

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

Death is a Servant

Acts 7:54–8:3

Let's turn together to Acts 7. Before we dive into the text of Acts 7:54–8:3, I want to direct your attention to a passage from the Gospel of John. These are the words of Jesus, and they will help inform our understanding of our passage in Acts. I believe they foreshadow what happens with our protagonist, Stephen, in Acts 7.

Jesus said this: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). Several years ago I came across a strange expression that intrigued me. One of the things that many prosperity teachers say when they are preaching is the following: "You need to sow a seed." That struck me as odd.

Now what they are doing with that phrase is promising people health, wealth, and prosperity. But in order to receive that "blessing," you've got to give money. That's called "sowing a seed." Of course, the more money you give, the greater blessing you'll receive afterward. The more seed you sow, the more blessings you'll reap.

Now there is a theology of "seed-sowing" in the Bible.¹ And the passage I quoted in John speaks about seed-sowing. But it's a passage that no "health-and-wealth" teacher would ever quote. It's a passage that speaks of death and suffering as a good thing that God uses for his glory. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). Jesus was speaking about his own death in that passage, which bore the fruit of salvation for many. But Jesus was also giving his disciples a paradigm for their own ministry. Because he follows up that statement about "death-bearing fruit" with a universal statement for all of us: "Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:25).²

This passage was prophetically fulfilled in the lives of all of Jesus's apostles. Yet it wasn't one of Jesus's twelve that first experience a "seed-sowing death." Jesus's apostles all experienced suffering and opposition and persecution, but it wasn't one of his original twelve whose death first propelled the church into a new stage of fulfilling the Great Commission. It was the death of a bold, courageous, Greek-speaking Jew, one of the seven men, full of the Holy Spirit, who was called to serve widows with benevolence. One of those "Magnificent Seven" from Acts 6 earns the prestigious title: "First Christian Martyr." His name was Stephen.³

Now when we last left Stephen in Acts 7, he was preaching up a storm in the Sanhedrin. He was giving the religious leaders in Jerusalem a profound history lesson. And he was laying them out with his interpretation of the OT. And they couldn't counter his wisdom or his godliness or his rhetorical powers. Of course they couldn't! He was full of the Holy Spirit; they were not.

¹ Paul uses this imagery in the context of giving generously: "whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully" (2 Cor 9:6).

² Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 269: "Today we have a lot of therapy for sufferers. While this may be helpful, more helpful is a theology of suffering. Even with all the therapy we cannot avoid or escape suffering. In fact, by trying to avoid or escape suffering we may become disobedient to God's will. A theology of suffering will take the bitter sting out of it. It will help us to maintain joy in the midst of it and turn the suffering into something constructive for the kingdom."

³ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 13, Kindle: "The outreach of the church might never have reached beyond Jerusalem if it had not been for Stephen's death and the intensifying persecution it precipitated."

And when we last saw Stephen at the end of his speech, he told them in **verse 51**, “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit” (7:51). He accused them of rebelling against God, just like their forefathers did before them. He accused them of rejecting the Word of God, which Moses had delivered to them. He accused them of turning the temple into a superstitious good-luck charm. He accused them of murdering and rejecting the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Stephen was on trial for his life, but you wouldn’t know it from his “defense.” They accused him of blaspheming against God and his Word and his servant Moses. Stephen responded by saying, **“No, no, no! You’re the blasphemers here, not me. You’re the ones who are rebelling against God, not me. You’re the ones that are on trial here, not me.”** These religious leaders have no comeback for this. They resort to using their fists instead of their minds to silence Stephen.

Now we might have hoped, **“Maybe, just maybe, Stephen’s curt and direct appeal to their consciences will bring them to heartbroken repentance.”** **What’s the cure for stiff-necked rebellion? The answer is broken-hearted repentance!**⁴ And maybe, just maybe, they will respond like some did after Peter’s sermon in **Acts 2**.⁵ They said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” (**Acts 2:38**). And 3,000 people got saved and baptized that day. God used Peter’s sermon to bring about a radical transformation in the lives of thousands of people.

But not so, in **Acts 7**! God’s plan with Stephen’s sermon in **Acts 7** is different than his plan with Peter in **Acts 2**.⁶ Look what Luke records for us in **verse 54**.

⁵⁴ *Now when they heard these things they were enraged,⁷ and they ground their teeth at him.*

Is that repentance? Are those signs of repentance with these Jewish leaders? Grinding you teeth in Jewish society was a sign of rage. It was physical manifestation of uncontrolled fury. And so we know as early as **verse 54**, that this crowd is not headed for repentance.

Look at **verse 55**.

⁵⁵ *But [Stephen], full of the Holy Spirit,⁸ gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.⁹*

Now this is how I envision what’s going on here. Stephen is just preaching away and his language escalates at the end of his sermon from interpretation of the OT to accusation of the Jewish leaders. Probably at **verse 51**, when Stephen calls them “stiff-necked people” and “uncircumcised in heart,” their blood starts to boil and their teeth start to gnash. And that’s when they start to advance on him.

But Stephen is unaffected by the rising tension in the room.¹⁰ He just keeps preaching. And as his sermon starts to climax in **verse 55**, he has this divine vision of the throne room of heaven.¹¹ And as he gazes into heaven he sees the glory of God, and Jesus is standing at the right hand of God. Jesus said that he would be

⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 207: “Whether Stephen intended to give a direct appeal for his hearers to repent we will never know, for they abruptly broke him off.”

⁵⁵ MacArthur, *Acts 1–11*, MNTC, 220: “Stephen’s hearers seem just as resistant and callous toward the truth. This was at least the third time they had heard the gospel presented (cf. 4:8ff.; 5:27ff.), yet their anger escalated and they continued to harden their hearts.”

⁶ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 266: “God is powerfully at work both when the sun shines brightly and when the dark clouds loom over us.”

⁷ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 310: “They are ‘ripped [or sawn through] in their hearts’ (διεπρίοντο ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν, *dieprionto tais kardiais autōn*), which describes a visceral, emotional reaction of anger.”

⁸ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 397: “What Luke emphasizes is not Stephen’s courage but the presence of the Holy Spirit in his life (6:10; 7:55).”

⁹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 389: “Stephen could have proclaimed the basic content of the vision—Jesus of Nazareth is the messianic Son of Man, who, after his death, was raised from the dead and exalted to the right hand of God—as this is what Peter proclaimed on the day of Pentecost (2:34–36). The fact that the fundamental assertion that Jesus had been raised from the dead and exalted to God’s presence is communicated in a vision underscores its divinely vindicated validity.”

¹⁰ Sproul, *Acts*, 134: “If I had a mob ready to kill me, so furious that they were advancing and gnashing their teeth, I would not be able to take my eyes off of them except to look around quickly for a way of escape. Stephen looked up, and God in His grace gave him a taste of heaven.”

¹¹ MARTIN LUTHER: “This glimpse Stephen saw with his physical eyes. We today do not see this physically, but in the Word we, too—praise God!” Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 99.

at God's right hand, and sure enough that's where he is (**Luke 22:69**). Jesus is high and lifted up in all of his resurrection glory.

And as Stephen sees this, he brings his sermon to this grand finale in **verse 56**.

⁵⁶ And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man¹² standing at the right hand of God."¹³

This is the dramatic climax of his message. This is the grand finale. God himself has put a stamp of approval on Stephen's sermon by revealing to him this majestic vision of Christ exalted.¹⁴

Now let me just point out something to you. Peter didn't have a supernatural vision like this when he was preaching his sermons. He preached the gospel in **Acts 2, Acts 3, Acts 4, and Acts 5**. When Peter preached, he had the same boldness and gusto that Stephen had. Sometimes people responded in faith. Sometimes people rejected him. But Peter never had a finale like this to his sermon. He never saw the heavens open up before him with the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. But Stephen did. Why?¹⁵

I think it's because God was signaling to Stephen in this moment that death was imminent, and it was time for him to come home. I think Jesus was standing to welcome him into eternity, whereas Peter had more work to do after his sermons.

Now let me ask you a question. Some of you Bible-savvy Christians will know the answer to this. When Christ is mentioned at God's right hand in the NT, is he usually pictured *sitting* or *standing*? **A:** He's usually pictured "sitting" (e.g. **Ps 110:1; Matt 26:64; Luke 22:69; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3, 8:1**). It's a symbol of his finished work. It's a symbol of his rightful place as a judge. Judges sit; they don't stand when they judge.¹⁶

Yet what is Christ doing when Stephen sees him? He's standing. He's preparing to welcome Stephen into eternity. And you might even say this—Jesus is standing as witness or advocate in Stephen's defense. Why would Jesus do this? Because as Jesus said "[Everyone who] denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven" but "everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven" (**Matt 10:32–33**).¹⁷

But not everyone shares Christ's approval of Stephen. Not everyone is standing up for him, so to speak. Look at **verse 57**.

⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears¹⁸

They were saying something like, **"I won't stand for this. I can't listen to this. I won't tolerate these blasphemies."**¹⁹ **"Jesus Christ standing at the right hand of God the Father! That's impossible! Jesus Christ, that Galilean rebel-rouser! That upstart, know-nothing from Nazareth! Him, standing before God the Father! Impossible!"**²⁰

⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him.²¹

¹² Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 207: "This is the only instance in the New Testament where the term [Son of Man] is spoken by another than Jesus himself."

¹³ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 312: "This is a Jesus whom God has brought into glory at his side."

¹⁴ AMBROSE: "[Jesus] stood as though ready to crown his martyr. Let him then stand for you that you may not fear him sitting, for he sits when he judges.... He sits to judge, he stands to give judgment, and he judges the imperfect but gives judgment among the gods." Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 86.

¹⁵ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 311: "God is granting Stephen a glimpse of heaven as an act of vindication for his claims."

¹⁶ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 312 disagrees and says, "The picture of Jesus as vindicating judge, is the most likely force of the image here... Stephen's later appeal in 7:59–60 that his audience be forgiven reinforces this view that judgment is on the horizon and forgiveness is needed."

¹⁷ Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*. NICNT, 156: "Most probably Stephen's words should be taken closely along with Jesus' promise: 'everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God'... That is to say, Jesus stands up as witness or advocate in Stephen's defense."

¹⁸ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 390: "For Stephen, the fact that the Jewish leaders cover their ears would have confirmed his earlier point that they are uncircumcised in their ears (v. 51)."

¹⁹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 390: "People who shout and who put their hands over their ears look more like children than experienced lawmakers and judges."

²⁰ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT,; "In the later Talmud, *b. Ketub. 5a* says that when people hear a word that is not seemly, they are to stop up their ears... Thus the covering of the ears symbolizes the desire not to hear what has been uttered."

²¹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 389: "Since Jesus had been condemned by the members of the Sanhedrin and taken to Pilate, the Roman governor, with the request to execute him by crucifixion only a short time ago, the Jewish leaders would have regarded as blasphemy

They “rushed” at him. This is the same Greek word (ὀρμαῶ [*hormaō*]) that was used of the pigs that rushed headlong into the Sea of Galilee after Jesus cast the demons out of the demoniac and into the pigs (**Luke 8:33**).²² The same kind of madness prevails here as these religious leaders are yelling loudly and covering their ears and rushing headlong at Stephen.

One commentator put it this way, **“Casting aside dignity and propriety, the highest court in Israel was reduced to a howling, murderous mob.”**²³ And in verse 58 it says,

⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city²⁴ and stoned²⁵ him. And the witnesses²⁶ laid down their garments at the feet of a young man²⁷ named Saul.²⁸

In the first century world, stoning someone to death was a brutal process, especially for someone as young and healthy as Stephen.²⁹ Sometimes, for efficiency, you would throw someone off of a cliff and then drop boulders on top of them.³⁰ That expedited the death of the victim. But there was nothing like that here.

Instead the witnesses laid down their garments in order to keep blood from splattering on their good clothes. Also taking off the outer garments allowed a person to get more velocity behind their throws, and maybe more precision too.³¹ This stoning took time as the witnesses and the Jewish leaders hurled stones at him. At one point, Stephen fell to his knees as a result of the blows. This was a tragic, pain-filled, ignominious death to a good man. And Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (**John 12:24**).

Go ahead and take your notes and write this down as a first point. Without romanticizing Stephen’s death or glamorizing the execution of this Christian martyr, I want to show you how God uses

the proposition that Jesus can be seen in God’s presence sharing the glory of God. If the Jewish leaders understood Stephen’s statement as a claim that he has had a vision of God (which is not entirely clear, because the focus of Luke’s summary is on Jesus), they could accuse him of claiming to see him whom even Moses was not allowed to see (Exod 33:18–23).”

²² Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 174–5.

²³ MacArthur, *Acts 1–11*, MNTC, 223.

²⁴ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 391: “Executions by stoning were carried out outside the city (Lev 24:14; Num 15:35; cf. *m. Sanh.* 6:1). Stephen might have been taken from the Sanhedrin building adjacent to the western wall of the Temple Mount (near Wilson’s Arch; see on 4:5) along the main street in the Tyropoeon Valley past the Pool of Siloam to the gate in the southern wall of the city to the Hinnom or Kidron Valley. Or he could have been taken across the Upper City past Herod’s palace (the Praetorium) through a gate in the western city wall, perhaps to the site where executions took place, perhaps to the very location of Jesus’ crucifixion.”

²⁵ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 391: “The imperfect tense of the verb, which is repeated twice, indicates that the throwing of stones (λίθοι) went on for some time. In the law, stoning was prescribed as the death penalty for the following offenses: worshipping pagan gods (Lev 20:2–5; Deut 17:2–7), prophesying in the name of a pagan god (Deut 13:2–6), divination (Lev 20:27), blasphemy (Lev 24:14–16), violation of the Sabbath (Num 15:32–36), adultery (Deut 22:22), and refusal to submit to one’s parents (Deut 21:18–21). Since Stephen had been accused of uttering blasphemous words against Moses (the law) and God (the temple), he is stoned on account of the perceived blasphemy (6:11, 14; cf. on v. 57).”

²⁶ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 175: “The role of the false witnesses in the stoning is also recorded. Their presence gave this execution an appearance of legality. According to the Law of Moses, the two or three witnesses at whose testimony someone was being condemned to death had to be the ones to cast the first stone (Deut. 13:9–10; 17:6–7). Hence, these false witnesses probably cast the first stones at Stephen.”

²⁷ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 392: “He is described as a ‘young man’ (νεανίας), a term that covers the age from ca. 18 to 30 years (see on 2:17). If Stephen was executed in AD 31, Paul would have been born probably in the first decade of the first century AD.”

²⁸ Sproul, *Acts*, 136: “This is the first we find of the Apostle Paul in all of history, and we are introduced to him as part of a murderous mob.” Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 210: “Paul likely had a deeper involvement with the whole incident than appears in these brief references. He was himself a Greek-speaking Jew, a Cilician, who perhaps had argued with Stephen in the Hellenist synagogue in Jerusalem (6:9f.).”

²⁹ “Frederick Buechner describes [the stoning] this way: ‘Stoning somebody to death, even somebody as young and healthy as Stephen, is not easy. You do not get the job done with the first few rocks and broken bottles, and even after you get the man down, it is a long, hot business.’” Quoted in Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 12, Kindle.

³⁰ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 209: “In formal stonings victims were stripped and pushed over a cliff ten- to twelve-feet high. They were then rolled over on their chests, and the first witness pushed a boulder (as large a stone as he could manage) from the cliff above. In the unlikely event the victim survived this first smashing, the second witness was to roll a second boulder from above. The picture of Stephen’s stoning is radically different.”

³¹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 315: “Those who will cast stones shed their garments, no doubt to be able to cast those stones more effectively.”

the persecution of his saints, and even their death, to accomplish a greater good. I want to show you how death, instead of being some great fearful thing that hovers ominously over our lives, or operates like a ticking time-bomb, death, instead, is our servant.

Death, physical death like we see with Stephen, and “death to self,” which the NT commends repeatedly, is employed by God for our greater good. And thereby it functions as a servant. I want to give you three ways from the text that **“Death Becomes Our Servant.”**

The title for our message today is “Death is a Servant.” Here’s the first way that death becomes our servant.

1) Death opens a **window** for us to see **Jesus** (7:54–58)

Stephen got to see something magnificent right before he died. He was privileged with an opportunity to glimpse into heaven. This is something that few people in human history were allowed to do while alive (e.g. Isaiah, Ezekiel, Paul (later in life), and John in the book of **Revelation**).³² **But here’s the thing. Stephen’s experience will be our experience. What Stephen saw in life, we await in the afterlife. We will see someday with our own eyes Jesus standing up to receive us into eternity, if and only if, we know Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.**

Remember what Jesus said, “[Everyone who] denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” but “everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven” (**Matt 10:32–33**). The Apostle Paul—the same person who was here collecting the garments of these men who stoned Stephen—later in life he writes as a Christian, “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (**1 Cor 15:55–57**).

The question that we’ve got to ask ourselves is as follows: Are we ready to die? Are you ready to meet your maker? Is death your servant or is it your constant dread? If it is your constant dread, you don’t have to live that way. God has made a way for you, in the “twinkling of an eye,” in a fraction of a second, after you die to go home to eternity and meet Jesus Christ your Savior standing and welcoming you into God’s glory.

And the only way that’s going to happen is through faith in Jesus Christ. Do you believe? Are you ready to die? It’s not that we’re in a hurry to die. We’re not like suicidal, terrorist bombers who believe a lie from the pit of hell. We’re not in a hurry to die. We’re not anxiously trying to hasten our death.³³ But we’re not afraid of it when it comes. Because death propels us into a better place. Death opens up a window for us to see Jesus.

Let me just expand on that statement “death is our servant” for just a second. Not only does death in life serve us and open up a window to see Jesus, but “death-to-self” opens up a window for us to see Jesus as well. The Bible says, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:3).³⁴ Paul says in Romans, “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 6:11). Paul says later in Romans, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice” (12:1–2). Wrap your minds around this—God wants us to offer up ourselves as living “dead persons.” How does that work? Well you’ve got to die to yourself, and as you do that, death becomes your servant, and opens up a window to see Christ.³⁵

³² MacArthur, *Acts 1–11*, MNTC, 222.

³³ JUSTUS JONAS: “Death should not be openly sought after, but when God sends it, it must be endured with joy and faith.” Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 105.

³⁴ JOHANN SPANGENBERG: “Riches, honor, power, health and life are gifts of God, but also temptation, adversity, persecution, misery, sickness, cross, suffering and death. For on whomever God places cross, suffering and death for the sake of righteousness, to this person he also grants his Spirit, so that he is able to remain faithful in cross and death, and finally, as it happened with Saint Stephen, to enter eternal life.” Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 100.

³⁵ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 264: “There is a depth of union with Christ that comes to us only through suffering. But not only do we share in his sufferings, *he shares in our sufferings*. The exalted Christ, sharing in the glory of God, is not deaf to our cries of pain as

I actually think “death-to-self” might be more difficult for Christians than literal death. Not to take away anything from Stephen and what he did. He was a faithful martyr. He was a bold witness for Christ. But faithfulness to Christ isn’t just found in great heroic acts of martyrdom. It’s often found in the everyday actions of death to self. Stephen, for his part, demonstrated both of those—Death to self and literal death.

Whenever Sanja and I do pre-marital counseling, we use this teaching analogy.³⁶ Most of us, men, would be more than willing to lay down our lives for our wives and children. Right, men? It’s a matter of honor to be willing to give our lives for them. If someone tried to hurt our wife or our children, we would take them out even if we got taken out in the process.

But here’s the reality of that illustration. Few of us will ever be called to literally lay down our lives for our families in that way. The real test of a marriage and the real test of a man’s love for his family is not found in those heroic acts of martyrdom. It’s found in the daily acts of self-denial and sacrificial love that is shown to our families. It’s found in things like cleaning up after ourselves. It’s found in not losing our tempers. It’s found in showing patience and forgiveness in the nitty-gritty daily events of life. That usually requires greater heroism than physically dying for your family.

Similarly, death-to-self, picking up your cross and following Christ daily... I believe that requires just as much sacrifice and commitment as laying down your life for Jesus in a momentary act of heroic martyrdom. Sometimes it requires *more* sacrifice and commitment.

So don’t just dismiss this story and say to yourself, “I’ll never die a martyr’s death like Stephen. So let’s just admire what he’s done.” No, you are called to martyrdom! Christ has called you to die to self. Christ has allowed opposition and suffering to come into your life so that you could die to self.

And in doing that, death becomes your servant, and opens a window for you to see Christ and experience him like never before.³⁷ Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:11, “For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.”

Here’s a second way that death becomes our servant.

2) Death fosters **compassion** for the **lost** (7:59–60)

Watch what happens with Stephen in the next few verses. What he does in these verses is almost incomprehensible. It is so otherworldly... it is so unbelievable that the only way it can be explained is that it didn’t originate from Stephen himself. It originated from God. It was a product of him being full of the Holy Spirit, and therefore he is able to do something that no ordinary human being could do.³⁸

⁵⁹And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”³⁹

Does that sound like someone else you know?⁴⁰ Was somebody else murdered viciously by a mob of people, while crying out “Lord, receive my spirit?”⁴¹ You might remember that Jesus said from the cross,

we suffer; he himself suffers with us when we suffer. Paul came to understand this on the road to Damascus when he heard Jesus say, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?’ (Acts 9:4). Saul had been hitting the church, but Christ had been feeling the pain!”

³⁶ I’m indebted to Tommy Nelson for this insight. See his sermons in the “Maximum Marriage” series:

- 1) “Marriage: Its Order and Identities,” 10-19-03: <https://dentonbible.org/sermon/marriage-its-order-and-identities/>
- 2) “Man, the Lover,” 10-26-03: <https://dentonbible.org/sermon/man-the-lover/>
- 3) “God and the Fairer Sex,” 11-02-03: <https://dentonbible.org/sermon/god-and-the-fairer-sex/>

³⁷ See the following Ligonier article by Mark Dever entitled, “Participation in Suffering”, 06-01-05: <https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/participating-suffering>

³⁸ AUGUSTINE: “And in the Acts of the Apostles, blessed Stephen prays for those by whom he is being stoned, because they had not as yet believed in Christ and were not contending against that universal grace.” Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 88.

³⁹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 392: “Stephen affirms that even though he is about to die, his life will continue in the presence of the Lord Jesus.”

⁴⁰ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 309: “Stephen dies in a way that parallels Jesus: Stephen makes claims about the Son of Man, utters a final cry, and asks that his opponents be forgiven.”

⁴¹ Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*. NICNT, 154: “Not many years before, another prisoner had stood at the bar before the same court, charged with almost the same offenses as Stephen. But when the hostile evidence broke down, the high priest adjured the prisoner to tell the court plainly if he was indeed the Messiah, the Son of God. Had he said, “Yes” and no more, it is not clear that he could have

“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Luke 23:46). Both of those prayers are based on Psalm 31:5 where David writes, “Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.” This was a prayer that Jewish children were taught to pray at bedtime.⁴²

It’s interesting to note that Stephen doesn’t say “Father.” He could have, certainly. But he says, “Lord Jesus.”⁴³ This is a remarkable affirmation of Christ’s deity here.⁴⁴ And even in death, we see that Stephen is pointing his persecutors to Christ as the Divine Savior who has authority over life and death.⁴⁵

Verse 58 says that they cast him out of the city. I think that it’s appropriate to view the Sanhedrin as a murderous mob that loses their minds in this moment of rage as well as other “witnesses” and bystanders. This whole scene was a scene of bloodlust not justice. There was no formal prosecution. There was no formal trial or sentencing. At least with Jesus there was some aspect of justice with due process, flawed though it was.⁴⁶

Instead of that this time, the Sanhedrin just ran Stephen out of town and stoned him in cold blood. Yet even in their hasty dismissal of due process, they still tried to follow some semblance of Jewish law.⁴⁷ They executed him outside the walls of the city, for instance.⁴⁸ And they had “witnesses” according to verse 58, which Luke already told us were “false witnesses” (see 6:10–15).

The truth is they didn’t even have the authority to execute people.⁴⁹ That’s why they needed the assistance of the Romans for Jesus’s crucifixion (see John 18:31). But here they don’t have time to appeal to Rome. They just lose it with Stephen and rush to judgment and kill him. This was murder not execution. This was mob justice not justice.⁵⁰

been convicted of a capital offense. “Messiah” was not his chosen self-designation, but if the question was put to him like that, he could not say “No.” He went on, however, to reframe his answer in words of his own choosing: “you will see the son of man sitting at the right hand of the almighty and coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62). No more was required: Jesus was found guilty of blasphemy and judged to be worthy of death. Now Stephen in the same place was making the same claim on Jesus’ behalf as Jesus had made for himself: he was claiming, in fact, that those words of Jesus, far from being false and blasphemous, were words of sober truth which had received their vindication and fulfillment from God. Unless the judges were prepared to admit that their former decision was tragically mistaken, they had no option but to find Stephen guilty of blasphemy as well.”

⁴² Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 209.

⁴³ Stephen’s action here is one of a handful of examples in the NT of prayers direct to God the Son. Some have concluded that prayers need to be directed only to God the Father, since that the Biblical model for prayer. I would agree that this should be the norm, but I don’t think that we should prohibit prayers to God the Son or God the Spirit. The statement “Maranatha, Come Lord Jesus!” is a perfect example of how we pray something directly and specifically to the Son. For more on this, see Graham Cole’s TGC article entitled, “You Asked: Can I Pray to Jesus?,” 12-18-12: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/you-asked-can-i-pray-to-jesus/>

⁴⁴ MacArthur, *Acts 1–11*, MNTC, 225.

⁴⁵ Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*. NICNT, 160: “Whereas Jesus committed his spirit to God, Stephen committed his to Jesus—eloquent evidence for the rapid emergence of high christology in the church.” Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 315: “In a manner very similar to Jesus’s call to the Father, ‘Into your hands I commit my spirit,’ Stephen prepares to die (Luke 23:46; Ps. 31:5). There is one major difference: as he cries to heaven, he explicitly addresses his mediator, the Lord Jesus (κύριε Ἰησοῦ, *kyrie Iēsou*), to receive him. The work in heaven is now shared between God and the one at his right hand. Here is evidence of a high Christology. Prayer is now made to Jesus, and requests to heaven go through him.”

⁴⁶ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 12, Kindle: “Their action was illegal, brutal, immoral, but they did not care.”

⁴⁷ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 261: “Stephen is dragged out of the city for stoning (7:58a) in keeping with the command to ‘take the blasphemer outside the camp ... and ... stone him’ (Lev. 24:14).”

⁴⁸ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 208: “There was a certain irony in their action. Out of concern for the sanctity of the city, they performed their unholy deed outside its bounds. It has often been debated whether Stephen was ‘lynched’ or condemned by formal verdict of the Sanhedrin, for which stoning was one of the chief manners of execution. In favor of the latter is the fact that Stephen was on trial before the Sanhedrin and was killed by stoning. Luke’s account, however, gives more the picture of mob action.”

⁴⁹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 893: “Josephus’ comment that the Roman authorities granted the Jews the right to execute people who desecrated the temple (*J.W.* 6.126) appears to be accurate. The Romans evidently respected the autonomy of the temple in Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish commonwealth, by accepting a limited curtailment of Roman jurisdiction in capital cases as a concession to the jurisdiction of the Jews. It seems unlikely, however, that they would have allowed a lynch killing or a spontaneous honor killing by (for example) the priests. They would have insisted on regular legal proceedings before the Sanhedrin and on the confirmation of the death sentence by the Roman governor before the Jewish authorities could execute the perpetrator.”

⁵⁰ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 309: “The account is an example of mob justice, not a formal legal process. No attempt is made to solicit a verdict. Stoning emerges from the angry crowd’s spontaneous reaction.” For an alternative view, see Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 391.

Now notice how Stephen responds to this. Stephen would have been perfectly justified in uttering curses against these murderers. This would be a great place for an imprecatory psalm! Or you might expect him to say something like this, **“Vindicate me, O God! Vindicate me! Pour out your wrath on these murderers!”**

According to **2 Chronicles 24:22**, when Zechariah was put to death, he cried out, “May the Lord see and avenge!”⁵¹ In my opinion, Stephen would have been perfectly justified in saying that. But that’s not what he says. Look what he says in **verse 60**.

⁶⁰And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”⁵²

Stephen, falling to his knees... his body bloodied... his bones broken... his extremities crushed... his vital organs punctured... his head gashed open and bleeding profusely... doesn’t say, **“Avenge me, Lord.”** Instead his last words, his dying refrain was, “Lord do not hold this sin against them.”⁵³ Not unlike what his Savior did when he was dying on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (**Luke 23:34**). Let me say it this way—Stephen dies with forgiveness on his lips.⁵⁴

And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

About ten years ago, I went to a men’s conference in Chicago. And one of the profound memories I had from this conference, was this older brother giving a lecture on how to finish life well. I remember being the only thirty-something person at this lecture. Most of the men in the room were way older than me.

The title of the session was “Finishing Well,” and I was intrigued by it. And what this brother emphasized in his lecture is that many Christians don’t finish well. Their faith grows cold and stale. They get bitter instead of better as they get older. And they grow less and less influential for the gospel as they age.

And that lecturer gave us this profound question. He asked, “How are you going to finish your life?” “Are you going to finish well?” Paul said at the end of his life, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day” (2 Tim 4:7–8).

Is that going to be said of you? Are you going to finish the race well? Like Paul? Like Stephen? I came away from that men’s conference feeling this overwhelming desire to put the pieces in my life that would help me finish well. And I’ve been praying ever since then, “Lord, help me to advance your kingdom all the way to the end. Lord, help me to break the tape of life more passionate about the gospel, more sold-out for Jesus, more dead-to-self than ever before. And God, if you give me fifty more days or fifty more months or fifty more years or fifty more seconds... whatever the case... Lord, help me to finish well!” Life is short. I want to live it well. And I want to finish well.

But here’s the thing about this passage. Let me draw your attention back to Acts 7 and our brother, Stephen. This occurred to me while studying the end of Acts 7. The reality is that I’m not going to be able to finish well if I don’t deal with bitterness in my soul.⁵⁵ Here’s what I marvel at when I look at Stephen. Here’s this guy who preached with such passion and boldness. Here’s this guy who was on fire for 53 verses in Acts 7. He lets these religious leaders have it! He said to them, “You stiff-neck people... you always resist the Holy Spirit.”

⁵¹ This is a different Zechariah (the son of Jehoiada, not the son of Berechiah [see Zech 1:1]) than the writing prophet who wrote after the Babylonian Exile.

⁵² Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 262: “Stephen’s last words are surprisingly close to two of the last words of Jesus just before he died. He asks God to receive his spirit (7:59; cf. Luke 23:46) and not to ‘hold this sin against’ his killers (Acts 7:60; cf. Luke 23:34). Only Luke mentions the two parallel statements of Christ.”

⁵³ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 393: “Stephen follows Jesus’ command to pray for those who abuse you (Luke 6:27–28).”

⁵⁴ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 315.

⁵⁵ RUDOLF GWALTHER: “Stephen models love, which cannot be separated from faith. For following the example and commandment of Christ, he prays for his enemies, that God would not punish them for their sin, as they deserved.... Let us learn to extend our charity, even to the ungrateful, and with godly prayers commend to God those who most grievously offend against us....” Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 98.

And yet, just a few moments later, while they are killing him, and he's saying, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." "Save their souls, Lord. Rescue them."

Who does that? How can the same man communicate those two things just a few moments apart? Here's the epiphany that I was struck with, while studying this passage. Our boldness for Jesus has to be devoid of bitterness. Boldness without bitterness—that's our goal.⁵⁶ That's how we finish well. We preach the gospel unapologetically and unashamedly, and we weep for lost people.⁵⁷

I think one of the ways that "death fosters compassion for [lost people]" is realizing the destiny of those who reject Christ in this world. Stephen knew full-well that these Jewish leaders, if they continued rejecting Jesus, wouldn't entered eternity with Jesus standing to greet them. They would enter eternity permanently separated from God as a recipient of God's wrath forever. And that made Stephen weep for those people who were killing him. And he cried out for God to save them.

I heard John Piper say once, **"The devil designs for your death to produce despair and hopelessness and self-pity and resentment and bitterness. But the design of the Holy Spirit is very, very different. He destroys the power of death, and makes death into an occasion for showing the beauty of Christ. 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' A great triumph of Christ-like mercy!"⁵⁸** That's what death should do in the life of a Christian. Death is our servant, and it should produce in us tender compassion for lost people.

Remarkably God answered Stephen's prayer, at least with one of the people who was party to Stephen's death. Paul was there. Saul was his Hebrew name; Paul was his Greek name.

By the way, "Saul" is mentioned three times in six verses (7:58, 8:1, 8:3). That's not an accident. Luke is signaling something here. Paul becomes a prominent person later in the book of Acts. And he remembered Stephen's death many years later when he was making his own defense in front of people who wanted to kill him (see Acts 22:20).

God *did* have mercy on Paul! God *did* answer Stephen's prayer! The church father, Augustine, said once about this passage, **"If Stephen had not prayed [this dying prayer], then the church would not have Paul."⁵⁹**

Here's one more thing that death does for us. One more way that death becomes our servant.

- 1) Death opens a **window** for us to see **Jesus** (7:54–58)
- 2) Death fosters **compassion** for the **lost** (7:59–60)
- 3) Death propels the **fulfillment** of Christ's **mission** (8:1–3)

You might think, "Maybe Stephen said too much! Maybe he pushed too hard! Maybe if he would have just eased off the gas just a little bit, then he could have been spared. They would have released him and he could have gone back to his ministry. Isn't that the most important thing? Isn't our health and our happiness and our safety God's utmost priority?"

⁵⁶ CHRYSOSTOM: "If we happen to be among Gentiles, let us silence them likewise, without anger and without harshness. For if we do this with anger, it is no longer boldness but appears rather as raw passion. If, however, it is done with gentleness, that is true boldness. For in one and the same thing success and failure cannot possibly go together. Boldness of speech is success; anger is failure. Therefore, if we should aspire to boldness, we must be free from anger, in case anyone should attribute our words to the latter. For no matter how just your words may be, when you speak with anger, you ruin everything. This is true no matter how boldly you speak or how fairly you admonish—in short, no matter what you do. See how free from anger this man was when he spoke to them. He did not treat them with any harshness but reminded them of the words of the prophets. Notice that there was no anger, for in his terrible suffering he prayed for them, saying, 'Do not hold this sin against them.' Thus it was not in anger that he spoke these words but in grief and sorrow for their sakes. As indeed it says of his appearance, 'they saw his face that it was the face of an angel,' so that they might believe. Let us then be free from anger. The Holy Spirit does not dwell where anger is and cursed is the wrathful. Nothing wholesome can proceed from where anger issued forth." Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 87–8.

⁵⁷ BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER (1549): "Grant us, O Lord, to learn to love our enemies by the example of your martyr Saint Stephen, who prayed to you for his persecutors, who lives and reigns with your dearly beloved Son and the Holy Spirit, one true and everlasting God, world without end. Amen." Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 102.

⁵⁸ See his sermon "The Death of a Spirit-filled Man," 04-21-91: <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-death-of-a-spirit-filled-man>

⁵⁹ Quoted in MacArthur, *Acts I–II*, MNTC, 226.

Or you might think, “O this can’t be the end of Stephen. Surely, God’s going to raise him from the dead... like Lazarus. Or Peter’s going to raise him from the dead with his apostolic powers. Or maybe, they just perceive him as dead after the stoning. Like Paul and Barnabas later (see Acts 14:19–20), he’s going to get up and get right back to preaching.”

No! There’s no apostolic raising of the dead here. He’s dead. And God’s going to use the death of this saint to extract the church from Jerusalem.⁶⁰ God’s going to use the death of Stephen to get the church to do the things that it should have been doing all along, namely taking the gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (see Acts 1:8; Matt 28:18–20).⁶¹

Look at **chapter 8, verse 1**.

¹ And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem,⁶²

This persecution was actually led by Saul, as we’ll see in **verse 3**. It’s interesting to me that Luke is totally candid with the nefarious actions of his buddy Paul.⁶³ Remember Luke and Paul were friends later in life. They were co-laborers for the gospel. Luke was Paul’s personal doctor and travelling companion. But Luke doesn’t pull any punches with his good friend. He portrays Saul in all of his pre-conversion infamy.

¹ And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution⁶⁴ against the church in Jerusalem, and they [the believers] were all⁶⁵ scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.⁶⁶

The Greek word for “scattered” here is διασπείρω (*diaspeirō*). It’s cognate to the verb “to seed” in Greek, σπείρω (*speirō*).⁶⁷ The church was seeded throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.⁶⁸ That gives new meaning to Jesus’s statement. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). Like a new diaspora, this time a Jesus-following diaspora, the Jewish believers are scattered and seeded outside of Jerusalem.⁶⁹

⁶⁰ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 317: “Persecution faced faithfully can have positive results for the church.”

⁶¹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 320: “Ironically, it is persecution that helps the church carry out the commission Jesus gave them (Acts 1:8; Matt. 28:18–20).”

⁶² Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 395: “Since the ban on speaking issued earlier (4:18; 5:40) had proven ineffective, the juridical sentence that Saul and his associates had in mind probably ranged from flogging (the forty lashes minus one; see on 5:40) to the death sentence.”

⁶³ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 262: “Luke is not reluctant to describe the pre-Christian vehemence of his later friend Saul/Paul (8:3).”

⁶⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 211: “The opposition to the Christians had been gaining momentum throughout chaps. 4–6. It came first from the Jewish officials in the arrest of the apostles and the two hearings before the Sanhedrin. The first resulted in a warning (4:21); the second, in a flogging (5:40). With the Hellenist Stephen came a third Sanhedrin trial, and this one resulted in death for the Christian witness (7:58–60). The new factor was that this time the officials had the backing of the people (6:12).”

⁶⁵ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 318: “The reference to ‘all’ the church being scattered is probably hyperbolic (Williams 1990: 151), but it shows that when a significant portion of the church is persecuted, the whole is attacked and affected.”

⁶⁶ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 211 suggests that this statement probably indicates that the real opposition was against Stephen’s fellow Hellenists. The resistance began in the Hellenist synagogue (6:9) and was surely escalated by Stephen’s prophetic critique of the Jewish worship and nationalistic religion... The apostles and their fellow Aramaic-speaking Christians had not taken such a radical stance but had remained faithful to the Jewish institutions; thus they were likely able to remain in Jerusalem unmolested.” Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 393–4 disagrees.

⁶⁷ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 211: “Luke’s word for their dispersal (*diaspeirō*) comes from the Greek word for ‘seed.’ They were scattered like one scatters seed. But scattered seeds grow, and the irony is that the persecution and scattering of the Christians only led to their further increase.”

⁶⁸ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 318: “In Judaism, the view was sometimes expressed that scattering is a good event. Second Baruch 1.4 speaks of God scattering Jews among the Gentiles so they can do good among them. A similar positive result emerges from this persecution, as Acts 8:4 and the Philip episode show.”

⁶⁹ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 180: “The Greek word for ‘scattered abroad’ is *diesparēsan*. The term was used for the scattering of seed. Hence, the believers of Jerusalem were scattered like grain. At the time of the scattering, this seed was also sown, because where seed is scattered, some of it is also sown. The word ‘Diaspora,’ meaning ‘dispersion,’ is related to *diesparēsan*. In Jewish literature, the term applies to Jews in general who live outside the land. Here, it is used specifically of Jewish believers in the Messiahship of Yeshua before the judgment against Jerusalem in A.D. 70.”

Luke tells us that the apostles stayed in Jerusalem at the end of **verse 1**. They stayed for a while anyway.⁷⁰ God continued to use them to minister to Hebrew-speaking Jews. But the rest of the church got expelled from Jerusalem.

Look at **verse 2**.

² *Devout men buried⁷¹ Stephen and made great lamentation⁷² over him.*

He's truly dead. There's no "Lazarus miracle" forthcoming. He's the first Christian martyr. And that title will never be taken from him.

Let me just say two things about **verse 2** quickly. First of all, the Greek word translated "devout" (εὐλαβής [*eulabēs*]) is used elsewhere in the NT of pious Jews (**Luke 2:25; Acts 2:5, 22:12**). If these were Christians, I suspect Luke would have told us so by using the term "brothers" or "saints" or something similar.⁷³ Therefore, what we have here is probably a reference to God-fearing Jews who loved Stephen and were appalled by what the Sanhedrin did to him. If that's the case, then Stephen's death may have paved the way for more God-fearing Jews, maybe Greek-speaking, God-fearing Jews, to become Christians.

Secondly their lamentation for Stephen could have gotten them killed. **Craig Keener writes, "Jewish law forbade public mourning for a condemned criminal... Stephen's pious friends ignore the illegal ruling of the highest Jewish court to honor their friend."**⁷⁴ It seems that Stephen's death made a pretty amazing impact on believers and unbelievers alike.

And then Luke writes in **verse 3**.

³ *But Saul was ravaging the church,⁷⁵ and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women⁷⁶ and committed them to prison.⁷⁷*

⁷⁰ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 318: "Eusebius (*Eccl. Hist.* 3.5.2) says that they were harassed until they finally left to engage in wider mission after James's death (Acts 12)."

⁷¹ JOHN CALVIN: "The rite of burial looks to the resurrection hope, because God ordained it for this purpose from the beginning of the world. Accordingly it was always regarded as a monstrous barbarity to leave bodies unburied deliberately. Unenlightened people did not know why they should consider the rite of burial to be such a sacred thing, but to us the purpose is certainly not unknown: that those still living may know that bodies are committed to the earth as to a prison, until they are raised up from it. It is evident from that, that this ceremony is of value to the living rather than to the dead. And yet it is also part of our human nature to bestow due honor on the bodies, to which we know blessed immortality has been promised." Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 105–6.

⁷² Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 319: "The term for 'lament' appears only here in the NT. Usually such mourning entailed beating one's breast and weeping. They are honoring Stephen, as *m. Sanh.* 6.5–6 permits burial of one who was stoned but no lamentation. Their act is both defiant and a statement of their perception that Stephen was righteous... Such mourning often lasted from thirty to seventy days (Gen. 50:3 [seventy days]; Deut. 34:8 [thirty days])."

⁷³ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 394: "Had they been believers, Luke would have said so, referring to 'brothers.' The term may refer to Jews who sympathized with the Christian message." Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 181: "The word refers to devout Jews in general, but not necessarily to believers in the Messiah. In the context of Acts 8, it appears that the men who buried Stephen were not believers, but they did not agree with the Sanhedrin's verdict either. They were called "devout" to distinguish them from the believers and also from the members of the Sanhedrin."

⁷⁴ Craig S. Keener, *IVPBBNT* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Ac 7:53–8:4. Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 212: "Jewish law forbade funeral observances for a condemned criminal [*M. Sanh.* 6:5–6]; and even if Stephen had been the victim of mob violence, those who stoned him surely viewed him as a blasphemer and law breaker. One is reminded of the similar courage shown by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus in the burial of Jesus."

⁷⁵ Sproul, *Acts*, 138: "When we first meet him here in Acts, however, we do not meet the greatest pastor, the greatest missionary, the greatest evangelist, or the greatest man. We meet the early church's public enemy number one."

⁷⁶ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 182: "The fact that women were included in the persecution is a new element at this point."

⁷⁷ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 395: "Why did Saul persecute the followers of Jesus? The most plausible explanation recognizes that Saul would have regarded the proclamation of a crucified Messiah as utterly despicable, indeed blasphemous. He was convinced that Jews—who devoted their lives to Jesus, who believed that the man from Nazareth who had been executed by crucifixion had come back to life, and who taught that he had been exalted into heaven as Lord and Savior at the right hand of God—could not be tolerated to believe these matters and to proclaim these convictions to others. He was probably convinced that Jesus, who was executed with the consent of the Jewish leaders by crucifixion, was under God's curse: according to Deut 21:22–23, 'if someone guilty of a capital offense is put to death and their body is exposed on a pole (κρεμάσῃτε αὐτὸν ἐπὶ ξύλου),' that person is under God's curse (κεκατηραμένος ὑπὸ θεοῦ), as Gal 3:13 and 1 Cor 12:3 indicate."

That word “ravaging” in **verse 3** is a terrifying word in Greek. It was used of wild beasts who would tear their prey to shreds.⁷⁸ So Paul was ripping apart the church like a wild animal.⁷⁹ Paul was so destructive to the Christian cause, that Luke would say later that the church was at peace finally once Paul was converted (**Acts 9:31**).

Paul’s opposition to the church was something that would haunt him later in life.⁸⁰ He said candidly in his epistles:

- **Galatians 1:13** “I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it”
- **1 Timothy 1:13** “...I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.”
- **1 Corinthians 15:9** - “For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”

But, what Satan meant for evil, God meant for good. This apparent victory of the enemy, didn’t just grow the church in Jerusalem. It detonated a revival in the surrounding areas. It forced the church to do something, that Jesus had commanded them to do after his resurrection.

Let me just dip into next week’s passage for a second and read **verse 4**.

⁴ Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

So they didn’t scatter to hide. And they didn’t scatter to lie low. They scattered to proliferate the gospel!⁸¹ Don’t you love it when God does stuff like that? Don’t you love it when God uses evil for good? God does that kind of thing all the time.

It took persecution and it took the death of Stephen to get the church to do what Jesus had commanded them to do way back in **Acts 1:8** before he ascended into heaven.⁸² And Stephen’s death propelled Christ’s mission.⁸³ It started a revival in Judea and Samaria. More on that next week.⁸⁴

The church-father, **Tertullian**, a well-known second-century theologian said this, **“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.”**⁸⁵ He said, “The more you mow us down, the more we grow. The blood of Christians is seed.”⁸⁶ Death is our servant. Death is God’s servant for getting Christ’s message to the world. Death is not an entity to be feared. Death is not an instrument of dread for the Christian. Death is our slave. Death is something that God uses for his bigger, greater, and deeper purposes.⁸⁷ “Truly, truly, I say to you,

⁷⁸ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 212: “The Greek word is *lymainō*, a strong expression that is used in the Septuagint for wild beasts, such as lions, bears, and leopards tearing at raw flesh.”

⁷⁹ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 12, Kindle: “This is what Jesus was referring to when he said on the Damascus Road, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads’ (26:14).”

⁸⁰ Sproul, *Acts*, 140: “Paul knew after his conversion what it meant to have all his sin forgiven by the blood of Christ, I believe when he put his head on the pillow at night and closed his eyes, he could see Stephen on his knees, bleeding from every part of his body, looking up into heaven with his face like an angel, saying, ‘Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!’ (7:56). Maybe when he prayed, ‘Lord, do not charge them with this sin,’ he was looking right at Saul.”

⁸¹ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 263: “With the benefit of hindsight, Luke sees great significance in these events. In fact, when he describes the preaching of the gospel to Gentiles for the first time outside Palestine, he says that the ones who did this were ‘those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen’ (11:19).”

⁸² Craig S. Keener, *IVPBBCNT* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Ac 7:53-8:4.

⁸³ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 317: “The main characters in Acts 8–12 are the scattered church, Philip, Paul, Peter with Cornelius, the unknown Hellenists, and Peter again. Movement beyond Peter and the Twelve continues to expand.”

⁸⁴ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 320: “In sum, this brief unit prepares us for Philip and the positive effects of persecution. Faithfully, the persecuted church disperses and preaches the word of the gospel.”

⁸⁵ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 268: “A similar statement comes from an Anglican bishop from Uganda, Festo Kivengere. Speaking in February 1979, on the second anniversary of the death of his archbishop, Janani Luwum, he said, ‘Without bleeding the church fails to bless.’”

⁸⁶ Quoted in the message by Tim Keesee, “The Blood of the Martyrs Is Seed: Learning from Missions and for Missions,” 01-27-16: <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-blood-of-the-martyrs-is-seed-learning-from-missions-and-for-missions>

⁸⁷ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 266: “The story is told of a Christian martyr smiling as he was being burned at the stake. His persecutor was annoyed by that smile and asked him what there was to be smiling about. He replied, ‘I saw the glory of God and was glad.’”

unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24).⁸⁸

I’ll close with this. Most of you are probably familiar with the writings of C.S. Lewis: *Screwtape Letters*, *Mere Christianity*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, etc. Well, according to Alister McGrath, at the end of Lewis’s life, he actually went into a coma.⁸⁹ Lewis was an Anglican, so they called the priest to give Lewis his last rites and prepare him for death.

But all of a sudden, Lewis woke up out of his coma. And he shocked everybody after he awoke. He was alert. He was cognizant of his surroundings. It was like Lazarus coming back to life. And so Lewis went home and lived out a few more months before his eventual death.

And during this time, in between his coma and his eventual death, he confessed to a friend, “I wish I hadn’t been wakened from that coma.” He was on the cusp of something great, he was just a few seconds away from meeting Christ, his Lord, and entering into eternal glory, only to be wakened and sent back to live on this side of eternity for a few more months.

Now death is in God’s hand. So we shouldn’t make too much of this or try to hasten our exit from this world. But here’s the takeaway from Lewis’s statement. Death isn’t something to be feared. Death is a servant. Death is a threshold leading to somewhere wonderful, just like the wardrobe in Lewis’s first book about Narnia, *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*.

You might have noticed this in the text. In Acts 7:60, Luke doesn’t say “Stephen died.” Did you notice that? I think in Luke’s mind, Stephen didn’t die. He just fell asleep. It’s a beautiful Christian euphemism.⁹⁰ Stephen didn’t die, he just peaceably passed from this life to the next.⁹¹ Death is not the end. Death is just a threshold to another world where Christ greets us and welcomes us into eternity.⁹²

For those who know Jesus Christ as their Savior, death is our servant. And so, here’s what I want to ask you as we close: “Are you, like Stephen, like C.S. Lewis, ready to die? Is death your master instead of your servant? Is death your continual dread?” It doesn’t have to be that way. Put your faith in Christ. And then when it’s time to die, you just fall asleep. And then, you enter into God’s presence forever.

⁸⁸ Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 97: “Martyrdom was not an abstract concept for the reformers. Luther was certain that after the Diet of Worms he would die. The French Reformed parishioners constantly faced the threat of death—famously realized for many of them during the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre in 1572. Almost the entire first generation of Radical reformers were martyred through a state-administered ‘final baptism’ by drowning or burning: Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, Michael Sattler, Georg Blaurock and Hans Hut. The English Reformation was particularly brutal; after Thomas More’s death numerous theologians were publicly executed—some, like Paul Fagius, were even disinterred to be ceremoniously executed again under Queen Mary I (‘bloody Mary’). Not all the reformers persevered in persecution, either; Thomas Cranmer and Balthasar Hubmaier recanted, although in the end both suffered martyrdom willingly.”

⁸⁹ Alister McGrath, *C.S. Lewis—A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Tyndale, 2013).

⁹⁰ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 316: “To describe the death, Luke uses the euphemism that he ‘fell asleep,’ which according to later NT teaching will result in a resurrection (Polhill 1992: 210; John 11:11; 1 Cor. 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20; 1 Thess. 4:13–15; 2 Pet. 3:4; sleep as death in the OT: Gen. 47:30; Deut. 31:16; 1 Kings 2:10; Isa. 14:18).”

⁹¹ JOHANN SPANGENBERG: “After he had prayed, he fell asleep. The Christian’s death is not a death but a sleep, as Christ said about the deceased Lazarus.... Such mercy Christ has gained for us with his death, so that we die peacefully and death will not approach us bitterly, as he says: ‘Truly I say to you, that whoever keeps my Word will never see death.’ As if he wanted to say, ‘The Word will snatch this person up and slay him, so that he falls asleep in God’s peace and dies gently. The Word, I say, will bring you past the devil, death and hell without any harm into eternal life.’” Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 99.

⁹² JOHN CALVIN: “It is an inestimable comfort to know that when our souls leave our bodies, they do not wander about haphazardly but are taken into Christ’s safe protection, if only we place them in his hands. This confidence ought to teach us to face death calmly; yes! and what is more, everyone who commits his soul to Christ with a serious attitude of trust must, at the same time, necessarily resign himself to a total obedience to his will.” Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 99.