

Sermon Title: Lord Jesus, Receive My Spirit
Scripture Text: Acts 7:44-60 (Acts #17)

Speaker: Jim Harris
Date: 6-18-23

Come with me, please, to Acts Chapter 7, as we continue our march through the Book of Acts. Today is going to be our third and final visit to Chapter 7.

As we have worked through these first six and a half chapters of Acts, there has been a very clear theme: No matter what happens, the subject is Jesus. If there is a miracle, and one of the Apostles seizes the opportunity to preach after the miracle, it was *never about the miracle!* It was *never* about how you could line up to receive *your* miracle. The subject is "Jesus...whom God raised from the dead" (Acts 4:10). Jesus and His death and resurrection—that is *always* the subject (cf. 1 Cor. 2:2; 15:3-4).

When the Holy Spirit first came to indwell the believers—Acts Chapter 2—Peter explained immediately that this was the fulfillment of prophecy about the Messiah. And then he said, in Acts 2:22-23—"Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know—this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death." The subject is Jesus. (NASB-1995—and throughout, unless otherwise noted)

And in every case, the Gospel message—every time we have seen it preached in Acts—is undergirded with exposition of Old Testament texts. Peter started out right away, talking about Joel, and then David was cited in several places. And when Peter and John healed a man who had never walked—he was asking for alms, he was asking for money, and they politely declined his request for money; and then in Chapter 3, Verse 6, Peter said, "I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—walk!" Then in his sermon that day, Peter took them back to Genesis, to the promises to Abraham.

And then when he and John were arrested—we read about it in Chapter 4, Verses 8 and 10—"Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, 'Rulers and elders of the people...let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this name this man stands here before you in good health.' " And then he quoted Psalm 118 (vs. 11), and he said, "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (vs. 12; cf. Jn. 14:6; 1 Tim. 2:5). The subject is Jesus—that is what the book of Acts is all about.

Again Peter quoted David, and again he turned the attention to Jesus. And then eventually the Sanhedrin arrested all the Apostles, not just Peter and John. God set them free; they went back into the Temple, preached again, and when they got rounded up the second time, the message was clear: Chapter 5, Verses 29-30—"But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross.' "

Then they were scolded, and then they were flogged, and then they went back, and we are told in Acts 5:42: They went back into "the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ."

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That is what Acts is all about! "Christ died for our sins...He was buried...He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3-4). He *is* your Savior! Repent! Come to Him! Turn to Him! Be saved! Be forgiven!

The hard-hearted and spiritually blind members of the Sanhedrin at that time were absolutely furious with the Apostles. They had tried to shut them up, they had tried to shout them down, they had arrested them, they had beaten them, they had flogged them—and they just could not stop the Gospel (cf. Matt. 16:18; Col. 1:5-6; 2 Tim. 2:9).

Well then, God raised up someone who *was not* one of the Twelve Apostles—this man named Stephen. He started out by accepting responsibility, along with six other men, to help the Apostles with the daily care of the feeding of the "widows" in the early church (Acts 6:1-6); and soon, by God's power, Stephen was doing miracles just like the Apostles; and he, too, proclaimed Christ.

And so, guess what? They arrested him. The Sanhedrin suborned false witnesses who accused him of blaspheming "Moses," of blaspheming "God" (6:11), of speaking ill of the Temple, of speaking ill of the Law of Moses (vs. 13), and claiming that Stephen had said that this "Jesus" would "destroy" the Temple and all the things done there (vs. 14).

So they came to wherever Stephen was, probably in the Temple courtyard, and they dragged him away and brought him to that same place—remember, the members of the Council would sit around the edges, and there was a place in the center for the one who was being grilled—and they started accusing Stephen.

I'm sure Stephen could tell that this was actually a lynch mob. The accusations against him are at the end of Chapter 6. And then, I know other words were said, but we have this summary at the beginning of Chapter 7. Verse 1—"The high priest said, 'Are these things so?' " And that launched Verses 2 through 53, which I entitled: "Best Last Words, Ever!" And it was *all* about Jesus!

Verses 2 through 53 is Stephen's great monologue, prior to the moment when these self-righteous hypocrites murdered him without *any* due process, without *any* proof of guilt; as a matter of fact, he was quite innocent.

We saw him start with Genesis. In Verses 2 through 16, he showed how this Gospel that he and the Apostles were preaching was the final step in God's unfolding of His plan of redemption that started with the covenant that God made with Abraham, and it built from there; and he went all the way back into Genesis: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, how Israel wound up being in Egypt.

And then, in Verses 17 through 43, Stephen preached about Moses; and he showed that not only was he not *blaspheming* Moses or the Law, but his *accusers* were doing *exactly* what their forefathers had done in rejecting God's prophets! And last time, we looked at what he said about Moses: This guy, off the top of his head—with his life hanging in the balance—summarized Exodus through Deuteronomy!

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And now, in our final visit to this chapter, it's the end for Stephen, but we will see how the rest of his final day on this planet unfolded; and then, we are going to circle back and see what God would have each of *us* do, in light of this astounding chapter.

So we are going to look, officially, at Verses 44 through 60 today.

Number 1: Stephen says, "You Were Wrong About Me And The Temple." (vss. 44-50)

Number 2: He says, "You Are Guilty, Not Me." (vss. 51-53)

Number 3: "Lord Jesus, Receive My Spirit." (vss. 54-60)

Stephen has shown his loyalty to God. He has shown that he *was not* blaspheming. He has shown that his message is in perfect harmony with Moses, and that he also *was not* blaspheming or criticizing Moses. In fact, it was his *accusers* who were rejecting God's message through Moses and the Law (e.g., Deut. 18:15, 18-19).

We know that "the Law" given through Moses was given to be "our tutor to lead us to" the Savior, Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:24). Those *countless thousands* of sacrifices, repeated over and over again—all of them pictured the need for the "once for all" sacrifice, which is Christ (Heb. 7:27; 9:12; 10:10; cf. 1 Cor. 5:7).

Next, Stephen addressed that absurd notion that he somehow spoke against Temple, himself, and the Law that was implemented in the Temple. And *yet again*, he shows *amazing* command of what we call the Old Testament—it was the only "testament" he had; it was God's Word. To show his respect for the Temple, he recounts the history of it; and he starts with the original prototype of the Temple, which was "the tabernacle of the testimony" in the wilderness (Ex. 38:21). It was always at the center of the life of the Israelites after they left Egypt, all the way up until the time when Solomon build the first Temple in Jerusalem.

Israel carried that Tabernacle with them when they crossed the Jordan River and they entered the Promised Land, and so we are going to pick it up at Chapter 7, Verse 44. Now remember, the accusation is that Stephen has been criticizing the Temple, and saying that Jesus is going to destroy it. Stephen says: "Our fathers had the tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness, just as He who spoke to Moses directed him to make it according to the pattern which he had seen. And having received it in their turn, our fathers brought it in with Joshua upon dispossessing the nations whom God drove out before our fathers, until the time of David" (vss. 44-45).

Gee, this guy also knows the whole Book of Joshua—and even *beyond* Joshua! It's marvelous how he summarized the story of the Tabernacle, *just as* he had summarized the Covenant with Abraham, and the life of Moses, and he has alluded to the Davidic Covenant.

And now he goes on. Since they *are* the priesthood of Israel at that time, he is assuming that his accusers are familiar with Samuel and Kings and Chronicles. We call them six books; the Jews called them three books—major historical sections of the Old Testament.

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And here is the next installment in his summary: Verse 46—"David found favor in God's sight, and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for Him" (vss. 46-47). Again, look how much can just *tumble* out of this guy's mind, summarizing all that God has been doing for these centuries!

And now, he is going to make a very significant point about the theological significance of the difference between the essence of God Himself and the earthly place dedicated to worshipping Him. So he says in Verse 48—"However, the Most High"—that's a common Old Testament title for God, whose personal name is Yahweh—"the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says..." And now, Stephen pulls out, from memory, the words of Isaiah 66:1-2—"Heaven is My throne, and earth is the footstool of My feet; what kind of house will you build for Me?" says the Lord, 'Or what place is there for My repose? Was it not My hand which made all these things?' " (Acts 7:49-50).

He is making an important point there, because the Jewish leaders accused Stephen of blaspheming the Temple, but, Wow—what a case of the pot calling the kettle black! The words from Isaiah 66 are showing that God is *infinitely greater* than the Temple (cf. Matt. 12:6), and when they thought of God as somehow being confined in, dwelling inside the Temple, *they* were the ones misunderstanding the Temple! *They* were misunderstanding who God is! (cf. Jer. 23:24)

Now, as I have pointed out: All through this rather spectacular chapter, Stephen *never* engages with the specifics of the false accusations against him. He doesn't dignify them, as if there was any substance to them (cf. Matt. 27:12). He talks about God and His Word and His plan and His truth and His Son.

Now he is ready to point the truth squarely between the eyes of his murderous accusers. He says: "You Are Guilty, Not Me."

We have seen him draw several parallels between the way the leaders of Israel treated Jesus, and how their ancestors had treated the prophets, all the way back to Moses (cf. Matt. 23:29-31); and now, here comes the frontal blow: Verse 51—"You men..." Now, I can't tell you for sure that he was pointing at them, but I can picture him in that room, surrounded by these men; and maybe turning around and even pointing to the ones that he knew—and you can bet: *He knew them!* He brought sacrifices to the Temple. These were the priests. He says: "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did."

They were guilty of rejecting God's Word. *Their ancestors* were guilty of attacking His messengers. They had attacked God the Son.

"Stiff-necked" is a metaphor for obstinacy (cf. Prov. 29:1).

"Uncircumcised in heart and ears" is a metaphor to describe the hard-heartedness and the spiritual resistance to God's messengers, all through the ages of their history (cf. Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4; 9:25-26; 29:19; Zech. 1:4).

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The phrase "always resisting the Holy Spirit" describes refusing to humble yourself before the Word of God. That's how you can "grieve the Holy Spirit" (Eph. 4:30; cf. Is. 63:10)—you just simply refuse to live according to what He says (cf. Ezek. 6:9); and what He says is recorded in the Word (2 Pet. 1:21; cf. Acts 28:25).

Then he gets more specific in Verses 52 and 53—"Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One"—so he's talking about the prophets who *predicted* Jesus; and then he says, "whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the Law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

When you study the prophets of the Old Testament, you pretty quickly come to understand that their lives were *never* comfortable. Most of them were openly persecuted by the people who should have welcomed them. There are the ones like Jeremiah and Ezekiel. God says, "I have a great message to give you to give to My people. Oh, by the way: *No one will ever heed what you say!*" (cf. Ezek. 2:7) In fact, all those prophets were pointing to "the Righteous One"—the Messiah, Jesus (cf. Acts 3:24; 1 Jn. 2:1).

Stephen slips in here this part about how they "received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it." It's an interesting thing. The Bible does mention that somehow the giving of the Law involved angels; and the Jews had kind of a special place for angels—they sort of corrupted the Doctrine of Angelology. You can read in the first part of Hebrews, how the author of Hebrews makes a big point that Jesus is superior to angels.

But in case you don't know it, just understand: The Law *did* come through angels. Deuteronomy 33:2—"He"—that's Moses—"said, 'Yahweh came from Sinai, and He dawned on them from Seir; He shone forth from Mount Paran, and He came from the midst of ten thousand holy ones"—that's God using angels—"at His right hand there was flashing lightning for them.' " (LSB) In Galatians 3:19, the Apostle Paul says: "Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels" (NASB-1977). And then, Hebrews Chapter 2, right after the superiority of Jesus to angels, Hebrews 2:2-3 says: "For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every trespass and disobedience received a just penalty, how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?"

So, Stephen slipped that in about the angels because they had a "thing" about that, and he's saying, "It's all about Jesus, guys! The Law was to point you to the Savior." (cf. Rom. 3:20-24; Gal. 3:24)

The problem was *not* Stephen; it wasn't anything Stephen did. The problem was not the Apostles. The problem was not the Gospel. The problem was in the hearts of the self-righteous, hypocritical false teachers who, at that time, controlled the priesthood and the Sanhedrin and the activities of the Temple (cf. Heb. 4:2).

So Stephen's point was simple: "You Are Guilty, Not Me." Look again at Verse 53—"...you who received the law as ordained by angels, *and yet did not keep it.*"

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It was no accident that Stephen included the words about the Jewish leaders' treatment of Jesus when he said "whose betrayers and murderers you have now become." (cf. Acts 13:27) And they were about to murder him—another spokesman of God.

So, Number 3—here comes the end for Stephen, earthly-speaking: "Lord Jesus, Receive My Spirit" is our third point.

Verse 54—"Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him." If you remember, we saw that phrase "cut to the quick" back in Chapter 5, Verse 33. That same murderous group wanted to kill the Apostles because they were declaring that they were witnesses of the resurrected Christ, and they would not stop calling people to repentance. "They were cut to the quick" and they were furious. Remember, it was only the counsel of Gamaliel that talked them out of killing the Apostles that day.

Well, by contrast, back in Chapter 2, Verse 37: After Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost, it says that the people who listened to him "were pierced to the heart," and *they* said, "Brethren, what shall we do?" And three thousand of them heeded: "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (vs. 38); and they believed and they were "saved" that day (vs. 40).

So there is this bifurcated response to the preaching about Jesus: "cut to the quick" and "pierced to the heart." "Pierced to the heart" describes the inner spiritual response of the conviction of sin (cf. Acts 16:14; 2 Tim. 2:25): "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30; cf. Lk. 18:13). "Cut to the quick" means "really angry"—hurt, wounded, offended; and it leads to bursting out in anger, and the justification of yourself (cf. Lk. 4:28-29). His enemies were so carried away, it says they were "gnashing their teeth at him" in anger and frustration. Somehow, I picture them *growling* at him. They were absolutely *mad*—furious, insane with hatred (cf. Prov. 19:3).

What a contrast with Stephen, though: He was perfectly calm. Remember when they were throwing all of their accusations at him in Chapter 6, it says, there he stood with a "face like the face of an angel" (vs. 15), calm as could be (cf. Ps. 119:165). God gave him total calm and total "peace" (Is. 26:3). Verse 55—"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.' " (vss. 55-56).

And those words prompted his immediate promotion into the presence of Jesus. Look at the last four verses of the chapter: "But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul." This was a part of the process of stoning: The witnesses cast the first stone; they lay aside their robes so they can heave bigger and badder rocks. "They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!' Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them!' Having said this, he fell asleep" (vss. 57-60).

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That's the biblical euphemism for physical death (1 Kings 1:21; Ps. 13:3; Dan. 12:2; Jn. 11:11-14; 1 Cor. 11:30; 15:51).

This was a horrendous display of murderous pseudo-spirituality (Jn. 16:2). These men were too self-righteous to kill Stephen right where they were; they didn't want to make a mess in their nice council chambers. They didn't even just drag him outside the meeting place and do the deed there. Their hypocrisy just *shouts* out from this passage, because they rigorously chose to obey the instructions in the Law that said a blasphemer was to be stoned, and the stoning had to take place "outside" the city (Lev. 24:14). So they are rigorous about stoning outside the city—never mind that the guy they are accusing of blasphemy was not a blasphemer; never mind that the man they called guilty was innocent (cf. Matt. 26:59; 27:6). No problem *murdering*—oh, but we have to be scrupulous about *where* (cf. Matt. 23:24). They chose to obey the instructions of the Law about "outside the city," but it never dawned on them that they had turned into a frenzied lynch mob! They were supposed to be the ones who sat in "the chair of Moses" (Matt. 23:2), the ones who taught people the real meaning of the Law (2 Chr. 15:3; Mal. 2:7)—but they rejected the One that the Law pointed them to (Deut. 18:15, 18-19).

Oh, and don't forget—if you don't think of it right now, you probably will later—you've learned, as you've been through the Gospels, about how the Jews did not have authority under the Romans to execute anyone; they did not have the right to do capital punishment (Jn. 18:31). But in this case, they were too carried away in their blind rage and frustration to care at all about that. They didn't *try* to go find Pontius Pilate or any other Roman to do this for them.

Now, how do we reconcile that? Well, we have no commentary about it anywhere in Scripture, so the ultimate answer is: We don't know. But we can only assume the Romans did not intervene in *this* case because it was in internal matter among the Jews; and they gave the Jews quite a bit of latitude, as long as they posed no threat to the stability of the rule of Rome (cf. Acts 18:12-15). Now remember, in the case of Jesus, they *wanted* to murder Jesus, but they were afraid that the followers of Jesus would riot, and it would cost them *their* positions because the Romans would get upset (Jn. 11:48); so they went through that mockery of justice, and tried to—and eventually did—convince the Romans that Jesus posed a threat to *them*, so He had to be crucified. Here—"We are just really mad, and we are going to kill this guy," and they got away with it.

And surely you noticed that first mention of "a young man named Saul" (vs. 58; cf. 22:20). It won't be too long in our study through Acts until you are going to see him converted—transformed into the Apostle Paul. We saw an earlier mention of Saul's rabbi-mentor, Gamaliel (Acts 5:34; cf. 22:3). He is the one that gave the wishy-washy advice back in Chapter 5 that let the Apostles be set free again. And we mused back then: Was it possible that if Gamaliel was there, perhaps his star pupil, Paul, was there in Chapter 5? I think he probably was, but I know for sure he was here. And he *was* a willing participant; he was complicit in the murder of Stephen (cf. 8:1). Maybe he didn't throw stones because he was not one of the ones who had lied about what Stephen had done, but he was there. So, put a bookmark there; we will come back and, praise the Lord, we are going to see Saul become Paul.

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But before we leave this chapter, I want you to let it get personal with you. This is a historical record; it's a long time ago. We are not in Israel. We don't have any Apostles. We are fresh out of temples at the moment. How do we *connect* to this?

Well, it *is* the historical record of what happened, and it *is* God's Word; therefore we know it is "profitable" to "teach" us, to "reprove" us, to "correct" us, to "train" us (2 Tim. 3:16). So, before we leave this chapter, what lessons are here for us in Idaho, 2,000 years later—Gentiles, not Jews? How might this help *us* in our walk with Christ, or if the day comes that someone wants to kill *us* for our faith?

I would like you to think back through this chapter so that you can learn from Stephen's words and his examples and his attitude, and let me just suggest to you lessons that we would well learn from the example of Stephen (Rom. 15:4).

Number 1: The lesson in demeanor. Remember, I pointed out how he began by saying, "Hear me, brethren and fathers!" (Acts 7:2). Even with his life on the line, he spoke calmly, he spoke respectfully (Rom. 13:7; 2 Tim. 2:24-25; 1 Pet. 3:15); he treated people as individuals created "in the image of God" (Gen. 1:27; cf. Jas. 3:9-10); he respected their position, even though they were *abusing* their position. He could have said, "I protest! I demand a retrial! Go call the Apostles and all my friends; have them bring their placards! We need to protest! You are violating my rights!" No! He turned the subject to what the subject really was: "You are mad because Jesus died and rose again, and you don't like that." There's a lesson in his demeanor.

Secondly, learn the lesson of long-term preparation. Stephen had a *spectacular* grasp of the Bible. Now, trust me, he did not get that from perusing a few scrolls the night before this happened. You don't become strong *in an instant*. You see a spectacular work of architecture—you see this bridge and you see many semis going both ways on the bridge, and the bridge is strong enough to support them. Well, the bridge did not become strong *because* the semis rolled over it. The bridge became strong because it was *built* strong.

And if you are not to the point yet that you can summarize the flow of the plan of God for redemption in the Bible—well, don't beat yourself up. Instead, start taking little steps, day by day, to build your understanding, to build your comprehension. You know, Jesus promised that He would bring to the minds of His Apostles what they needed to say (Matt. 10:19-20; Jn. 14:26). Well, you know what? God never reminds you of anything that you don't have in your mind! You can't *remember* anything you don't know! Don't just say, "God is going to supernaturally give me revelation at the moment." No! He already *gave* you the revelation—every single thing you need (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:3)—so, start working your way. Inch your way along! (Col. 3:16; 1 Tim. 4:6; 1 Pet. 2:2)

There's a *great* way to do it. It's been suggested by others besides me, but I will do this, even though I get no commission for recommending the publication. A great thing to do is to pick *any* book of the Bible. Start in Genesis if you want to. Maybe you would rather pick Haggai, because you don't know what's in there. But pick *any* book of the Bible you want. Take your MacArthur Study Bible. Yes, I'm recommending a specific one, because for all the good ones that there are, there is none better than that. Read slowly and

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carefully, meticulously, through that book, *and* read every footnote that goes along with it. Now, the footnotes are not inspired, but they *are* the fruit of countless thousands of hours of study. You do that! Do that for one book. If you say, "I didn't get it all," okay, do it again! That's why maybe you should start with a short book. And just keep doing that, and before long, you will gradually have a better grasp of God's Word than most *pastors* in the world, I promise you.

Another lesson: Learn the lesson of filling your mind (Ps. 119:11). While you are working on gradually building your understanding of the Bible, *also* work on memorizing key passages. If you say, "Oh, you haven't been inside my head! It's fossilizing. I can't memorize like I used to." *I* can't memorize like I used to! I went for two years memorizing 70 new Greek words every single week, and I *never* missed one on the weekly quiz! I don't do that anymore. It's harder! So...take your time. You know, you can memorize *one*, and then you can move on to another one. And pick your battles. Pick the *key* spots! I mean, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (Jn. 3:16). You can memorize that! You can memorize, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). If, right now, you can recite *five* verses from memory, well, I'll bet you in five weeks from now, you could probably recite six—*maybe even ten!* *Just start filling your mind.* Notice how Stephen had that balance of the "big picture" overview *and* certain key passages

Here's another one: Learn the lesson of Christ-centeredness. When he was falsely accused, Stephen did not ever get dragged off into the weeds of debating the accusations. Instead, he turned the conversation to what it was *really* all about: Jesus, and what He did for us (cf. 1 Cor. 2:2). Just keep "speaking truth in love" (Eph. 4:15).

When I walked through a season of being falsely accused of things, and I was buried under a mountain of lies, I was encouraged by good friends who said, "Don't go arguing about that stuff. Let your excellence be your defense." That's what Stephen did. He kept pointing to God and to His Word. Or, as First Thessalonians says: As you "walk and please God...excel still more" (4:1). Work on the good things.

Here's another lesson from Stephen's example: the lesson of using Biblical examples (e.g., Matt. 12:3-5; Mk. 12:26-27). He was not shy about using examples from the Bible about people who sinned. And sometimes people become convicted by seeing the parallels between themselves and others, and finding out that, "Well, I'm not the only one that has this anger problem. I'm not the only one that has this lust problem. I'm not the only one that has this (fill in the blank) problem." Sin and rejecting messengers of God like you when you are attacked for your faith—it's not unique. Don't be shy about using examples.

Another lesson is the lesson of standing alone, when necessary. Be willing to stand alone when your message is rejected and when you are hated for Christ. Now, don't get me wrong: Christianity is *not* a singles match; it's a team effort. We, *together* are "the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:12; cf. 1 Cor. 12:12); we need each other, we build on each other, we

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build strength from each other, we encourage each other (Eph. 4:16)—all of those "one anothers" of the New Testament strengthen us...But there may come the day when you are *all alone* (e.g., 2 Tim. 4:16-17).

It had to be lonely of Stephen that final day of his life. They drag *him alone* before the Sanhedrin. Where were the Apostles? I'll bet they were around, but I bet they were locked out. I bet they were praying, but God let Stephen die anyway. It was lonely for him, surely, on that final day of his life, but he stood fast (cf. Rev. 12:11).

Another lesson: the lesson of clinging to Jesus. He lifted his eyes toward Heaven. We put it in a song: "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face" ("Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus," 1922, Helen Howarth Lemmel). Now, you are probably not going to be granted a vision of Jesus in Heaven, as Stephen was, but you can always ponder the beauty of your Savior, "And the things of Earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace." Never take your "eyes" off of Him (Heb. 12:2).

And learn the lesson about betrayal. Remember, he called these guys "brethren." He spoke of them as "fathers." These were "men of Israel" (2:22; 3:12; 13:16). Realize, he probably knew them. Surely, he brought offerings to that Temple! And these were priests. He said when he went around, "You men!" I bet he looked them in the eye! They betrayed him. They betrayed him *horribly*.

And many whom you have considered or do consider friends—maybe even *family*—will turn against you (Ps. 55:12-14). Jesus said it would happen (Matt. 10:34-36). They may have received Stephen's offerings in the Temple, and they could just slip right by that and throw the stones at him. Don't be surprised when you are betrayed because of your faith in Jesus Christ. Oh, and by the way: It *really* hurts! It *really* hurts.

Ah, but that leads to the next lesson: the lesson of trust and hope. Stand "firm until the end" in God's promises (Heb. 3:6, 14; 6:11; 10:36; cf. Matt. 10:22; 24:13; Rev. 2:26). Stephen knew that the *worst* they could do to him that day was kill him (Lk. 12:4)—and the *best* they could do to him that day was kill him, because he was going to be "with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8; cf. Phil. 1:21). Think of the end of First Corinthians. Our radio program just ended First Corinthians 15 this past week: "be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord" (vs. 58).

And then, one more lesson from Stephen: the lesson of practicing forgiveness. "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" (vs. 60). Well, who *should* He hold the sin against, if not the ones that killed him? You see, the point is: he understood forgiving as he had been forgiven (Eph. 4:32). And even if your enemy never repents, you need to not let him occupy space in *your* head and in *your* heart, which is exactly what is going on when you dwell on those things, and you become bitter (Prov. 19:11; cf. 1 Pet. 2:23). Be "ready to forgive" (Ps. 86:5), even if you never get the opportunity.

Stephen was around the very early church. He was part of the first ten thousand of believers. The Apostles were there, and you know there were the close associates of the Apostles: men like Stephen; men like James—not "James the brother of John" (Acts

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12:2), not James the Apostle called "James the Less" (Mk. 15:20), but James the half-brother of Jesus (Matt. 13:55). He actually became the de facto leader of the church at Jerusalem in the early years of the church (Acts 15:13; 21:18; Gal. 2:9); we are going to see him play a very key role later on. But Stephen knew those guys! And Stephen probably also knew another of Jesus' half-brothers: the guy named "Jude" (Jude 1:1).

And I was just thinking the other day: Maybe Jude thought about a guy like Stephen when Jude wrote these words, one of the most glorious benedictions in all of the Bible: Jude 24-25—"Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy"—that was *literally* an *instantaneous* transformation for Stephen—"to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever."

Brothers and Sisters, I don't think any of us are going to face a stoning squad today, before dark. Probably in our culture, even if we *are* murdered for the cause of Jesus, we probably won't be *stoned*. Oh, but people are getting mocked right out of their jobs, out of their schools, out of their friendships, alienated from families. It's getting worse, and I have no promise that it will get better! I have every expectation that it *won't* get better, societally (cf. 2 Tim. 3:13).

But, we can be ready to stand, as did Stephen. And whether it is today, or whether it's 50 years from now, we can cry out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"

Let's pray:

Father, thank You that we can stand in Your Son—forgiven, restored, redeemed, adopted, complete, blessed with "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ." And Father, as much as we don't ask for persecution, as much as we don't yearn to be mistreated and falsely accused, thank You that You are "able" to "make us stand blameless" in Your sight. Have Your way with us. Use us for Your glory, to "speak" Your "truth in love" to a world that evermore hates You. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.