

Stephen's Speech

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[0 : 0 0] So our first reading is on page 1098 in the Church Bibles, and we're starting at Acts chapter 6, starting at verse 8.

Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.

Opposition arose, however, from members of the synagogue of the freed men, as it was called, Jews from Cyrene and Alexandria, as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia, who began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God. So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law.

They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses who testified, This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.

[1 : 3 2] All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. Then the high priest asked Stephen, Are these charges true?

To this he replied, Brothers and fathers, listen to me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran.

Leave your country and your people, God said, and go to the land I will show you. This is the word of the Lord. Living words to pass on to us.

But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead they rejected him, and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. They told Aaron, Make us gods who will go before us.

As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him. That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and reveled in what their own hands had made.

[2 : 4 3] But God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon, and stars. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets.

Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings for forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel? You have taken up the tabernacle of Molech and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship.

Therefore I will send you into exile, beyond Babylon. Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant of the law with them in the wilderness.

It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them.

It remained in the land until the time of David, who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the god of Jacob.

[3 : 47] But it was Solomon who built a house for him. However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says, heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool.

What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord? Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?

You stiff-necked people, your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors. You always resist the Holy Spirit. Was there ever a prophet?

Your ancestors did not persecute. They even killed those who predicted the coming of the righteous one. And now you have betrayed and murdered him. You who have received the law that was given through angels, but have not obeyed it.

When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

[4 : 55] Look, he said, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.

Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

Then he fell on his knees and cried out, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. When he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul approved of their killing him.

On that day, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Hello, can I have my word of welcome to Martin?

[6 : 03] My name's Jack. I'm a ministry trainee here at St. Silas. Please keep your Bible open on page 1098. And let me pray for God's help as we look at his words together.

Father God, thank you that you are a God who speaks, and that you reveal your character to us. Please help us to be listening to your words with soft hearts and open ears, and please speak to us through your words.

Amen. Amen. I'd like us to start off by thinking about a question, and that question is, how confident are you in the gospel? Or, how confident are you in the gospel really, deep down?

Now, I think that could sound a bit vague, and we might want to know, how do I know how confident I am? So, here's a surrogate question. At what point would you stop trying to tell people about Jesus?

Would you become discouraged and stop when one friend becomes a bit colder towards you when you invite them along to an event which will have a talk about Jesus? Would you stop talking about Jesus when someone calls you arrogant and intolerant for saying that Jesus is the only way to God and that other religions are false?

[7 : 30] Would you stop when the student union bans the CU from campus because speaking about Jesus and sin is hate speech? I think that the more confident you are, the more opposition and inconvenience you'll be willing to put up with as you try to help people hear the good news about Jesus.

The question of, you know, when do we stop must have been a question that was going through the minds of the first Christians in Jerusalem in the months and years after Jesus' death and resurrection.

For instance, do we stop telling people about Jesus when Peter and John, our two leaders, get put in prison for a night and told to stop? Do we stop when all 12 of our leaders, all of the apostles, get put in prison, flogged and told to stop again?

And I think your confidence in that situation at least partly depends on how right you think you are and how wrong you think your opposition are.

If you are absolutely convinced that what you are doing is the right thing to do, you will continue to do it. And if you think your opponents are completely in the wrong, then that will encourage you to keep on going.

[8 : 51] If you think about groups, for instance, like Extinction Rebellion, I think they're convinced of two things. One, that climate change is an emergency which threatens both the planet and human life on it.

And secondly, that the government aren't doing everything that they can do to deal with this emergency. They're convinced that their cause is right, and that those who either oppose them or won't listen to them are at least partly in the wrong.

In terms of where we are in Acts, last week we saw more growth as the church prioritised the preaching of the word. And this week we see more opposition to the gospel as it grows.

And the more the gospel grows, the more it brings those who believe it and therefore speak it onto a collision course with its opponents. This week in Acts is all about who is wrong and who is right.

And Acts is a book written to give us confidence. And what sort of confidence is it there to give us? Well, it's this, that the mission of Jesus to spread the message of forgiveness all over the world is a mission that is worth getting behind.

[10 : 06] I don't know if you caught what Stephen's speech is about as we had it read out. I think it's quite a tricky, quite a tricky chapter to get your head around. It's the longest speech in Acts and Stephen traces right through the history of God's people.

He talks about Abraham, he talks about Joseph, he talks about Moses, he talks about David and he talks about Solomon. And then he gets stoned. What's going on?

Well, I think it's here to give us confidence that opposition to the gospel is opposition to God. And if we put ourselves behind Jesus, we are putting ourselves on God's side.

So let's take a quick look at Stephen's situation. We met him last week in Acts 6 as someone appointed to make sure that food is evenly given out to those who need it in the church.

And now he finds himself in front of the Sanhedrin. And I think what's rare describing the Sanhedrin, the Sanhedrin are like a combination of the Supreme Court, the House of Commons, and the bishops and all of the church leaders all kind of rolled into one body.

[11 : 11] And he is on trial in front of them. It doesn't matter that the charges aren't true. His opponents have run a pretty good smear campaign. Look at verse 11 of chapter 6.

Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, we have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.

So what exactly is he being accused of? Well, verse 13 and verse 14 help us to clarify what exactly the charge is. Verse 13. This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law.

And then verse 14. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.

Do you see the two things that he's being accused of? He's being accused of being A, against Moses and B, against the temple, this holy place. And basically, they are saying that Stephen is in the wrong, that he is against God.

[12 : 20] He is against God's main messenger, Moses, and he is against a place where God is, the temple. And in Stephen's speech, he gives a sweeping overview of a thousand years of the Bible story.

And he makes three key points in it that I'd like us to see. They should be on the handout on the yellow sheet of paper to help you follow along so you know where we are. So, our first point, God acts where he wants.

God acts where he wants. Stephen gives him this huge history of what happened with Israel, but almost none of the action happens in the land itself.

And the temple only makes one appearance, right at the end. And Stephen picks three of the most important people from the Bible story to show that God acts where he wants to act and has not been limited to a temple or to the lands.

And he picks Abraham, Joseph, and Moses. Let's work through them. So, Abraham, let's start with Abraham. So, chapter 7, verse 2. The God of glory appeared to Abraham.

[13 : 32] Where does he appear to Abraham? Well, the God of glory appears to Abraham in Mesopotamia. I had to Google it. It's 700 miles from Jerusalem. God tells him to leave this land and to go to a new place.

So, Abraham goes. And does Abraham get any of this land that was promised to him by God? Look at verse 5. He gave him no inheritance there, not even enough ground to set his foot on.

And here's a question for Stephen's listeners. Was God any less with Abraham? Abraham because he appeared to him in Mesopotamia and he never inherited the land at all.

No. God met with Abraham and spoke with Abraham outside the land. Number two. Let's look at Joseph. God was with Joseph. Where was he with Joseph?

Look at verse 9. When he was sold as a slave into Egypt, God was with him. God looked after and rescued Joseph in Egypt.

[14 : 37] God then provides food for Joseph's starving family, not in the land, but in Egypt. God acted to look after and to rescue his people in the promised land.

God's action, his making of promises and his keeping of promises, all happens away from the land and where the temple would be. And let's look at Bible character number three, the most important one of them all, Moses.

He's God's main prophet and he's God's main messenger of all the people in the Old Testament who were closest to God. It was Moses. Let's look at verse 20 and 22.

At that time, Moses was born. He was no ordinary child. For three months, he was cared for by his family. When he was placed outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him and brought him up as her own son.

Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action. So where was Moses born? Moses was born in Egypt.

[15 : 45] Who brought him up? And educated him. Egyptians. And perhaps most importantly of all, look at verses 30 and 33. I'll read them again.

After 40 years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight.

As he went over to get a closer look, he heard the Lord say, I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look.

Then the Lord said to him, Take off your sandals for the place where you are standing is holy ground. God appears to Moses and calls a place holy, not in Jerusalem, not in the temple, but in the middle of a desert.

One of the great encounters with God in the entire Old Testament doesn't happen in the promised land, let alone the temple. And then last of all, flick forward with me over the page, verses 48 and 49.

[16 : 54] The Most High does not live in houses made by human hands, as the prophet says. Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool.

What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things? The house made by human hands is a temple, you can see that from verse 47.

It was Solomon who built a house for him. But God is too big, he's too powerful, he's too important to be contained by and limited to a single place.

If he wants to appear to someone in Mesopotamia, then he can. And if he wants to be with Joseph in Egypt, then he can. And if he wants to appear on a mountain in the middle of a desert, then he can.

And I think, why is that important? Why does it matter for Stephen to say this to the Sanhedrin when he's accused of being against the temple? Because the temple is the place that the Jews thought was most important, is where God had promised to dwell and to be and to be present with his people.

[18 : 06] But Stephen's only against the temple, that only sticks as a charge, if the temple is the place where God wants to be. If God wants to be somewhere else, he can be.

He's not limited to the temple. I think it doesn't take much thought to see how ridiculous it would be that God could be told this is where God, you're allowed to be.

I mean, take for instance the queen. If you had to pick one, you had to pick the queen, or you had to pick Buckingham Palace. Which one would you pick? You might be a Republican and neither, don't care about either. But the queen matters more.

And the kings and queens of England certainly have lived in different places throughout history. But to say that they must pick one and they must stay there is ridiculous. It's so silly.

You can tell the queen that she must never leave Buckingham Palace. The queen's home is where the queen wants to live. And can you see what a big view of God Stephen is challenging us with?

[19 : 07] The tabernacle, the temple, the promised land. The Jewish leaders are using these as boxes. They're using these things to box in God. But God is so much bigger than that.

And we can, I think today, can have a view of God that is too small. And maybe we've boxed God into just being interested in Sundays. Maybe we think that God only really turns up at church.

But he doesn't turn up in the office or at school or at the university. Stephen is challenging his hearers and he's challenging us to see that God can appear wherever he wishes to.

He rules every nation. He sustains every human body. And he made the entire world. It's where he chooses that matters. And then we need to see a second thing in Stephen's speech.

And that is that Israel, God's people, always rejected God. Israel always rejected God. Stephen gives us a brief tour of Israelite rejection of God.

[20 : 17] Joseph's brothers hate him. But he mainly focuses on Moses. The Israelites rejected God by rejecting Moses. Moses was God's messenger.

He was sent to do what God wanted him to do. Look at verse 35. This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, who made you ruler and judge?

Who made you ruler and judge? Answer, God. Look at the rest of verse 35. He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself. God had sent Moses to lead the people out of Egypt to rescue them from a king who wanted to kill all of their children and keep the rest of them as slaves.

It was a horrible, violent, oppressive regime. But did Israel like that God had rescued them from this? No, they didn't like it.

They didn't like it at all. They resented that God had sent someone with a message from God to tell them what to do. Look at verses 38 and 39.

[21 : 31] Moses, he, received living words to pass on to us, but our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt.

Their rejection didn't stop. It continued. They didn't reject Moses once, but they kept on rejecting Moses. Instead of being led by Moses, they wanted to go back to Egypt, back to the people who had kept them as slaves.

There's a second important reason why the Israelites rejected God. Look at verse 41. They made an idol in the form of a calf.

They brought sacrifices to it and reveled in what their own hands had made. It was one of their first acts as a newly formed nation was just released from slavery.

They decided to make a golden cow and worship it as God, deliberately disobeying what God had just told them to do in the Ten Commandments.

[22 : 41] And then to prove this point, Stephen quotes the prophet Amos, writing 700 years before Stephen was alive, who accuses Israel of not worshipping God who had rescued them from Egypt but instead turning to worship idols, worshipping idols that they had made with their own hands, the tabernacle of Molech and the star of Rephan.

I think those are just things that Israel had made to replace God. This rejection of God continued so eventually they get kicked out of the land. God is so fed up with them and fed up with their idolatry that first of all the northern tribes are taken to Assyria and then the southern two tribes by the Babylonians a couple of hundred years later.

I think what's really important here is we see that there is a pattern and this will come back later on. Israel reject God's ruler and redeemer and instead settle for worshipping false gods that they had made with their own hands.

And perhaps you can start to see why Stephen's hearers might have been making his listeners very uncomfortable because Stephen's hearers he's saying that Israel's rebellion was a religious rebellion it wasn't a godless rebellion it was a rebellion that was all about God and worship and kind of keeping that box.

And then these are our third points. so Israel are rejecting God by rejecting Jesus. So Stephen's put together his evidence and he's made his points about the past but then he brings it to bear onto the people who are right there in front of him.

[24 : 27] Verse 51 It's a quite astonishing statement astonishingly brave and I'd like us to see why Stephen feels he's able to say that to them and what are they resisting what does it mean to resist the Holy Spirit.

Well in this context it means they have resisted and they are resisting Jesus. Let's have a look about how what Stephen says in the past in our first two points about Israel rejecting God applied to the people who are in front of them.

Israel rejected Moses. What does Stephen tell us about Moses? So verse 35 Moses was God's ruler and deliverer and verse 36 he performed wonders and signs that might sound familiar and that's for good reason because already in Acts the person who has been Jesus has been described that way.

Jesus has been described as one who is a ruler and redeemer and one who performs wonders and signs. Peter in chapter 5 31 describes Jesus as prince and saviour in 2 36 he's described as lord and messiah and it's in 2 22 it's Jesus who performs signs and wonders.

It's the same two ideas Jesus saves and Jesus rules just like Moses did. But Jesus isn't just like Moses he's also predicted by him.

[26 : 11] Look at verse 37 where we start our second reading. This is the Moses who told the Israelites God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people.

Moses knew that he wasn't the one he knew he was pointing forward to someone else. And it turns out this person was going to achieve a much bigger rescue than leading Israel out of Egypt.

He was going to rescue people from sin and God's judgment and not just to rule the nation of Israel but also to rule the entire world. God and so when the Jewish leaders accused Stephen of rejecting Moses and rejecting God the irony is that they are the ones who are rejecting Moses and rejecting God because they are rejecting Jesus and then they reject Jesus because they are idolaters just like their ancestors.

Do you notice the way that Stephen describes the temple in verse 48? He describes it as a house made by human hands and it's the same way that God describes the idolatry of Israel in the desert and in the land.

Verse 41 they reveled in what their hands had made and verse 43 it's the idols that they made to worship.

[27 : 41] And the question is how are they treating the temple in a way that is idolatrous after all God had said that he was going to dwell in a temple and be in a temple but they are idolizing a temple by ignoring Jesus who is the true temple.

When I was preparing I actually thought instinctively that verse 49 just means that God doesn't live in houses made by human hands and that means that God just isn't limited to those places and although that's true I think there's something more we can see the place where God is it's not anywhere it's Jesus look at verse 55 Stephen looks up to heaven sees the glory of God and what does he see he sees Jesus it's the same God of glory who appeared to Abraham who is in the temple the way that the glory of God is now seen is in Jesus Jesus has replaced the temple it's outdated obsolete and of no use and this is a truth we've already seen in Acts the name of Jesus is the name is it what heals the man who has been lying lame outside of the temple Jesus did what the temple couldn't do what no religious system can do and brought amazing blessing and restoration for him

Stephen is able to see the religious resistance for what it is an idolatrous rebellion against God that replaces God with man-made things and he can see it he can see that the Jewish leaders are so disconnected from God that they cannot see what God is now doing the new thing he is doing and they've been ignoring God to worship idols idols that allow them to do what they want to do so why is Stephen willing to die this is all true but why is he willing to die he's willing to die because he knows he is on God's side he knows that the way that God is acting now in the world is through Jesus Jesus is the temple the way we get access to God Jesus is the one who gives us forgiveness just like the temple was supposed to Jesus is the one who has the right to rule the world as God's king and it is Jesus who rescued and what Stephen has said to him isn't cold academic knowledge it's a knowledge of God that means he is willing to die and I think the scary and challenging thing for us all is that Stephen's words actions and death all make complete sense it's not a kind of extremist thing this is a sensible rational thing his life and death matches the truth about God because he knows that God is much bigger and much more important than either him or his opponents he can speak the truth about God to them confidently and because he knows that Jesus offers complete forgiveness he can pray to Jesus as he dies as his murderers throw rocks at him he can pray for them to be forgiven and because he knows that Jesus is God's rescuer he can die confidently knowing that he is safe with Jesus and that's a question for us do our lives make as much sense as Stephen's life to be confident in what God is doing in the world now so that we'll be willing to take risks and face opposition for the name of Jesus and the forgiveness that he offers and if Stephen was willing to be put to death for us it doesn't mean just be willing to die for Jesus when it's a pretty unlikely opportunity

I think for us comes that doesn't mean we're just kind of free to do anything live as you want and then die for Jesus this means everything absolutely everything in our lives up to and including death and that means our money our time our relationships should reflect the majesty of what God has done in Jesus because to join in God's work in Jesus is the most secure most amazing thing we can do to be willing to try and speak to people about Jesus even though we know some people might not like it comes from the confidence that we are knowing that we are on the side when we do so of the God of glory and if Stephen is willing to stand against opposition from the highest civil religious and criminal authority I think that probably puts our on the whole much smaller forms of opposition into perspective so I think if there's one thing I'd like us to take away from Stephen's speech it's this join Stephen in his confidence join him in his bravery join his confidence when you trust and live and speak for Jesus and that you are on God's side let me pray

Father God thank you that you are the God of glory who cannot be contained thank you that you have shown us your character through your son Jesus although we are often weak and timid please give us confidence in your son please help us to live wholeheartedly and boldly for him in Jesus name Amen the band is now going to come up and lead us in a time of response to that