

Acts Chapter 7 v 44 - 60

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[0 : 00] Heroic courage and calmness. Courage in life, in preaching the truth. His desire that these people should wake up to their spiritual danger.

And courage even more in dying. Such grace, such calmness, such peace, such forgiveness. So Christ-like.

You can see the parallels. The same two prayers that the Lord prayed. But the prayer to commit his spirit to the Father.

And the prayer for forgiveness of those who had done this thing to him. And one cannot look at Stephen, surely, without being reminded of another one.

Who had the spirit of God without measure. This man is full of the spirit of God. Reminding us of a saviour who had the spirit of God without measure.

[0 : 58] So a very striking contrast between brutal frenzy on the one hand. And heroic calmness on the other. But I find also that reactions of Christians to this passage can be equally contrasting.

Some Christians are intimidated by it for a number of obvious reasons. There is a very salutary warning to how tough things can get.

If we are bold with sharing our faith and warning people about their danger. And yet bold we must be because our Lord tells us that just because we live in a wicked and adulterous generation.

That is no excuse for being ashamed of him and his gospel. So we've got to be bold.

And yet here is a reminder of some of the possible consequences of boldness. Here is a reminder too of death itself. My friends, the prospect of dying is no easy thing to face.

[2 : 10] Death is not an easy thing. Not for the strongest of believers. We don't like being reminded of death.

And it's understandable that we shrink from it. Not only that, but a standard for dying is set for us here. A man who dies with peace and confidence in the Lord.

And the very opposite of bitterness towards God or men. So it's very easy to be intimidated. It's very easy to be intimidated by this passage of scripture.

But I want to suggest to you that it is wonderfully comforting. We don't need to be intimidated by it. Every Christian. Everyone who trusts in the great saviour.

The one who is utterly committed to bringing many sons and daughters to glory. Indeed, every one of his sons and daughters to glory.

[3 : 12] We see here great reasons for having courage. The passage is literally encouraging.

It puts courage into troubled Christians. Especially Christians troubled by death. I also love this passage because it shouts so clearly as to why it is vital that you, my friend, are a Christian.

Or that you become a Christian. Even this night. There are three beautiful reminders here to see and to remember.

What are they? Well, first of all, there's a beautiful reminder of every Christian's future. Of what lies ahead for the believer in the instant that follows physical death.

You see, I think many people just read this passage of scripture. And they focus in on Stephen's experience. And they kind of think, oh, you know, I've got to have an experience like that in dying.

[4 : 23] The Lord must give me that experience. And sometimes you read accounts of believers. Or you hear accounts. Or you know some believer who's been wonderfully encouraged with some profound sense of God and the nearness of heaven and the reality of heaven in death.

And you read a passage of scripture like this. And that's our focus. Because what a wonderfully encouraging thing this was for Stephen. The Lord is preparing him for death.

And he sees heaven open. And so he sees the reality of the world to come. And he sees Christ standing at the right hand of God.

Standing gloriously to receive him. And we say to ourselves, that's what I want. And yet we know because we talk to people who are dying.

We've had experience of that. Or others share with us. That this is not most Christians' experience. And so that's where we focus so often.

[5 : 33] Oh, Lord, give me what Stephen had. But I think we're focusing in the wrong place. What is revealed to Stephen here is the future of every believer, whether you have a vision like this or not, in dying.

This is reality. It's just that the curtain is drawn back in this man's experience. But it is reality for every Christian who dies.

That the very instant of death is to pass into the presence of Christ. To see him, as it were, standing to welcome that believer who's passed over through death.

Into heaven itself. And to see him, as it were, standing there to make sure that person is received.

And all heaven knows that they are precious to the Lord Jesus Christ. The point is not surely whether you or I or any other Christian has the vision.

[6 : 42] It is that in the instant of death, every Christian has the reality. For one man, and doubtless in many other cases, but for one man, the curtain is drawn back.

But actually what he sees is only what every single believer experiences in the moment of death. That heaven is real and glorious.

That in the instant of death, in the instant of her death, my Susie saw the glory of God. In a way that she'd never seen it before.

Certainly in a way she'd never seen it in the preaching of her husband. And she found Jesus standing ready to receive and welcome her.

And represent her to the Father. You see, then, what John pictured. The other place where we see Christ standing.

[7 : 47] Is in the vision in Revelation chapter 5. Where John sees the Lamb standing as it had been slain in the midst of the throne.

And there is the, in what we don't have here. But what we have in Revelation is a reminder of how it is. That sinners like Stephen.

And you and me. Can be welcomed into the presence. Of God in the moment of death. It's not because we've reached a certain standard. It's not because we are such good people.

It's because there is one there ready to receive us. Who has given his life as a sacrifice for our sin. Who has bought all the punishment.

Who has made a just way for us to enter into the presence of God. Now that's the emphasis I want you to see here.

[8 : 49] That what Stephen sees before death. Which helped him to face his horror. Every believer will see in the moment of death. Because to be absent from the body.

Is to be present with the Lord. This is the immediate future. Not of every human being. But of every believer. For everyone who likes Stephen.

Shows trust in Christ. How does he die? He dies saying. Lord Jesus receive my spirit.

Because that's where his confidence is. He knows. That the one who's died is none other than God. He prays to him. But he knows he's the God man.

He's the one who can receive. Who we can entrust. Our eternity to in the moment of death. This is the future of everyone who owns him.

[9 : 57] As sovereign Lord and God. Who trusts in him as saviour. My saviour. It's the future of everyone who likes Stephen. Has been changed by grace.

It's only grace that can make a man pray. For those who are stoning him to death. That their sin may not be held against them. It's only grace that makes people like Christ.

In that kind of way. It's only grace that fills men and women with the Holy Spirit. As this man was filled with the Holy Spirit.

So what Stephen sees. Is what is coming to everyone who trusts in Christ. Whose life exemplifies something.

Of that transforming grace. It is every Christian's future. That is the first encouragement. This beautiful reminder.

[10 : 54] Of every Christian's future here. Have you grasped that that is the future of every Christian? Are you keeping it in view? And are you using it to fight fear?

This great promised future. The second encouragement here. Is a beautiful reminder of God's inclination. To help believers in the difficult business of dying.

See we not only have the great encouragement. The beautiful reminder of what lies ahead for every believer. But we have here the beautiful reminder of God's inclination.

To encourage. To help believers. In the difficult business of dying. Because this vision. Doubtless helped Stephen greatly. What a vision it was.

Heaven opened. He was in a building. He was in a building. He was a preacher in a building. And yet there was a vision. Given.

[11 : 56] And it was so real that he asked other people to look. And to see what he saw. And what a help it must have been. To him facing sudden.

Frightening. And painful death. So much so. That as. He is being stoned. He prays not only Lord Jesus receive my spirit.

But Lord do not hold this sin. Against them. Here is a man who dies well. In confidence. With grace. With a forgiving spirit.

And isn't it. Isn't it remarkable. That we are told. His death is described simply in these words. When he had said this. He fell asleep. He fell asleep.

And that was. As it were a picture. Of what was happening. They are wonderful words. Because they promise. An awakening. They promise. The resurrection of the body.

[13 : 00] That's. The Bible's description. Of death. It's. It's as fearless. As falling asleep. Were you terrified. When you put your head on the pillow last night.

I woke up in the middle of the night. A bit terrified actually. Had to pray. Got this extraordinary. Unpleasant dream. But generally speaking.

We are not frightened. Of falling asleep. And the Bible uses this language. To remind us. That we have no more reason. A Christian has no more reason.

To fear death. Than they have. Of falling. Asleep. It's a beautiful. Description. And his death.

Had a tremendous impact. Didn't it? But. Saul was there. God says to Saul. The Lord Jesus Christ.

[13 : 54] Says to Saul. On the day he becomes a Christian. When he challenges him. On the road to Damascus. Oh it's been hard for you. To kick against the goads.

Something has been troubling his conscience. What has been troubling him? Is it not surely. What he sees. On this occasion. The courage. And the peace. And.

The forgiving spirit. Of this extraordinary man. Stephen. And the power. Of Christ. At work in his life. And he's.

Gone round. Trying to destroy. All such people. But it's. It's troubling his conscience. That's what the Lord says to him. It's hard for you.

It's been hard for you. To resist. The testimony. Of this man. And others. Like it.

[14 : 51] So what power. In this man's death. It's a great death. Isn't it? How the Lord. Helps him. How he's helped. By the vision. He sees.

And my point is a simple one. The logic is this. If Christ. Helps. Stephen. A man.

Full of faith. And the Holy Spirit. A man who is strong. And courageous. If he gives him. This wonderful vision.

To help him. In the difficult business. Of dying. Will my heavenly father. Not be much more likely. To help the weak. And the vulnerable. To find a way.

To encourage them. As they face. The last enemy. Isn't that the significance. Of the 23rd Psalm. Even though I walk.

[15 : 51] Through the valley. Of the shadow of death. David says. I will fear no evil. Because I'm a superhero. Not at all. Because when it comes.

To the crunch. You are more than. Able to look after me. In the hardest. Circumstances of life. Because there.

Your rod. And your staff. Comfort me. You will be with me. Your rod. And staff. They comfort me. Protection.

From our enemies. And protection. From ourselves. And our inclination. To run. In fear. Sheep. Are the most stupid. Creatures. Imaginable. I've got a friend.

Who's a shepherd. And he's told me. Lots of stories. And I've seen. First hand. Lots of things. And it's not a very. Encouraging. Image.

[16 : 48] Is it. That is used. We are compared to. The Lord's sheep. And yet it is. Wonderfully encouraging. Because it's. Incredibly realistic.

The shepherd. Does it all. The sheep. Are the daft creatures. It's the shepherd. Who looks after them. From beginning. To end. Including in the valley. Of the shadow.

Of death. Well how about. Psalm 116. Verse 15. Right in the middle. Of a psalm. That seems to have. Nothing whatsoever.

To do. With death. Or rather. It has something. To do with death. But nevertheless. You get these.

Sudden words. Precious in the sight. Of the Lord. Is the death. Of his. Faithful. Servants. He's talking about. God's. Hearing his prayer.

- [17 : 42] And his experience. Of coming near. To death. And he. Out of the blue. He says this. A greatly. Encouraging word. That it's important.
- To God. It's precious. To God. His full attention. Is held. By the death. Of his. Saints.
- By the death. Of his. Children. He is. All. Attention. To the.
- Suffering. And struggles. Of his. Dying. Children. Or what about. Isaiah 43. With its. Wonderful. Images.
- Of. The Lord's. Being. With us. In the hardest. Of circumstances. Of life. This is what.
- [18 : 40] The Lord says. He who created you. He who created you. Jacob. He who formed you. Israel. Do not fear. For I have redeemed you. I have summoned you. By name. You are mine. When you pass through the waters. I will be with you.
- When you pass through the rivers. They will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire. You will not be burned. The flames will not set you. Ablaze. Or again.
- At the end of Hebrews. In Hebrews. 13. Get these. Tremendously encouraging. And comforting. Words. Which. Give us confidence.
- That in. Even in the. The moments. Of facing. Our end. In this world. Our death. The Lord will be there.
- The Lord is my helper. Verse 6. Of Hebrews 13. I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me? Well we know what they can do. Remember your leaders.
- [19 : 37] He says. Who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome. Of the way of life. Of their way of life. And imitate their faith.
- Now some of these people are dead. And doubtless. Their death was not easy. But nevertheless. There was something.
- That he can point to. In these people. About. The outcome. Of their way of life. Because. And he underlines it by saying. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday.
- Today. Forever. So the help that Christ gives. To them. He will also give. To you. The Lord knows how hard we find the prospect. Of dying.
- It's an unknown path. It's the last enemy. We have to walk it alone. Clinging to life. Is very natural. It's built into us. We may know pain.
- [20 : 36] And isolation. As Stephen did. We may feel so unprepared. Unprepared. It can be very sudden. And unexpected. As it was for Stephen. It's no easy thing.
- But he has promised. Never to leave us. Or forsake us. I watched my darling die. The Lord helped her. Not because her faith was strong.
- But it was very striking. A woman who had suffered considerably with depression. Over many years. And with anxiety. She could have got a PhD in anxiety.
- She had a great ability to imagine the worst. And all kind of things that could happen. To the amazement of at least one of her sons. Who used to say to her mum.
- I don't know how I can imagine all these things happen. But very strikingly. In the last illness of her life. As far as I could see.
- [21 : 35] She was not troubled by anxiety. And she was not troubled by depression. Because the Lord is gracious. He holds the hand of his children.
- When they walk in that tough place. John and Anne will remember a lady we had in our church. Called Margaret Croft. She was one of the most godly women we could ever have met.
- Enjoyed her company immensely. A lovely Christian woman. But she had so little assurance all her days. I prayed intensely for her.

And worked hard with her. And in preaching. All the time. It was my great desire. To see this woman grow in assurance. And I don't think she did.

Except in the last two days of her life. She had confidence in the Lord. She'd never had. Before. And she died a beautiful death.

[22 : 33] And singing the praise of God. Up to the very moment of her death. God is very gracious. So that's the second thing here my friends.

I want you to see. God's inclination to help believers. In the difficult business of dying. And then finally and briefly. A third encouragement. It's the beautiful reminder of the appropriateness.

Of intense grief. In the loss of a dear Christian friend. I just want you to notice this. The Holy Spirit's description. Of what happened to Stephen's body.

After his brutal murder and execution. See it in verse 2. Godly men. Godly men. Buried. Or perhaps. Recovered Stephen. And mourned deeply.

For him. Do you notice. What the Spirit of God puts together. He puts together deep mourning. And godly men. Deep mourning.

[23 : 28] The word for mourning. And grieving. Comes from a root here. The word I'm used here. Which means to beat oneself. So it's an incredibly intense word. This is people profoundly distressed.

At the death of this man. But this is not the response. Of people whose faith is weak. This is a response of devout.

Godly men. God. Men who. In whom the Lord delights. They weren't wimps. They were believers. But you see.

Believers love. Others. They loved this man. They admired him. They felt they needed him. And his loss. Was a very.

Very profound. Pain. To so many. In Jerusalem. The implication is simply this. That such grief. Is an appropriate expression. Of our loss.

[24 : 27] When a dear believer. Is taken from us. This is how godly people. Behave. They don't grieve. Like those who have no hope. Not like the unconverted.

This is not despair. This is not hopelessness. Because. They were made aware of this vision. That this man had seen. They knew. What lay ahead for him.

They knew that for him. Was glory. They knew that for him. Was the welcome of Christ. Unimaginable. Glory. Was his. But they mourned.

Their pain. Was at their loss. This is real. Pain. At real loss. And it is utterly. Appropriate.

If I hear. A brother or sister. In Christ. Say to others. Don't mourn me. When I die. I will talk to them.

[25 : 28] And as gently as I can manage. Say. Now look. We won't be in despair. We know where you're going. But don't say to people. Don't mourn me.

You're asking them to be. I'm inhuman. You're asking them to cease to be. Loving. Kindly people. It's crazy. Of course it is appropriate.

I love this passage of scripture. Because it tells me it's right and appropriate. To mourn. Those. Who die. Even those who die in Christ.

And let's not say. Of a service. Of a funeral service. That it's simply a thanksgiving service. It isn't. It is a thanksgiving service. And there's often great reason to thank the Lord.

And there's sometimes great reason to thank the Lord. That he has finally taken this brother or sister home. To be with him. But that's not all it is.

- [26 : 27] We can't. One of the great things about becoming a Christian. Is that it makes you more human. Not less. And more affectionate. And more concerned.
- About others. More likely to miss those. Because. You know. People tell me that blood is thicker than water. That's not my experience. My experience.
- That the bonds of people who work together. For the saviour. Are profound. And it's a very painful thing. Even to say goodbye to somebody who.
- We rejoice for their sake. But it's very hard. It's a very hard thing. To lose somebody who's. Extraordinarily. Precious to you.
- As many of you. Know. And it's wonderful to read. The spirit of God. Say in the scriptures. That it is godly people.
- [27 : 23] Who mourn. Deeply. When the Lord's people. Are taken. From them. We need to take our view of death. From Christ. From John 11. For example.
- Now he's supremely confident. That those who believe in him. Shall never die. Though they do die. They will live. Forever.
- They are not lost. But that's not his only. Comment about death. You find him very angry. In John 11. The one. The words that are generally translated.
- Deeply moved. Are words which mean. That he's angry. He's not angry about the women. He's not angry at people. He's angry at death itself.
- He goes to the tomb. Death is vile. It's an awful thing. It's a great intrusion. Into God's beautiful creation. It's the fruit of sin and rebellion.
- [28 : 21] We should hate death. There's nothing natural about it. There's no dignified way of dying. Because there's nothing dignified about death. It's a horrible thing.
- We need to be like Christ. And hate death. And we also need to be like Christ. And weep. He wept for. Those sisters. For those who grieved.
- Their grief was but for a moment. And was going to be replaced by. Unutterable joy. When they see Lazarus come forth. From the tomb. Christianity.
- Conversion. Restores beautifully. A natural and appropriate way of life. It makes us more. Not less human. Grief. Even intense grief. Is natural. Appropriate. And God pleasing response.
- To the death of a dear Christian friend. And I for one have found that truth. In the scripture. And found it absolutely liberating. There we are anyway.
- [29 : 21] Acts chapter 7. The end of Acts chapter 7. Very sobering passage isn't it? Reminds us of the costliness. Of being bold and straight for the Lord.
- And yet we must be that. And it reminds us of death. And it's very natural to shrink from death. It reminds us of death. It reminds us that death can be unexpected. And isolated.
- And very painful. And hugely traumatic. And yet it is a glorious passage my friend. Because it reminds us of the future of every Christian.
- It reminds us of your future. If you either have made peace with God. Or you do make peace with God. And the only way that peace can be made. Through trusting in Christ.
- Through coming to God on the basis of the saviour that he has provided. It reminds us of God's heart. His inclination to help the dying Christian.
- [30 : 19] In the difficult business of dying. And it also reminds us that it's possible by grace to die well. To die with faith and grace. And die in peace.
- And to die with great impact. And surely it's of some help to be told. Isn't it? That the grief we feel when we lose those who are precious to us.

Though we know that they're in a better place. Yet we miss them tremendously. That that grief is natural. And God honouring.

And God approved. And it's part of being human. And we need not be afraid of it. May God help us in this very difficult business.

Of living as those who are ready to die. I don't mean ready in the sense that, you know, we're just kind of looking forward to it. We're bound to be schizophrenic about death.

[31 : 17] It is to be with Christ, which is far better. But it's often preceded by hard things. And death itself is so unnatural. It's so against everything, in a sense, that is ours naturally in Christ.

But thankfully, it is the gateway to eternal glory. As Stephen saw. And as every single child of God will experience.

Amen. Let's sing. Him which is in effect my own testimony. 579. I heard the voice of Jesus say, Come unto me and rest.

Lay down, thou weary one. Lay down thy head upon my breast. I came to Jesus as I was. Weary and worn and sad. I found in him a resting place.

And he has made me glad. Those promises that are alluded to here. The promise of rest. The promise of living water.

[32 : 23] The promise of light. They are to be experienced once and for all. But also they are to be experienced again and again. One comes again and again for rest.

And life giving water. And light. Even though in the moment of conversion. One comes for them and they remain forever.

Yet still we need to experience those things in greater and greater measure. In life's hardships. So we stand to sing 579. Let's see.

Let's see. Let's mention again. Let's shop. Let's shop. Let's shop.

This is a banging star. Let's shop.