

12.The Seed of the Fruitful Church

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[0 : 0 0] Well, turn with me, if you would, to the passage we read there in Acts 6 and 7, and we'll be looking at this together. Page 914, if you have one of the visitor's Bibles.

And it's a passage all about the seed of the fruitful church. We're going back to our studies in the book of Acts this morning, and Acts is a book all about the certainty of the unstoppable kingdom of Jesus Christ our Lord.

What God starts, he finishes, and there can be absolutely no doubt about that. And the book of Acts demonstrates that for us so clearly. In Acts chapter 1, verse 8, you'll remember, Jesus says to the apostles they will bear witness in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

When you get to the very end of the book of Acts, you find that indeed the apostolic witness has reached Rome, the very heart of the empire, and from there is being proclaimed throughout the whole known world.

And yet, it is a certainty that is played out constantly, despite great hostility and opposition. And that occurs both outside and from within the church itself.

[1 : 1 6] We saw particularly, didn't we, in Acts chapters 4 to 6, how Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 16, verse 8, are absolutely true in all Christian mission. Wherever a great and effective door is opened, there are many adversaries.

Those two things always go together. It was so then, and it will be so today, and it will be so always until the Lord Jesus returns. Nevertheless, Jesus says, I will build my church.

In Acts 6, verse 7 is a great testimony to that, isn't it? And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

That's stage 1 of Jesus' purpose fully accomplished. The gospel is rampant in the city of Jerusalem. And so verse 8 of chapter 6 marks a watershed.

It's the beginning of the next stage of gospel mission, where the gospel breaks out from Judea into Samaria, and then into all the Gentile world. And in a way, it's rather appropriate, isn't it, for a church like ours at this stage, at this time, when we also, I suppose, are standing on the threshold of a new period of our own mission together.

[2 : 3 2] We're excited about it, aren't we? We're expectant. And I hope that this passage in Acts will make us all the more so. But it will also sober us, because the church of Jesus will be built, and must be built, by the witness of Christ's people, and that's us.

So witness that Jesus says will be certain, but will have to be very courageous, and often indeed it will prove to be very costly indeed. And that's because our mission really is Jesus' mission.

And so it's going to mirror his mission, and it's going to mirror his method. Unless a seed, says Jesus, falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone.

But if it dies, it bears much fruit. John 12 and 24. And what the story of Stephen's witness exemplifies for us is exactly that kind of witness that is the seed of a fruitful church.

That's a very, very long passage, but we really do need to take it as one. I want to summarize it under three headings. A certain mission, a courageous message, and a costly martyrdom.

[3 : 48] First then, chapter 6, verses 8 to 15, and a certain mission. Now, the early church could easily be forgiven, couldn't it, for thinking, what is going on here with all this opposition?

Has the Lord deserted us? Is the devil stronger than we are? Is he perhaps stronger than the Lord Jesus himself? Are the first signs of real encouragement, consolidation, Jerusalem being taken for the gospel?

Immediately again, there's violent opposition against some of the key men of the church, and Stephen was, as we read in the early part of chapter 6. And it's getting worse and worse. Again, it's just like chapter 4 and chapter 5, isn't it?

Opponents, verse 9, come from the synagogue and dispute with Stephen. Verse 11, they have false accusations. And so he's arrested unjustly in verse 12, and put on a trial, verse 13, with false witnesses.

But this time, it's far worse, isn't it? This time, there's no miraculous rescue by the angels from prison. This time, surely the cause of Christ really has been defeated. Stephen is brutally murdered by a violent mob.

[4 : 56] Imagine, can't you, how the church must have felt? How would we feel? But you see, Luke writes this book. Remember, it's the second volume in his works. Luke's gospel is the first.

He writes it, he says, so that we might have certainty and confidence about the things that we've been taught and believed about Jesus and his kingdom. So what is Luke's explanation for this seeming tragedy in the life of the church?

And what's the explanation for similar tragedies today when believers are martyred? Or even in much lesser ways, when just in our own experience, we find that our witness to Jesus is so hard, it's so much opposed, it's so difficult most of the time.

Can real Christian witness survive all of these things that we face in our mission? Well, these verses, 8 to 15 of chapter 6, give us a very clear answer.

And the answer is yes, Jesus' mission is a certain mission. Real witness in a hostile world will always continue because of the faithful promise of Jesus.

[6 : 08] Jesus is in control of our mission. And we mustn't doubt that, because this pattern is exactly what Jesus himself promised. And so he also promised that he would always provide for our needs.

Let me explain. What's going on here? Well, the disciples are being hauled before synagogues and rulers and courts and flung into custody. Now notice Luke's language here.

It's very deliberately chosen. And just listen to something he recorded from the lips of Jesus in volume 1 of his book in Luke chapter 21. Jesus said, They will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake.

These will be your opportunities to bear witness. Luke 21, verses 12 and 13. You see, it's exactly what Jesus promised, isn't it?

And not only did Jesus foretell that it would happen, he clearly told them why he would allow it to happen. This will be your opportunity to bear witness, he says. These things won't be obstructions to my gospel and kingdom.

[7 : 20] These things will be the very opportunities by which they grow. I wonder if you've ever thought about the opposition that we face in our own Christian ministries like that.

Even the increasing public opposition that we're facing in the West, in our own country, as more and more even laws are being passed in our land which make speaking the truth about Jesus, the truth about his word, into hate crimes.

religious hate crimes or sexual hate crimes. Or I wonder if you've ever thought about the hostility that you face perhaps at your work or in university or in school, in the common room, in the playground, in with colleagues, as your opportunity for witness.

You see, if we're praying as a church in our own lives for opportunities for witness, we better be clear about the kind of opportunities that Jesus promises to give us, haven't we? And for a church like ours, it's a great day of opportunity.

We're asking the Lord to give us opportunities. This should give us food for thought, don't you think? But if we find that a bit alarming, and I guess we do, we mustn't also miss the encouragement that Luke gives us.

[8 : 34] Notice in verse 8 how he tells us that Stephen was full of grace and power. And in verse 10 he says, none could withstand his great wisdom and the spirit with which he was speaking.

Now listen again. Luke's chosen those words very carefully. In Luke 21 verse 15, Jesus goes on, I will give you a mouth and wisdom which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.

You see, Jesus is good to his word, isn't he? Both his promises that there will be certain opportunities for witness, but also his provision for the words and the wisdom in exactly those times.

He said a similar thing in Luke chapter 12 verse 11. When they bring you before synagogues and rulers and authorities, don't be anxious how to defend yourselves or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you are to say.

And so here in verse 10 of Acts chapter 6, they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which Stephen was speaking. Jesus is in control of his church's mission.

[9 : 43] He promises opportunities, which may be very hostile and very frightening, but he provides the words and the wisdom by his Holy Spirit.

We'll see in just a minute just how much wisdom and words were given to Stephen. Isn't that encouraging to us? As well as being sobering. Of course, it's not an excuse to not prepare ourselves for how to be able to speak for Jesus.

Not at all. Peter elsewhere tells us very plainly, we've always to be ready to give a reason, a reasoned defense of our faith. Stephen did this because he knew his Bible, didn't he? And so the spirit could bring to mind the truth that he had learned and taken in and meditated on.

And we also need to train ourselves so that we're ready for such situations. That's why, for example, a book like that Bible overview is such a good one. It helps us to get the big picture just like Stephen had.

But God promises to give us strength and wisdom in speech when we're faced with these tough situations, these trials. And we're to see them all as opportunities for witness.

[10 : 50] We do need to see them as that. We tend, I suppose, often to see them just as obstructions, don't we? That's how I see them. I guess our prayers tend to be like this. Lord, take away the hostility.

Take away the danger. Protect us from the pain of these things. But I think what Luke is telling us here is that actually our prayer should be as the prayer of the church was back in chapter 4, verse 29.

Lord, look on their threats and continue to help us boldly speak the word of Christ in all of these opportunities that you're giving us. Give us courage, O Lord, in this, our missionary calling.

Because it's a certain mission. And it will be like this because of the faithful promise of Jesus. But courage will certainly be needed, won't it?

If we're to emulate our brother Stephen. And that brings us to our second point, a courageous message, which really is the most of chapter 7. And what Stephen's example shows us here is so clearly that real witness in a hostile world must always be through the fearless preaching of Jesus.

[12 : 02] Jesus isn't just in control of our mission. Jesus is the center of our message. His unique revelation rebukes and corrects all wrong views of God.

And his unique redemption and rule sets aside all erroneous views of salvation. You could say that everything in Stephen's preaching here was leading up to Jesus as the chief subject.

And of course it was Jesus who was the chief scandal of his message. And you know, in a hostile pluralist world that we live in today, you still need to be very courageous, don't you, to proclaim a Jesus like that.

To proclaim a gospel like that. What was the accusation against Stephen? Verse 13. Well, the false witnesses said he was speaking against this holy place, that is the temple, and the law, that is the word of God, through Moses.

That is, they were saying he was blaspheming against God himself who dwelt in the temple and his great prophet who spoke the very words of God. And that was what drove them to mad rage and zealous murder.

[13 : 13] Well, that is often the mark, isn't it, of religious zeal in religions where there is a colossal misunderstanding of the true nature of God and of the true revelation of God to man.

You kill people who dishonor a holy place or a holy land or a temple or a holy book. Alas, we see a lot of that in the world today, don't we?

And by the way, it is important, isn't it, that we mustn't let the mischievous secularists get away with trying to lump what they call Christian fundamentalists with fundamentalist fanatics of another type who do promulgate that kind of ideology.

We need to be very careful, don't we, that our language isn't hijacked like that. Yes, there are Christian martyrs. Christians can be deeply committed, evangelical, even fundamentalist, although that really just uses a term of abuse, isn't it?

But there is a crucial difference, isn't there? Whereas the evidence seems to be plain today, for example, that unfortunately Muslim martyrs today are those who seem to be willing to lose their life in order to kill others, the Christian martyr is very different.

[14 : 26] He's somebody who's willing to lose his life in order to save others. There's a huge distinction there, isn't there? Let's not be slow to make that vital distinction. There's all the difference in the world, isn't there, between killing mercilessly for your doctrine and being willing to be killed mercifully for your faith and for the sake of others.

That's an aside, but it is an important aside. It's something that we need to articulate today, I think. Well, these charges against Stephen were very serious. blasphemy against God and his greatness and against God's word, his gospel, if you like, as spoken by Moses, who was the great servant, the great prophet.

And it was so serious that his life truly was under grave threat, just as we know today the lives of many are under grave threat in certain countries when they convert to Christianity. That's exactly the situation that Stephen was facing.

And that makes his message all the more courageous, doesn't it? because he counters their accusation and he does it completely. And instead of him being on the defensive, he puts them on the defensive and he is accusing.

He accuses his accusers in a two-fold way. It's not he who blasphemes God, he says, it's they who are doing that.

[15 : 47] They're the ones, he says, who have robbed God of his greatness. They have thrust aside the true revelation of God and they have replaced him, in their minds with an idolatrous creation of their own imagining, a domesticated God, a God in a box, a God who serves them only and their own ends.

And secondly, it's not he who is blaspheming against Moses, against God's word. It's they who have not only robbed God of his greatness, but they've rejected his gospel, they've thrust aside, as they've always done, God's servants, God's servants who bring his redemption and his rule, who invade their sinful lives with God's truth and call them to repentance and obey.

You're wrong about God, says Stephen, you're totally wrong and you're wrong about his message, his gospel. You think you're in with God, but you're not.

And you think you understand what he's doing in this world, but you're not. The reality is you haven't got a clue. And it's not because of an unfortunate misunderstanding, Stephen says. It's because you're a recalcitrant, you're proud, you're hard hearted, you're enemies of the true God and his gospel.

Look at verse 51, it's very damning, isn't it? You're stiff-necked, you're uncircumcised in heart, you always resist the Holy Spirit. He doesn't pull his punches, does he?

[17 : 09] Not really a terribly seeker-friendly sermon. It's very long and detailed, but I think those two points are very clear. And he backs it up by a masterful summarizing of all of the Bible's storyline.

Let me just give you a few pointers to his argument. You see, they think he blasphemes God because he seems to play down the importance of the temple. And no doubt Stephen was passing on Jesus' own clear teaching that everything that the temple stood for temporarily, that is the presence of the living God, that it was just that.

It was a temporary thing because in Jesus the fulfillment of the temple had arrived. Because in Jesus, we have direct access to God himself. Because he is the mediator, the one mediator between God and man.

But Stephen points out, you see, that there's absolutely nothing new about the idea that the God of Israel is the God of the whole earth. He's not a God who's ever confined to one temple or one people.

You can't claim him just as your own, as the God who only stands for you and fights your battles. Those who thought that had got it totally wrong, said Stephen, and culpably wrong.

[18 : 22] Where did God first meet with the great patriarch Abraham? Well, the answer is there in verse 2. Not in Jerusalem, not in the temple, but in Mesopotamia.

And where did God tell Abraham that his offspring were going to live for generations, for centuries, verse 6? They were going to be sojourners in a land belonging to other people. Where did God walk with Joseph?

Verse 9. In Egypt, that pagan land. And it was in Egypt that the patriarchs were blessed, where they were rescued from famine. Verse 17. Where God blessed and multiplied his people.

Far, far away from Jerusalem and the temple. Where did God appear to Moses, the great prophet? Verse 30. In the wilderness of Sinai. And he made a point, didn't he, of telling Moses, that that place was holy ground.

Verse 33. It was holy because God happened to be there at that time. He's not a God whose holiness confines him to a particular piece of real estate in Jerusalem or anywhere else.

[19 : 26] Indeed, verse 44 may explain that he was very, very happy to be a God of no fixed abode. A God who lived in a tent, a tabernacle, for generations. Not until Solomon's day was a temple built.

And even when it was built at God's own express direction. It was abundantly clear that no house made with human hands could contain the God of heaven. Solomon himself said that when he dedicated it.

We read it last week. Stephen quotes here in verse 49 from Isaiah. God saying the same thing himself. What kind of idiots do you really think I am to think that I, the God of heaven and earth, can be cooped up in a rabbit hutch that you've made?

That's a literal translation of the Greek by the way. You get the point, don't you? See, Stephen is relentless in his logic. And yet that's what these people think they can do.

They want to sanitize God. They want to domesticate God. They want to control God. He's our God. He does what we want. They've robbed him of his greatness.

[20 : 34] They thought of him as theirs, as their servant. to fight for them. More like the genie out of Aladdin's lamp. Though God was rather privileged to have such a faithful people as Israel, as his special people, when in fact Stephen's history shows it's precisely the opposite.

Extraordinary privilege that Israel had, this recalcitrant people, to have such a wonderfully faithful God, despite again and again and again their total rejection of him. Because you see, when you rob God of his greatness, you will also always reject God in his gospel.

And that's the second major point that Stephen hammers home, again relentlessly. All through their history, he says, they have thrust aside the true revelation of God and they have thrust aside his true redemption because they would not have his servants, those that God sent to administer his rule, to speak his word, to summon them to obedience and faith.

And right from the start it was so. Even the patriarchs in verse 9, they were jealous of Joseph, they didn't like his words that came from God, so they sold him as a slave to Egypt.

But God was with him. Right from the beginning he had to work against his people. Just so with Moses himself, whom these people pretended they cherished greatly. He wasn't cherished in his day.

[22 : 00] Verse 27, he was thrust aside. And all through his leadership in the wilderness, verse 39, they thrust him aside. They wanted to go back to Egypt. They made idols and gods of their own.

You are the champions of Moses, says Stephen. You want to talk about Moses? Let's talk about Moses. Verse 35, this Moses whom they rejected, saying, who made you a ruler and a judge, this man God sent as both a ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel.

This man, verse 36, performed signs and wonders. This is the Moses, verse 37, who said, God will raise up for your prophet like me, who pointed to Christ. Verse 38, this is the one who was in the wilderness.

He received the living oracles. But verse 39, our fathers refused to obey him and thrust him aside and in their hearts returned to Egypt. That's actually what you would do as Moses, says Stephen, if he arose from the dead and confronted you today.

Religious nostalgia is a great thing, isn't it? But it's almost always self-deception, isn't it? You defend the faith of Israel, he's saying.

[23 : 11] Well, that's how it's always been in reality for people like you. That's why the prophets, verse 42, had to rail against you. It's always been like that.

You have and you have always been wrong about God and wrong about salvation, and culpably wrong. Because, verse 51, you're proud, you're rebellious, you're unspiritual, you refuse to repent.

Stiff-necked, uncircumcised in hearts. These are the words the prophets always used to mean that you're unbelievers. You had the privilege of the law of Moses who spoke of Christ himself and yet, verse 53, you refuse to obey it.

You resisted God's spirit, you rejected his prophets. And to compound it all, when the righteous one, when the Messiah, whom they had all been pointing to, when he himself came, you betrayed and you murdered him.

It's just the parable of the talents that Jesus told, isn't it? You see what Stephen is saying. There's only ever been one true gospel, the promise of the Christ of God and of salvation in him alone.

[24 : 22] That was Moses' gospel. It was the prophets' gospel. And they always rejected it. That's why Jesus said to the people, if you had believed Moses, you would have believed me because he spoke of me.

But no, they thrust aside Moses and so they thrust aside Jesus. You see, when human beings rob God of his greatness, they'll always resist his gospel.

That's the great sin of man, isn't it? They exchanged the truth of God for a lie. That's how Paul puts it in Romans 1. And it can happen even in the finest religious traditions.

Israel's tradition was all holy God given, wasn't it? And yet even it could be turned into idolatry through religious pride, through self-seeking. It can happen in the church too, can't it?

When God becomes our servant in our minds, when he becomes the God of our temple, of our denomination, our particular understanding, our particular version of the scriptures, whatever it is. The telltale sign often, isn't it, when our own ways and traditions become sacrosanct so that they stand in the way of the mission of Jesus.

[25 : 35] We get angry because our temple is apparently being marginalized. It could be like that for us as individuals, can't it? Within a congregation. Our own little empire in the church's life.

The whole church and God himself and everything else, his gospel, has to work around my little temple. Don't touch my temple. Which really means don't touch my ego.

It can happen in denominations too, can't it? We think we have a divine right to survival and to be flourishing and blessed even when we thrust aside the truth of God through his servants, through his apostles and through Christ himself.

And we know better. But you see, all of that is just folly, isn't it? If God can destroy the temple that he himself caused to be built, if he can turn aside from the nation that he himself chose of all the nations of the earth, well, we're fools to think that way ourselves.

Because to reject God's true messengers, his bearers of the gospel, whether it's Moses or Christ and his apostles, to reject them and say, who made you a ruler and judge over us?

[26 : 48] How dare you tell me how to live? Well, that's to reject the Son of God himself, isn't it? Do you notice the similarity in verse 35 of Stephen's words here to Peter's words about Jesus in Acts 2 and Acts 4?

This Moses, whom they rejected, God made ruler and redeemer. This Jesus, whom you crucified, God exalted as a leader and savior. This Jesus, whom you crucified, God raised up.

You see, Stephen's gospel is just full of the subject of Jesus and his gospel and that's why it's full of the scandal that got the reaction that it did. Scandalizes, you see, because it tells people you're wrong.

It says to people, no, you're wrong about God, you're wrong about salvation, you're wrong about yourself, your life, everything. And you're going to have to change everything if you want to be right with God.

Everything you've thought up until now is wrong. Even if you're zealously religious and very, very spiritual, if you haven't bowed the knee to Jesus Christ, if you haven't sought the only true God, the only possible way, you've been wrong.

[28 : 03] A terrible shock and a scandal, isn't it, to be told that? Especially if you're a religious person. That you're an enemy of God, that you've been all wrong about God, that everything you've done is just completely worthless.

People hate you for that. They scorn you. They despise you. And sometimes they'll even attack you and kill you. That's what happened here to Stephen.

Verse 54 to the end speaks of a costly martyrdom. And these verses tell us plainly that although not every witness to Jesus Christ will end in martyrdom, nevertheless, real witness in a hostile world cannot happen except through the fruitful pattern of Jesus.

Jesus' death, you see, is the crucible for our mission. And his saving death is always the pattern of a fruitful growth of the gospel in the world. We share in his death.

We carry the cross. If we're also to share in his risen life and share the crown. I'm sure you didn't miss how deliberately Luke draws our attention to the fact that Stephen is so similar to the Lord Jesus himself.

[29 : 18] Back in chapter 6, verse 8 and 10, we're told of his great grace and power and wisdom and spirit and no one could withstand him. Just like Jesus, isn't it? Right from the beginning, even when he was a young boy in the temple.

And here at his death, we read that he cries out to the Lord Jesus to receive his spirit. And he cries out and asks forgiveness on those who are murdering him, just like Jesus on the cross.

Because, you see, his witness shares the very pattern of Jesus' death. The true servant of Jesus becomes like him in his death in order to see the power of his risen life at work.

That's Paul's prayer in Philippians chapter 3, isn't it? That I might know him and the power of his resurrection and may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.

And that's the privilege that is given to all believers. In Philippians 1, he says, it's been granted to you for the sake of Christ, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for his sake.

[30 : 20] That's what it means to be called to discipleship and Christian witness. Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. Our lives bear spiritual fruit. Our lives become the seeds of real spiritual growth as they follow the pattern of Jesus' life and death.

And only if they do, unless a seed falls into the ground and dies, Jesus says, and he goes right on and says, if anyone serves me, he must follow me.

Follow me in the pattern of a life given willingly for many. Given to many deaths. A living death of killing our own desires, our own ambitions, our own agendas, our own glories and victories, in order that we may bear fruit instead for Jesus.

Jesus loved the church, Paul says to the Ephesians, and gave himself up for her. And likewise, he says to the Colossians, now in my flesh, I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the church.

And that's what we see here, I suppose, in its most extreme form in Stephen's costly martyrdom. He is filled, says verse 55, with the Holy Spirit, the spirit of the Jesus who gave himself over to death, that life might be at work in others.

[31 : 47] That's the seed that bears fruit. And notice that that is the context of Stephen's fulsome experience of the glory of God in Christ.

It's not in some ecstasy of worship that he sees that great vision. It's the far greater glory of being one with the Savior and his self-giving and costly and self-denying sacrifice and love.

That's the truest experience of glory. Sharing the deep cost of real witness to Jesus. You know, don't you, that that word witness is the Greek word martyrion.

It's where we get the word martyr from. Because real witness always is costly. Self-giving. It involves death in the pattern of the master.

That's how Jesus won the world through shame. And he beckons us his road. When the gospel really touches a man's life, says one writer, it marks that life with the marks of the cross.

[32 : 58] Witness is costly, you see. At least real witness that bears real fruit. It always is. But that's real discipleship. It's the way of the cross. But the way of the cross is also the way to the crown of life, isn't it?

For Jesus and also for us. That's the unchanging law of spiritual harvest. Isn't that how Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 4? We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not us.

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifest in our bodies.

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. So, death is at work in us, but life in you.

It's that life of costly but willing death with Jesus that is the seed of fruit-bearing life in the mission of the church, always. That's what Luke's showing us here so clearly.

[34 : 14] Because this costly witness, this martyrdom of Stephen is the great event that seeded the fruit-bearing of the church throughout all the rest of the world.

In Samaria and Greece and Rome and from there to everywhere. In one sense, every one of us sitting here this morning who's a believer in Christ is here as a fruit of the witness of the martyrdom of this man Stephen.

Death worked life in abundance. There's the immediate witness that we'll see next time of the disciples being spread out through all Judea and Samaria, as verse 4 of chapter 8 says, preaching the gospel everywhere they went.

But even more significantly, surely, there's the extraordinary fact that we read in the crowd watching it and approving of it was who? Saul of Tarsus. The nemesis of the church, or so it seemed.

But what he saw that day in Stephen's death must have lodged in his mind surely forever, mustn't it? And what he heard too, so that in time the death that worked in Stephen produced life abundantly in this man Saul.

[35 : 26] And in becoming the Apostle Paul, through him, through his own cross-bearing witness, the gospel was truly let loose all throughout the world. He must have seen an absolute calamity, mustn't it, that day, to those who saw Stephen being stoned and who buried his body.

Certainly it must have been a mystery. But Jesus knew and he saw and he understood. And we're told that as his precious servant Stephen stood witness to him bearing the marks of death for his sake, Jesus likewise stood in heaven as a witness to him before his Father.

Did you notice verse 55? Stephen sees a vision of the risen Christ in glory at the right hand of the Father, just as Jesus said he would be seen. But you'll see, strangely, in this place we're told Jesus was standing, not seated at the Father's right hand, as always else we're told he is, but standing.

He seems deeply involved, standing himself to bear witness to his own faithful witness and ready to receive him into glory, to give him the crown of life that he'd so richly won.

The mission and witness is all about sharing the fruitful pattern of Jesus' own life and his death. There is the cost. It's undeniable. You can't witness without the cross.

[36 : 53] But there is the crown. The glory of life. Life through our costly witness in others and also the crown of life from the hand of he who testifies to us before his Father's throne in heaven.

Is it accidental that Stephen's own name, Stephanos, means crown? Perhaps it is. But his life and witness is a great message, isn't it, of challenge and of encouragement to all of us to strive likewise for that crown of life.

For we too have a certain mission to witness in a hostile world according to the fruitful, faithful promise of Jesus. He's promised us all these opportunities, hard as they may be, but he will provide.

We also, therefore, must have a courageous message to witness to a hostile world the fearless preaching of Jesus, however scandalous it may seem.

And we also, likewise, every one of us, therefore, has a call to a costly martyrdom, to a witness that is truly in the fruitful pattern of Jesus, where deaths to our self, to our pride, to our ambition, to our glory, to our praise, deaths to these things, willingly, work abundant life, eternal life, gracious and free, even in the hearts of ardent opponents to the gospel today, like Saul of Tarsus was then, who can be changed and transformed and brought forever into the orbit of Christ's grace.

[38 : 42] Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, Jesus, standing at the right hand of God. And as they were stoning him, he cried out, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

And falling to his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold their sin against him. Friends, that's the spirit of witness.

And if it's found in us, we'll truly be the seed of the fruitful church. Let's pray together. Lord, our God, we thank you that your mission is certain.

Amen. And so, Lord, we ask for courage. We ask for spirits that follow in your way, not counting the cost as anything other than great privilege.

That death may be at work in us and through us for the life of Christ to be made manifest in this city and in this world. To the glory and praise of our Saviour's name.

[39 : 57] Amen. Amen.