

Acts 6:8-15 and 7:51-60

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[0 : 0 0] Turn to Acts chapter 6. Now it's full Lord's Day, isn't it? It's a good Lord's Day. The church meeting that we're going to have straight after this.

There is going to be, I think, Pilgrim's Progress, the video of that on the creche for children, just for children. You can't go in there as adults. But do stay. It'll be, I think, the encouragement for you to stay around.

We'll have coffee and then gather back in here just for a short time. And then we've got the Hope Pregnancy Prayer at 5 o'clock. And the whole issue of abortion, how we need to ask the Lord to work, ask the Lord to make us effective in this ministry.

Do come at 5 o'clock this evening. And there is an outline for this sermon. It's a really long passage. Interestingly, Stephen didn't need an outline.

But I do. And so I hope that might help you. Reactions to sermons are funny things, aren't they? I've been preaching for a long time.

[1 : 0 0] There are a handful of occasions when I can remember people have responded angrily. There was one time I went to preach in a church in Twickenham. And I was supposed to be preaching on one passage.

I got up, opened my Bible, and I had another sermon note. And so I thought, well, in for a penny, in for a pound, I'll preach that. And a man got up halfway through, stomped out, slammed the door, and shouted at the person on the door that I was getting at him.

I didn't even know what I was preaching until about 30 seconds before I got up to preach. But he was very, very angry. I've never had anyone throw stones at me, though. Can you see the end of the reaction to Stephen's sermon?

It's ferocious, isn't it? A sermon that creates fireworks. Why would a speaker address people so strongly and so accusingly?

And would a preacher be that insensitive? Or is the preacher angry? Or does he want to be offensive? Have you heard those kind of preachers? Is he a proud man? Self-righteous?

[2 : 0 8] Or is it possible that he speaks like that because he wants the listeners to find something better than they've found? C.S. Lewis has got a famous quote.

He says, People fool around with drink and sex and ambition while God is offering them infinite joy. People are like infinite children, Lewis says, making ignorant children, making mud pies because they cannot imagine a holiday by the sea.

In other words, C.S. Lewis is telling us that people aim too low and somebody needs to come along and lift their gaze and religious people can aim too low.

You may be the sort of person that's happy to be in a one-hour service in a nice building. You think, that'll do me.

You've aimed too low. The history of the early churches, we've seen it in Acts, we've seen the Lord Jesus Christ being raised to his throne in heaven and building his church.

[3 : 2 2] And as he builds his church, opposition builds as well. And so today, we come to the first martyr in the history of the church whose name was Stephen, who was killed for his faith.

You might think, sometimes people are in the wrong place at the wrong time and it can be fatal. Open Doors, the ministry organisation that works amongst the persecuted church, tells me that every two hours, somewhere in the world, a Christian is killed simply for believing in the Lord Jesus. Every two hours. So from your arrival, when you got here, to the time you leave after tea and coffee, somewhere in the world, somebody has been killed for just being a Christian.

Stephen was stoned to death. And why was he killed? What did he say that made the crowd so angry? If you were here last week, you'll remember that Stephen was chosen to be a servant

distributing food and goods in the church.

He was obviously a remarkable man, a multi-talented man. There are five reminders in the book of Acts that he was a man full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom and power. And he's obviously doing a lot more than just administration.

[4 : 51] We're told chapter 6, verse 8, he was working miracles. Chapter 6, verse 10, he was preaching. And just as Jesus was strongly attacked for his miracles and his preaching, now Stephen is strongly attacked.

We're told verse 9, people argued with him. Verse 11, they slandered him. It always happens, isn't it, when you're not winning the argument, if someone slanders you.

And then in verse 12, they seize him, they take him to trial, and in verse 13, they tell lies about him. And so we're meant to read Acts 6 and 7 and see the echo of the Lord Jesus.

The same sort of stuff that landed on Jesus is now landing on Stephen. And because the religious people, they can feel their religious comfort blanket being taken away.

They attack Stephen. I was once on a committee with an angry man. I didn't know he was an angry man when I went on the committee. But he didn't like to be crossed.

[6 : 00] He particularly didn't like to be blocked. They say, don't they, that anger is a blocked goal. Why is there anger in your home?

I want to say it's because of a blocked goal. As on the committee, he would say something had to be done and somebody would contradict it or they'd even question it.

Guy's face would become contorted. It looked like he was going to break into tears. But it was actually anger. His path was being blocked.

And so it is with these people who are listening to Stephen. This fury rises up inside of them because they're being challenged. It's easy, isn't it, for us to be threatened when something precious is being taken away from us.

But understand that sometimes the person is taking something away from us. They're taking a false God away from us. Something that we're trusting in, depending in, finding our identity that we shouldn't be trusting in.

[7 : 07] And therefore, when we're challenged, very often, it's a kindness, isn't it, of the person to challenge us? Or to take it away? And their security blanket here is being threatened by Stephen.

Can you see what their security blanket was? Where was their comfort? Chapter 6, verse 13. The people trusted in the holy place, the temple, and the law was their great weapon. And Stephen, in his sermon, is dethroning the temple and dethroning the law.

And he's saying Jesus Christ is on the throne. And the temple, it may point you to Jesus and the law may point you to Jesus, but you're not meant to worship the temple and you're not meant to be trusting the temple and you're not meant to be worshipping the law and you're not meant to be trusting the law.

You are meant to be worshipping and trusting Jesus Christ. so these things the temple and the law they'd become like the rabbit's foot they'd become like a lucky charm to the people that's what they trusted in for you it probably isn't that but there will be things in your life which your identity is resting on which you're trusting in and as Thievin exposes that and shows them what it is they go on the attack there's two points you can see from the outline first God's word on what really matters and then God's word on what really lasts it's a speech Stephen is on trial and they're asking him whether the charges that have been brought against him are true and he begins to speak in chapter 7 verse 2 let's look at that the speech has got four parts the first part is God's dealing with Abraham Father Abraham in verses 2 to 8 Stephen obviously doesn't need to tell them who Abraham was they know he is but he is showing them that they've missed the obvious so in chapter 7 verse 3 he reminds them that God met with Abraham

God is the one who took the initiative and God is the one who told Abraham to go to the promised land and then look at chapter 7 verse 5 Abraham never owned a scrap of the promised land and that's what Stephen wants these people to know he says to them you're so interested in the holy place but your father Abraham never owned one scrap of the promised land and of course Abraham didn't have the law either did he because the law came centuries later with Moses so Abraham had no land no law and Stephen wants the people to remember this he's saying to his listeners do you remember that do you realise that the founding father of the faith him who you look to had no holy place and no holy law but what did Abraham have?

[10:08] what did Abraham have from God verse 5? a promise God gave him a promise for the future that one day the land would belong to the people of God a promise and in chapter 7 verse 8 God gave to Abraham a relationship a covenant I will be your God Abraham and you will be my people and you will belong to me forever I've noticed that when somebody is at the end of their life and they know that they're coming to the end of their life they often come to their senses what interests those who are coming to the end of their life and they know that they're coming to the end of their life?

is it their possessions? is it their car? is it the office? is it the work on the house that needs doing? now when people come to the end of their life what are they interested in? how do they come to their senses? they are interested in relationships and the promise relationships and the promise that's what a dying person is interested in they've come to their senses they've realised what really matters in life it's the promises and the relationship they long for a promise that can get them through death they long and they rejoice in the relationships that they've had they have with the Lord and so what would you rather have?

would you rather have the temple that can do nothing for you or the law which only convicts you or would you like to have the promise of God and a relationship with God? and Stephen is teaching his listeners that God gave Abraham what really matters and all the promises point to Jesus and the relationship that you can have with God comes through Jesus who takes away the barrier of our sin and he brings us into fellowship with God through the cross that's the first thing in the speech it's got to do with God and Abraham the second section has got to do with God and Moses not God and Moses God and Joseph remember Joseph in the technicolor coat there's no mention of the color coat in verses 9 to 19 Stephen doesn't talk about the coat that's not important but what does he tell them?

chapter 7 verse 9 it's that Joseph landed in Egypt and he says the word Egypt six times he says don't you remember that Joseph your forefather went to Egypt Egypt Egypt Egypt Egypt Egypt not the promised land is it possible that God can do anything with his people if they're not in the promised land?

[13:17] yes of course we're told aren't we wonderfully chapter 7 verse 9 God was with Joseph it's a wonderful thing isn't it?

a wonderful truth for you and I as the Lord's people this morning God was with his servant isn't that a precious thing? as you walk home as you get on the bus as you drive home as you face the rest of this week you can say having trusted in the Lord Jesus God with me and then we're told chapter 7 verse 10 that God rescued Joseph and God rescued him from prison and then God used him very wonderfully and God provided for Joseph and he provided for the family through the famine God looked after him but it was all where was it all?

it was all in Egypt Egypt Egypt Egypt did Joseph live in the promised land? no did Joseph have the law? no are those things vital?

they are not but God rescued him and provided for his family and that is what really matters that you would be rescued and that you would have a place in God's family I remember hearing a missionary going to Pakistan with a family he was interviewed and they asked the dad aren't you a little bit nervous about your children going to Pakistan?

aren't you afraid for your children? and he said I remember being really surprised about this as a teenager he said I'd be more afraid to keep them here in the UK things are comfortable here and it's easy to forget the important things John Patton John Payton you children learn about him in Club 16 don't you?

[15:17] and he went to the New Hebrides which is now called Vanuatu and John Payton was a missionary preparing to go to the New Hebrides Vanuatu and he was told by a member of the church as he was heading off to the New Hebrides where there were cannibals John Payton was told you will be eaten by cannibals my boy John Payton said to the man you sir are old and you will soon be eaten by worms and whether I'm eaten by cannibals or worms I don't mind because I will soon stand before my Redeemer and so will you that is the courage of a man who knows that he has actually given his life to the most important things and so what would you prefer?

would you prefer to have a temple or the law or would you prefer to be able to say Christ has rescued me and Christ has provided for me and Christ will provide for me because that is what Joseph received from God he received rescue and provision on a small scale but the Lord Jesus he delivers and provides for us on a mighty a massive scale because he died for you and he rose

again for you and he lives for you and so that's what Stephen says about Joseph now the third section is God dealing with Moses it's verses 17 to 43 it's a long section why does Stephen spend so long speaking about Moses well because if you look at chapter 6 and verse 11 he's been accused of speaking against Moses and what Stephen does is he tells his listeners and they don't need to be told again about the law on Mount Sinai they know about that Stephen reminds them in the end

God owns the whole world now here's the question the question is this was Moses appreciated and Stephen says you know that people have brought the chapter of chapter 7 verse 25 he didn't have any interest in him you didn't recognize him you did not want him can you believe that God raised that Moses but the people didn't want him you can see where this is going can't you because God raised Jesus and these people in front of him very very religious but they didn't want him and Stephen reminded his listeners that the people of God disobeyed Moses yes they did they disobeyed they refused chapter 7 verse 39 they refused to obey him in fact they turned from what Moses had said to false gods they turned and made themselves a golden calf and they made a golden calf to worship and to put their trust in and you can see where this is going can't you because

God's son the Lord Jesus was rejected and the people in front of Stephen have turned away from Jesus they don't want him and they've turned to the temple and the law false gods and so again were the temple and the law bad things no they weren't they were good things they were signposts to the Lord Jesus but they were not meant to be worshipped the temple and the law were not meant to be trusted in and so can you see where the speech is going follow the trajectory Moses has been sent by God greatly used by God but he was rejected by the people and disobeyed by the people and Moses spoke of Jesus chapter 7 verse 37 and Jesus has now been rejected and disobeyed and Stephen preaches what the Lord Jesus and Stephen as a preacher of the Lord Jesus is now being rejected himself and being disobeyed and there is hostility hostility to the Lord Jesus is ferocious and it's strange and ferocious you can lift the lid of what looks like boredom and underneath there's a serious dislike of Jesus find the person who just seems to be bored by the subject not really interested in the subject of the Lord Jesus and you probe a little deeper and you find that they are strongly opposed to Jesus I read this week about T.S.

[20 : 42] Eliot the poet I didn't know this but T.S. Eliot became Christian and it was a massive shock to his friends T.S. Eliot was a really bright man he wrote this he wrote that the majority of mankind is lazy minded in curious absorbed in vanities tepid in emotion and is therefore incapable of either much doubt or much faith T.S.

Eliot became a Christian and his fellow writer Virginia Wolfe was so angry that he became a Christian she wrote to a friend she said a most shameful and distressing interview with Tom Eliot he has become a believer in God and immortality and goes to church a corpse would be more credible I mean there is something obscene that a living person sitting by the fire would believe in God that's fairly hostile isn't it but it's there and that is what Stephen is facing so in these three sections Stephen has talked about God dealing with Abraham with Joseph and dealing with Moses and so in this last section from verses 44 to 50 he deals with God's special place and he says to the people God's special place in the Old Testament was originally a tent in the wilderness did you know that God said to his people I want you to have a tent because when you're travelling it will be a symbol of my presence with you and as you travel and you get to a base at night set up my tent it'll be there as a symbol to tell you I am with you and when you get into the promised land the tent is replaced by the temple and the temple was built by Solomon but the temple was never meant to box God in it was never assumed that the temple no matter how great and how grand that the temple could somehow hold God in could control God could box God even Solomon when he prayed at the dedication of the temple he says God who could hold you in you are too great and then Jesus comes and in John chapter 1 we are told he made his tent among us the proof that God is interested in this world the proof that God is interested in you this morning is that Jesus came and made his tent among us and Stephen's listeners rejected Jesus and they replaced him that is the speech and so secondly and briefly God's word on what really lasts verse 51 Stephen turns to his listeners and he says you are just like the Old Testament evildoers yes you are you killed the prophets you killed the Messiah you had the law said Stephen but you just disobeyed it and the crowd goes crazy they block their years they start screaming they run at him they drag him out of the city where have you seen that before Jesus was dragged out of the city they stone

Stephen to death and how interesting it is that as

Stephen is dying we're told that he looks up to heaven he's given a vision into heaven and he sees the Lord Jesus standing it's the only place in the whole of the New Testament where we're told that Jesus is standing in heaven always because Jesus finished his work we're told that the priest sits down and so Jesus is seated in heaven but in act 7 he's standing why is he standing surely he's standing because as he sees Stephen dying he is dying to welcome him he stands to welcome his saints his martyred saints and Stephen echoes Jesus as he dies he says Jesus receive my spirit that's exactly what Jesus said on the cross into your hands I commit my spirit and then he says Lord do not hold this sin against these people which is exactly what Jesus said on the cross isn't it and the references come from

[25 : 30] Luke's gospel who also wrote Acts and so volume 1 of the gospel and volume 2 of the book of Acts the people the crowd they're full of anger and Stephen is full of joy and peace and hope these people are deeply religious but they are deeply opposed to Jesus is that possible is it possible that somebody could come to church week by week and be deeply opposed to Jesus of course it is and although Stephen is facing death he's got more life in him than all the crowd he's got more hope in him more joy in him Spurgeon says very quaintly on this when a person is born they cry and the people around them smile and when a believer dies says Spurgeon the people around may cry but the believer smiles and here's the point

Stephen is exposing his need the things that are really going on in the people who prefer false gods to the real God and he gathers the things that really matter for those who are drawn to Christ and this is what really matters this morning it is that God would call you in the gospel and he does that he would call you to follow him and to belong to him and to be forgiven and to have eternal life and he does that now through the preaching of God's word and so that God's presence would be with you in everything you go through in life and in death and God also gives you his promises food to live by and that he would be your rescuer all the way through to the end and that he would be your protector and these are the things we find in the Lord

Jesus promise and relationship that's what really matters isn't it and actually nothing else ultimately really matters in the long run Jesus offers you promise and relationship let's pray Thank you.