

Acts 041

Dying Grace

Acts 7:54-60

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Let's take our Bibles this evening and open them to the book of Acts 7:54. We're going to try to finish Acts 7 today. Verses 54 through 60. I always try to give little titles for the sermon teachings. I've entitled this one "Dying Grace," because the verses that we're looking at tonight really describe the first martyr of the church age. A man named Stephen, the first deacon that was selected. So, we can take the material related to Stephen and divide it into four parts. We saw Stephen's arrest at the end of chapter 6. And his arrest and the fact that he was brought before the Sanhedrin sort of gave him an opportunity to give a defense, Acts 7:2- 53. And we've spent several weeks on Stephen's sermon, where he is, impromptu, going through Israel's history, under pressure, and explaining why Israel is guilty. So, I don't know if I have to talk through this again. I think we've talked through it enough, but he gets to the end there, chapter 7:51-53. And his point is the current generation-- through its national rejection of Yeshua, their King, Jesus-- is committing the same sins prior generations have committed. After all, part one Abraham was partly obedient after all.

I. Stephen's Arrest (Acts 6:8-7:1)

II. Stephen's Defense (7:2-53)

III. Stephen's Stoning (7:54-60)

IV. Third Persecution (8:1-4)

Part two: Israel always gets things right the second time, not the first time. As evidence from the life of Joseph and the life of Moses.

Part three: it didn't take Israel long to rebel against God while Moses was on Sinai receiving the law, it only took them forty days.

Part four: God revealed himself to Israel as one, but they moved into polytheism.

Part five: the Tabernacle and the temple were never intended to be permanent habitations of God. So the fact that God is now setting aside Israel for a season and turning to a new man called the church shouldn't be surprising.

Part six is: the current generation is just as guilty as any other prior generation in terms of their national rejection of Jesus. So that's quite a sermon. I mean, first of all, it's long. Secondly, it's purely historical. It's all coming from memory of Israel's history. And thirdly, it doesn't make Israel look good. So, Stephen did not exactly get a standing ovation from the Sanhedrin when he gave this talk.

III. Stephen's Stoning (Acts 7:54-60)

- A. Audience's reaction (54)
- B. Stephen's dying vision (55-56)
- C. Stephen's death (57-60)

And what takes place now is part three of the material, related to Stephen that we're going to look at this evening. Stephen's stoning. So, we have three parts to this. The audience's reaction, verse 54. Stephen's dying vision, verses 55 and 56. And then Stephen's death, verses 57 through 60. Notice the reaction of the Sanhedrin, the governing religious and political body in Jerusalem, when Stephen got to his conclusion of the sermon. You see it there in verse 54, *Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him.* Now this language "cut to the quick," it should sound familiar to you, because that was the reaction to Peter's sermon when he got to the end of his sermon back in Acts 2:37. It says: *Now when they (the Jews) heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" So they were cut to the quick when they heard this.* The same thing happened in Acts 5. When the apostles got to the end of that teaching in Acts 5 before the unbelieving Jews. Acts 5:33 says, *But when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and intended to kill them.*

So why does it keep saying that they were "cut to the quick"? Well, it has to do with the nature of the Word of God and the nature of the Holy Spirit. First of all, the Word of God is living and active and sharper than any double-edged sword, piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. You know that verse? That's the famous Hebrews 4:12 verse, describing the work of the Word, the nature of the Word. When God's Word is taught in an uncompromising way, it has this effect of sort of laying people bare, laying us bare and convicting us. So, Stephen hasn't done anything here but cite scripture to prove his points. And when the Jewish leadership heard this, they're basically convicted. That's

the work of the word. Paul, over in Second Timothy 3:16-17, describes the work of the word. He says there: *All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.* So, you notice that the Word, its function is to not just teach, But it's also to reprove and correct. That's what Stephen's sermon did. And beyond that, Jesus in the upper room made this prediction. Because in the upper room, the disciples-- eleven of them, Judas, the unbeliever, having already left-- were very panicked over the predictions that Jesus was making, that He was leaving soon. So, in response to that, Jesus says to the eleven in John 16:7-11, "*But I tell you the truth, It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you--*" speaking of the Holy Spirit. "*And He, when he comes, will convict--*" This is why they're cut open. "*--the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you no longer see Me; and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged.*" So, Jesus said, when I leave, the Holy Spirit is going to come, and He's going to execute the ministry of conviction.

So, the day of Pentecost has transpired. And that's why when Peter finishes the sermon they're laid bare, they're cut open. That's why in Acts 5, when the teaching is over, they're laid bare, they're cut open. And Stephen has that same effect. So, it's the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit working through the Word, which is analogized to a sharp-edged sword. And that's why it says here they were "cut to the quick." And it says they began "gnashing their teeth at him." Now, that's an interesting study in and of itself, the gnashing of teeth. It's typically used of people in hell. Matthew 13:42, Jesus describing hell, says: "*and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*" So, it's kind of something that unbelievers experience when they come under either conviction or judgment. And this is how they react to Stephen's masterfully crafted speech that he basically gave off the top of his head. They're cut open and they're gnashing their teeth.

And prior to his death, Stephen sees a vision. And this is why I've entitled this "Dying Grace." Because it seems to me that when somebody that's a believer dies, God provides extra grace or enablement to handle that difficult situation. Notice, if you will, verse 55. It says: *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." So, the first thing you notice here is Stephen; he's experiencing these things, this wonderful teaching, historical sermon that he gave and the fact that he's ready to die and he's receiving grace from God in the midst of it. You notice that he is completely and totally dependent upon the Holy Spirit. He's not doing these things through his own power, because it's very tempting to look at this and say to ourselves, well, we could never do this. And that's true. We couldn't. But if you're enabled by the Holy Spirit, as Stephen is here, you have the ability to do it because it's not you who's doing it-- it's God doing it through you. And you might recall that when Stephen was selected for the position of deacon, there were criteria given back in Acts 6. One of those pieces of criteria (criterion, singular) is such a person had to be full of the spirit. Acts 6:3 says: "Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the *Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.*" The distribution of the food to widows, you remember. God raised up the office of deacon, and to be a deacon you had to be known as a person full of the Spirit. You had to have people in those positions that knew how to depend upon the Spirit as they're going about the work of God. So, I think Pastor Jim, earlier in prayer time was talking about the selection of elders and deacons. And so that would be one of the pieces of criteria, I would think when you nominate someone. Are they an individual that's known to be full of the Spirit? Stephen is clearly full of the Spirit here, and that's why he's able to say the things he says in Acts 7, and that's why he's able to die the way he dies here at the end of Acts 7.

Now, you keep reading the second part of verse 55 into verse 56. Stephen, as he's already getting ready to die, sees a vision of Jesus in heaven. And it says here twice that Jesus was standing. *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."* Now that's very interesting because whenever Jesus is portrayed in His post-Ascension ministry at the Father's right hand, He is never standing. He's always seated. When Jesus spoke to the church at Laodicea in the book of Revelation 3:21, it says this of Jesus: *He who overcomes, I will grant him to sit down with Me on My throne, as also I overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.* Now, this would be a good sixty years after the ascension. As Jesus is speaking to the church at Laodicea, He says, I sat down with My father on His throne. So, whenever Jesus is portrayed in heaven after

the ascension, in His present session, in His priestly ministry, after the order of Melchizedek, He's always seated. Never standing. Colossians 3:1 says, *Therefore, if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.* Hebrews 1:3 says, *He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.*

So why is it that Jesus is always portrayed in the seated position in His high priestly ministry? It has to do with the fact that the forgiveness of sins is finished. Because of what Christ accomplished on the cross. John 19:30 says: *Therefore, when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "it is finished!" And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.* That's the death of Christ. So, when Christ died on the cross, it's not like He did, you know, 95% of the job and He's got to be busy in heaven standing up, continuing to do the remaining 5%. The idea is He's seated; He's sitting down because the job of paying for the sin debt of the world has been accomplished, paid in full. And that's what makes the present session of Jesus in His high priestly ministry different than the Aaronic Levitical priesthood of the Old Testament era. Those priests in the Old Testament era functioned in an earthly tabernacle, which you can see a picture of on [slide 12]. And the book of Leviticus goes into great detail, describing the furniture in the tabernacle. But there's a piece of furniture that's missing. There are no chairs. You can look at all these pieces of furniture. You go to the book of Exodus and you get to about chapter 25, and really through the end of the book, it describes in mind numbing detail-- chapters 25, 26 all the way through chapter 40-- every little detail of the tabernacle. Every single piece of furniture. But never is there a chair described in the tabernacle. Now, why is that? Because the priest's job was never finished. The priest never sat down, at least when they were on the job or before they were replaced. Why is it that there's no chair in the tabernacle? Because the priest's job was never finished. Why was the priest's job never finished? Because the animal sacrifices could not conclusively deal with the sin problem. The only thing they could do is kick the note of indebtedness down the road for another year on the Day of Atonement. It postponed God's judgment against sin, against the nation because of its sins for another year. The can was kicked down the road for another year, but the next year they had to go through the same ritual on the Day of Atonement. So, the animal sacrificial system

never perfectly resolved the sin problem. So that's why the priests are never portrayed as sitting down. They're always on the job, always offering the new sacrifice.

By contrast to all of this, Jesus said in John 19:30, "*It is finished.*" So, His first order of business after the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, as He ascended back to the Father's right hand and started His own high priestly ministry-- not after the Order of Aaron-- but the order of Melchizedek; the first thing He did was He sat down. That's why all these references that I gave you earlier portray Jesus, unlike the priests of old, in the seated position, because He did finally and conclusively deal with the sin problem. So, every time you see Jesus at the right hand of the Father, He's always sitting down for that reason. But here it's different. This is the only place in the Bible that I know of where He's standing. So why is he standing here when every other place He's seated? We don't know. But it does say twice that He was standing when Stephen saw this vision of Jesus at the Father's right hand. I think Jesus is portrayed as standing here out of honor to Stephen, because Stephen is about to become the first martyr of the church age. He's going to be the first among many martyrs of the church Age that will transpire over the next two thousand years or so. And because of his martyrdom, Christ does something irregular here. He does something abnormal. He does something atypical. He stands up, which He never does, at the Father's right hand, out of honor to Stephen.

C. Stephen's death (57-60)

1. Mob response (57)
2. Stephen's stoning (58)
3. Stephen's response (59)
4. Stephen's death (60)

The fact that Jesus is standing here shows the significance of what's happening in terms of Stephen's martyrdom. You go down to verses 57 through 60, and you actually have Stephen's death described for us. The first thing you notice as all these things are happening is the mob response by the Sanhedrin. Look at verse 57, *But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse.* The first thing they do when they hear his speech—now keep in mind who these people are. This is the leadership of the whole nation. This is the Sanhedrin. This is not some neighborhood gang or something. These are the highest-ranking people religiously, politically in the whole nation. And they basically act like a mob here. The first thing they

did was they “cried out with a loud voice.” The second thing they did is they “covered their ears.” They didn't want to hear this condemnation that they were under. We have that today, right? We have these safe spaces for college students today. If you're a conservative and you come onto the college campus and you give a conservative message, then the liberal college students get upset and claim you're invading their safe space and they can kind of retreat behind a box or something like that, where their assumptions in life can never be challenged. Right? Which I think is just crazy because that's not what college campuses are for. It's supposed to be about the free exchange of ideas, you know? But now we have a scenario where people don't want to be exposed to new ideas. And so, they're given these places called safe spaces, where their assumptions can never be challenged by anybody.

This is kind of a safe space mentality. I mean, here's the Sanhedrin. They're just physically clogging up their ears so they don't have to hear any more of what they've just heard from Stephen in Acts 7. And then it also says in verse 57 that they “rushed at him.” Now the word for “rushed”, translated is the same word used in Luke 8:33 of the demons that went into the herd. Remember? It says in Luke 8:33, *And the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd **rushed*** (that's the same word in Greek) *down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned*. So, this concept of rushing is like a mob/herd mentality. There's no vote. There's no discussion. There's no motion on the floor. There's no second of the motion. There's no “all in favor, say ‘aye’.” Nothing like that. I mean, they're just so enraged that it's a mob scene, and they can't wait to kill this guy because of what he has just said in terms of the speech here in Acts 7.

Then what comes is Stephen's stoning, Verse 58. *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*. You'll notice that when they finally execute Stephen and stoned him to death, they want to do it outside the city. Which is interesting, because that's the same thing that happened to Jesus, right? Hebrews 13:12, of the death of Christ says: *Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate*. Jesus was killed outside the gate of the city of Jerusalem. That's exactly what's happening to Stephen. Now, why is that? Why did they execute criminals outside the gate of the city? Well, they're following-- and here's a case where they are following their law. Some parts of the law they follow, other parts they

ignore because they're in such a rage. But it says in Leviticus 24:14, *"Bring the one who has cursed (blasphemed, in other words) outside the camp, and let all who heard him lay their hands on his head; and let all the congregation stone him.* So that's why they're taking him outside the city gate; because the Book of Leviticus mandated that's how you treat criminals. 'Don't kill them in the city. Kill them outside the city.' And then when they get him out there, verse 58 says *...they began stoning him.* Now this here creates a problem because by this time in history, Rome had come to power over the land of Israel, under General Pompey, in 63 BC. Pompey of Rome came into Israel, subdued the nation of Israel, and in the course of time the Romans, to show that they were the boss and not the subjugated Hebrews or the Jews, they took away from the Jews the right to execute their own criminals. That's why, when they made a decision that Jesus was guilty, the Jews didn't kill Him themselves, but they turned Him over to Rome for execution. I mean, why didn't they just kill Jesus themselves? Well, Rome had taken away their right to execute criminals. There's actually a reference to this in John 18:31. It says, *So Pilate said to them, "Take Him yourselves and judge Him according to your law."* Pilate says, I don't want anything to do with Jesus. *The Jews said to him (Pilate), "We are not permitted to put anyone to death."* So, Pilate, we're sending this back to you, because you Romans, going back to 63 BC, have taken away our right to execute our own criminals.

Which, you have to understand, is the handiwork of God, because Bible prophecy demands-- Isaiah 53:5, Psalm 22:16, Zechariah 12:10-- that when the Messiah dies, He must be pierced. If the Jews had executed Christ, He wouldn't have been pierced the way the Bible predicts. He would have been stoned to death, because that's how the Jews executed their own criminals. God had allowed Rome to come to power, take away from the Jews the right to execute their own criminals, so that when the Messiah died, He would not be stoned to death. He would be pierced. Because that's what happened when you were crucified, your hands and feet were literally pierced. And then typically a soldier would make sure that you're dead by thrusting a spear into your side. So, Jesus was pierced yet again. In this case, He was already dead, John's gospel tells us. Because blood and water, symptomatic of a ruptured heart, spilled out of Him when He was pierced by the Roman soldier. The fact that Rome had taken away from Israel the right to execute their own criminals was actually setting the stage for the fulfillment of the prophecies concerning Messiah's death through piercing.

So, if all of this is true, why is it that they're killing Stephen here? I mean, I thought Rome had taken away from them the right to execute their own criminals. It sort of creates a problem in the text, a problem in the passage. Now, there's a couple of solutions to this. One solution you'll find in Josephus, in his Antiquities, where Josephus says the Romans took away from the Jews the right to execute their own criminals, except in cases involving the temple. So, if the case concerned the temple, then the Romans said back to the Jews, you execute him the way you want. And remember-- Stephen had been accused of falsely speaking against the temple. That's back in Acts 6:13-14. It says: *They put forward false witnesses who said, "This man (concerning Stephen) incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law--"* holy place being the temple. So that may be one reason why Stephen was executed by the Jews here and not the Romans; because the allegation against him concerned the temple. Another possibility is that the Sanhedrin was in such a mob mindset that they weren't paying attention to the law. 'Yeah, Rome said what they said. But we're so angry we're going to kill him ourselves.' That's another possibility.

Arnold Fruchtenbaum writes:.

"A second explanation is that this event may have occurred in A.D. 36. In that year, Vitellus became the new imperial legate of the Province of Syria, which included Judea. He deposed Pontius Pilate from his procuratorship in A.D. 36. Pilate's successor, Marullus, did not arrive until A.D. 38. So there may have been a hiatus or a break between the deposing of Pilate and the arrival of the new procurator. It could very well be that the stoning of Stephen occurred during this time, which would have left the Sanhedrin without tight Roman oversight. A third explanation is that this was a mob scene, and mobs do not regard the rules of law."

So, this execution could have occurred during a time when Rome was sort of between leaders over the Land of Israel, and they weren't supervising executions the way they normally do. That's a possible solution. So, any way you cut it, there's a way to explain this. Maybe they were in a mob mindset. Maybe it had to do with the provision that Josephus talks about, that you can execute your own criminals if the (alleged) crime involves the temple. Or maybe it was during a time when there was a transition in Roman leadership, when they weren't supervising executions as tightly as they normally

did. So, there's no matter which way you go, there's a way to explain this, and I just point this out because people will surface this and say it's a contradiction in the Bible. You know, 'How could the Jews have killed Stephen here when Rome had come to power and removed from them the right to execute their own criminals?' I mean, these are the kinds of things that they will put on the Easter special with Dan Rather. And I don't even know if Dan Rather still alive. He's rather biased. But they have these Easter specials, and they have, you know, mysteries of the Bible and A and E. And they just jump on there and 'Look! the Bible is filled with contradictions. Who could ever believe that?' When in reality, when you start to investigate this beyond the sound byte you get on TV, there's ways of making this alleged contradiction into a non-contradiction. There's no contradiction here at all.

But at any rate, they're so angry that they execute Stephen. It's interesting as you go to the end of verse 58, it mentions somebody. It says *...witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul*. Why are they laying their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul? Well, here's a case where they're trying to follow the law. So, in some cases, they ignore the law. In other cases, they try to follow the law. And all the way back in Deuteronomy 17:6-7, it says you cannot execute someone in Israel unless you have two to three witnesses that witnessed a capital crime-- number 1. So, the innocent until proven guilty concept goes all the way back to the mosaic law. Number 2, the first person that throws the stone or stones to execute the alleged criminal has to be one of the witnesses. So, don't execute anybody unless you've got two to three witnesses. And then to further protect the rights of the accused, the very first person to throw the stones must be one of the one of the two to three witnesses. So, you better make sure you really saw what you saw in terms of a capital crime, because you're going to be the person throwing the rocks. That's why these witnesses, to Stephen allegedly speaking at the temple, put their cloaks aside so they can have their arms free outside the city gates to throw the first rocks at Stephen. Deuteronomy 17:6-7 says, *On the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses, he who is to die shall be put to death; he shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness*.

Now when you go into the New Testament, you'll find this concept of two-to-three-witnesses repeated in many contexts. But it's repeated in First Timothy, related to catching an elder in sin. If you're going to catch or witness an elder in sin, to the point where that elder has to be removed from his position, you cannot do it, First Timothy

tells us, on the basis of one witness. You must have two to three witnesses that see it. You'll notice that the elder or pastor is not some kind of pope appointed for life. He can be removed if caught in a sin. But at the same time, the church world is filled with people that don't like the elder or pastor for some trivial reason. Maybe he parts his hair on the wrong side of his head or something. It's very easy, if you don't like somebody, to kind of go around and gossip and stir up a sort of whispering campaign against somebody. So, the two-to-three-witnesses protect the elder from that as well. This two-to-three-witnesses thing is, is very, very common. It's very, very frequent in the Bible. The two-to-three-witnesses is in place here for those accused of capital crimes. You can't put someone to death on the basis of one witness-- you have got to have two to three. And then the Deuteronomy passage, chapter 17:7 goes on says, *The hands of the witnesses shall be the first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.* So, if you are one of the two to three witnesses, you better be sure about what you saw, because you're supposed to be the first one throwing the rock. That's why they're taking Stephen outside the gate. They're laying their cloaks down because it's the witnesses that are supposed to throw the first rocks.

And in this case, I think they're just making up things about Stephen. They're accusing him of speaking against the temple, taking him out of context-- which, in fact, he was not speaking against the temple. But as they lay down their cloaks, who's monitoring the cloaks? A young man named Saul. Saul is going to become Paul, right? But he hasn't been saved yet. He's going to become a big deal, beginning in Acts 9. Not only to the end of the book of Acts, he's a big deal, but he's a big deal for the rest of the New Testament. I mean, this is a man that's going to go on the three missionary journeys. He's going to get the gospel to Rome. He's going to write two thirds of our New Testament epistles. He's going to explain the mystery or the doctrine of the church in a way that others had never given such a complete explanation on. He then is mentioned here, because what is happening is, as Saul is as watching Stephen die, the Holy Spirit is planting a seed in his heart that He's going to water, leading to Saul's conversion in Acts 9.

The Bible teaches that evangelism is not something that happens in an instant. Jesus analogized it, in John 1, to planting. So did Paul in first Corinthians 3. A seed is planted, a seed is watered, A seed germinates over the course of time. In the same way a seed

is planted into someone's heart, that the Holy Spirit waters, leading to a conversion down the road. And I bring this up because a lot of times when the Holy Spirit prompts you to share your faith with somebody and you don't see an immediate conversion, you think you're outside of God's will. When the truth of the matter is, God could be calling you just to plant the seed. I mean, you have no idea how the Holy Spirit is going to bring that to fruition down the road.

This has happened a couple of times in my life where people-- one time in particular. A guy called me-- and he was like the least likely guy that you would ever think to get saved-- that I knew in college. This guy gets saved, and he calls me on the phone. I guess he had the alumni directory or something. I had long forgotten this guy and long forgotten this conversation. And he calls me on the phone, excited, talking about how he's a Christian now, and I'm listening, saying, 'Wow, that's amazing.' And then he tells me, 'It was something you said.' And I couldn't even remember the conversation. But he talked about where we were standing. Here was my dorm over here, Melrose Hall, University of Redlands. Here's the other dormitory over here. We were standing between them, and I kind of looked at my watch and I said, 'I've got to go.' And he goes, 'Well, where are you going?' I said, 'Well, I'm going to a campus crusade meeting.' And he made some comment, like, 'Campus Crusade? What in the blank is that?' You know, that's basically what he said. And I apparently had said something to him during that event. I said, 'Well, you know, if you try Jesus—' I said something to the effect of, 'It's like an experience that you've never had before. I mean, there's nothing like Jesus.' It was that kind of conversation. And then I just kind of went on my way. And he said, 'You know, the Holy Spirit has been bringing that conversation to my mind almost every single day for years.' I had no idea. I just threw this seed out there. Probably didn't even know what I was doing. And yet the Holy Spirit takes something that simple and that humble and uses it over the course of time to bring probably the least likely individual you can think of to Jesus Christ.

That's the kind of thing that's happening with Saul. I mean, he's just watching this happen. He's doing his job. I'll take care of the cloaks while you witnesses throw the first stones according to the law. And he's just watching Stephen die. And what is happening is the seed is being planted in his heart. And you know a seed is planted, because Saul gets angry. In fact, he gets so angry at this, he's going to launch persecution against the church in the next chapter, which is going to push the church out of Jerusalem into

Judea and Samaria. So, when you share Christ with somebody and they become upset at you, or they become visibly angry, that's the work of the Holy Spirit planting a seed and watering a seed. If they're getting upset at you, family members, coworkers, that's actually a good sign. That's not a sign that you're outside of God's will in your evangelism. That's actually a sign that you're in God's will. The people you have got to worry about are people that have no reaction at all and could care less. 'Oh, that's nice. I'm glad you found enlightenment through your guru. I'm happy with mine.' Those are the people that the Holy Spirit isn't working on, in my opinion. But if they're getting upset and they're getting angry, that's the work of the Spirit of God. And so that's what's happening with Saul. He's watching this. He's getting angry because he's presumably heard Stephen's whole talk. And the Holy Spirit is going to water that seed and bring it to fruition in Acts 9.

Watch what the Lord does with Saul, now, Paul. I mean, you wouldn't really have Christianity as we know it today without God's work through Paul. You never know what God is going to do with little things that we're faithful in, in the lives of somebody. Stephen is the bridge to Paul. He's the bridge between Peter and Paul. The two major characters in the book of Acts are Peter, early part of the book, and Paul, second part of the book. That's why I don't like the title Acts of the Apostles. The book is not about the apostles. It's about two apostles, primarily Peter and Paul. Peter being dominant in the early part of the book. Paul being dominant in the latter part of the book. In fact, the things that Paul does in the latter part of the book are repetitions of things that Peter did in the first part of the book. And yet, who's the bridge between Peter and Paul? Stephen. The martyrdom of Stephen. The speech of Stephen. Stephen transitions us away from Peter, who's the dominant figure, and introduces us to this man named Saul, who is going to become Paul.

So, they're throwing rocks at Stephen. They're laying their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. And then look at Stephen's response in verse 59. *They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"*

This idea of "receive my spirit" is a description of death; when a person dies. And that's what the Greek and Hebrew words for "death" mean. They mean separation. When a person dies, the part of them that's designed to live forever, the soul or the psyche,

sometimes called the spirit because God has set eternity into the hearts of men. We all live forever somewhere. Heaven or hell. The part of us that's designed to live forever separates from the body. And if you're a Christian, where does the immaterial part of you go? It goes into the presence of the Lord. This is what happened to Jesus when He died. Matthew 27:50 says, *And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His Spirit.* Almost the same language here in verse 59. The material and the immaterial are separated. In our studies in the book of Genesis 35, the same thing happened to Rachel who died giving birth to Benjamin. Remember? Genesis 35:18 says, *It came about as her soul was departing (for she died)--* Departing where? Departing into the presence of the Lord, because body and soul separated. Now at the resurrection, it's the opposite. Your soul comes back into your body. But it's the resurrected body. It's still you. But you'll look a lot better than you do now. And I'll look a lot better than I do. I'll feel a lot better because it'll be me. You'll still be able to recognize me, but it will be the body as God intended, without sin and sin and its consequences.

Genesis 3:19, *"...from dust you are to dust you shall return."* But when the separation occurs, the soul, if they're an unbeliever, goes immediately into torment. Luke 16:19-31, the rich man who died in unbelief immediately was in torment. But the good news for the believer is in Second Corinthians 5:8 *...to be absent from the body [is] to be present with the Lord.* Paul in Philippians 1:21-23 says, *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better.* Paul is saying, I'd rather die and leave and be with Jesus, because that's better. But as long as I'm here, I'm going to be fruitful for the body of Christ. He almost-- I don't know, maybe I'm reading between the lines here-- seems to get a little irritated with the Philippians. It's because of you people I have to stick around, kind of thing. But I would rather just depart and be with the Lord, which is much better.

So that's what happened to Stephen. The body and the soul separated. And he said, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Now notice this. There's no such thing as soul sleep. Where the soul kind of goes into this, I don't know, unconscious state for one hundred years or a thousand years and gets resurrected later. There is a future resurrection, but the soul is alive and aware, just like you're alive and aware right now, somewhere; either in Hades or in the presence of the Lord, depending upon whether the person is a

believer or not, awaiting the future resurrection. The Bible does not teach any such doctrine of soul sleep the way many unfortunately do.

Verse 60 is Stephen's death. It says, *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.* So, three things here: he's kneeling. There's a lot of kneeling that goes on in the Bible. Luke 22:41 says of Jesus in his prayer life, *And He withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and He knelt down and began to pray.* I mean, it's sort of embarrassing when you think about it, because usually when I pray, I'm in a comfortable position. But here's the Son of God praying while He's on his knees. Daniel 6:10 says, *Now when Daniel knew that the document was signed, he entered his house (now and his roof chamber he had his windows open toward Jerusalem); and he continued kneeling on his knees three times a day, praying and giving thanks before his God, as he had done previously.* You'll notice also that Stephen cries out. *He cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!"* Now who said that originally? That's what came out of Jesus' mouth as he was dying. Luke 23:34, *But Jesus was saying, "Father, forgive them--" that's the people killing Him-- "for they do not know what they are doing."* I mean, Jesus is not saying, 'Just wait till I come back the second time. I'm going to wipe you people out.' He's saying, 'Father, forgive them, they don't even know what they're doing.' Now, why is Stephen saying the same thing? Verse 55, *But being full of the Holy Spirit...* So it's not really Stephen doing the speaking here, it's Stephen relying upon the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is basically saying the same things that Jesus would say under those circumstances.

This is what I mean by dying grace. You don't have to go through this alone, this difficulty of dying. I remember George Mysinger, the founding president of Chafer Seminary. He had cancer and things of that nature. And we visited him once in his home in Albuquerque. He was obviously in a declining state. And I remember he said to us, you know, 'When I die, I just don't want to go out like a wimp. You know, I want to go out with strength and joy.'

And I think that's possible for us because we're not doing this through our own strength. This is dying grace. Stephen is saying what Jesus said when He died because it's the Holy Spirit speaking through Stephen.

And then the last thing it says is *he fell asleep*. Now, sleep is a euphemism for death for the Christian. Euphemism is a polite way of saying something. You know, it's not like he croaked or kicked the bucket. There's a nicer way of saying it. He fell asleep. And I like that euphemism because it's temporary. The separation between body and soul is temporary. Just like taking a nap. Because one of these days, the soul is going to go back into that body and it's going to be alive again, just like waking up from a nap. Paul uses this euphemism in First Thessalonians 4:13, *But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve, as do the rest, who have no hope*. Down in verse 15, he says, *For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep*. So "sleep" is an appropriate euphemism for a believer who's going to one day be back in their body, just like waking up from a nap.

Dying grace. Psalm 116:15 says, *Precious in the sight of the Lord Is the death of His godly ones*. So, Stephen, the first martyr of the church age, was not only given honor by a standing Jesus, but he was also given grace. The story of Stephen doesn't end here. It will anger Saul of Tarsus, who sees this, who will use this as an opportunity to launch the third major, the worst major persecution against the early church. Which is actually God's will because it will push the church out of Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria, which they wouldn't have gone into without persecution. Remember what Jesus said? *"you shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria even to the [uttermost] parts of the earth."* He never told them how He was going to get him out of Jerusalem, though, did He? He got them out of Jerusalem through persecution. And this is how they started to fit into the Master's design for the church. And we'll take a look at Acts 8 next time.