deeds; remember my sermons; remember my faithfulness to you." He made no appeal to his

own merit, he trusted solely in Christ's grace and love. He leaned completely upon him. A person who does that is ready to leave this world at any moment.

Stephen was ready, but he had one last request. As the end came, he prayed in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Then Luke says he fell asleep. It was a peaceful end to a violent death.

That's the death of the righteous. That is what Balaam envied: sleep. That is the death for the believer. The body sleeps because it will be awakened in the future resurrection. The soul is present with Christ and alert in the joy of heaven waiting for the day of the resurrection when it will be reunited with the body that will be glorified and complete. And so under a rain of stones, Stephen left this world and was received by Jesus Christ with great reward.

His death must have left a deep impression on the minds of many who saw it, and one I think in particular; the young rabbi at whose feet the executioners lay their robes, Saul. We're told at the beginning of chapter 8 that Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. But for the rest of his life, he must have carried in his memory the picture of that face that was like the face of an angel, and that prayer of grace for the forgiveness of his enemies. Such images can't be easily dismissed; and God does not dismiss such prayers.

It wasn't long after that that prayer was answered when on a Damascus road, the very glory that Stephen saw struck down Saul in a blinding light, and Jesus spoke to him and brought him to faith. Surely all that Stephen said and all that Stephen did played a part in the conversion of Saul of Tarsus.

We never know what affect we are having on those around us, those to whom we witness; those for whom we pray; those who see us as we merely live out our lives in faithful service to God. We don't know what God is doing. We may see no response in those around us, but God may be doing a great work that will bear fruit in their lives at a later time; in fact, at a time after we've left.

George Müller was a man of great faith, a man of earnest prayer. I'm sure many of you have read about George Müller and how he prayed against great odds, and yet he saw God miraculously answer his prayers. Devoted his life to a ministry in which that would be demonstrated, and he was faithful to the Lord and the Lord was always faithful to him. Well, there were two men for whose salvation he prayed for over 50 years, and he prayed continually for them because he was convinced that God

had laid them upon his heart. Both men were converted; one shortly before his death and the other shortly after it.

The prayer that Stephen prayed had been laid on his heart by God; and shortly after his death, Saul was converted and he became the apostle to the Gentiles, the apostle Paul who had much to say about Christian death himself. He called it sleep. He called it the enemy without a sting. He described it in terms of a journey: "My departure," he wrote to Timothy.

Every believer in Jesus Christ can face death with the same hope, the same confidence that Stephen did, that Paul did, because we face death without fear of judgment. It doesn't mean we won't stand before the judgment seat. We will stand before the judgment seat of Christ, that's true, as he judges our lives and our rewards; but we do not stand before the judgment seat of condemnation. The sting of death has been removed; Christ has taken it in our place.

God does not promise any of us an easy death. A martyr's death is a hard death. A modern death sometimes means living out our last days in an intensive care unit or on an oncology ward. What God promises though peace in death and glory forever and ever.

I like the scene at the end of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* when the two pilgrims, Christian and Hopeful have crossed the river and come to the Heavenly City. It was a hard crossing for Christian. But Bunyan writes: "Now I saw in my dream that these two men went in at the gate. And, lo, as they entered, they were transfigured and they had raiment put on them that shone like gold. There were also that met him with harps and crowns, and gave them to them, the harps to praise with all and the crowns in token of honor. And then I heard in my dream that all the bells in the city rang again for joy, and that it was said unto them, 'Enter ye into the joy of your Lord.'"

That's what Stephen did. That's what we as Christians do; when we die, we enter into joy, we enter into glory. And the life and death of Stephen should teach us this: serve Christ while you live, be faithful witnesses while you can, and fear not death. Christ will lead us through the valley and receive us safely to himself on the other side just as he did Stephen, just as he has done for countless others who've gone before us. That's our hope, and that's the certainty for the believer in Jesus Christ.

Do you have that hope? Have you put your faith in Jesus Christ as your God, as your substitute and Savior? If not, then death is a terrifying thing, because what follows is endless punishment. But Christ bore that punishment as the substitute, and all who believe in him escape the judgment to come.

Don't reject him. Don't fall into the error of those Jews who believe that because they had the temple, they had God. It is easy to come to a place like this where the Bible is taught, where Christ is, and believe that because you're here, Christ is yours. Those who belong to Christ are those who believe in him. Not until one puts his faith in Jesus Christ and understands that he or she is a sinner deserving of hell, and turns from his indifference to Christ, or his confidence in himself, and puts his faith in Jesus Christ, does that person become a true child of God. May God help you to do that.

If you're here without him, don't reject him. Turn to Christ, trust in him, and receive at that very moment the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting. May God help you to do that, and help each of us to rejoice in what we have in Christ; to live our lives as Stephen did, as bold witnesses for the truth, not fearing what may come, knowing that God is in complete control, and he will receive us into his presence. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for your goodness and your grace, and we consider a passage such as this. And we see that and see your faithfulness, faithfulness to Stephen; and we see in Stephen faithfulness to you. And may that encourage us to be men and women like him: clear in our faith, bold in our faith, trusting in you. Make us effective witnesses as we go out of this place, Father. May we be lights in a dark place. May we trust in you at every moment.

We thank you that you're always faithful. We thank you for the death that Christ died on our behalf, and it's in his name we pray. Amen.