

Rejection

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[0 : 00] It doesn't feel nice to be rejected. It really doesn't feel nice to be rejected, does it? Twice, I've been rejected by McDonald's going for job interviews there. I've been rejected by McDonald's. It doesn't feel nice to be rejected.

Maybe, I don't know if you've had this situation, there's been a WhatsApp group that your friends are part of, but you haven't been invited to. And you felt rejected. It doesn't feel nice to be rejected. Maybe you watched the recent Olympic Games opening ceremony in Paris and you felt rejected as a Christian. Feeling rejected is not a good feeling.

And in our passage this morning, we pick up the story with Stephen again, who is a man who's been rejected. Rejected because he's a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And unashamed to speak of Jesus. He knows what rejection is like as he follows the man of sorrows who was despised and rejected by others.

[1 : 21] And this shouldn't come as a surprise to us. Jesus said this in John 15, remember what I told you, a servant is not greater than his master.

If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they rejected Jesus, they will reject you also. We live in a world that has crucified the Lord Jesus.

We live in a world where Jesus is still rejected by many today. There will be many who pass by this church building this morning who reject Jesus.

We live in a city that celebrates love and freedom and acceptance, but has rejected the greatest gift of love that this world could ever know.

So let's look at Stephen and his speech. Stephen, as he makes his speech, knows the feeling of rejection.

[2 : 29] But is able to stand up and make this bold, amazing speech. And it's a speech where Stephen essentially says, sure, you have rejected me by saying that I speak blasphemy against God.

But actually, you're just like your ancestors. You yourselves have rejected God and his words. And he reminds them in his speech that God's people have a history of rejecting God's servants.

Verse 39, speaking of Moses, our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt.

And really, they are rejecting God. Verse 51, you stiff-necked people, your hearts are still uncircumcised. You're just like your ancestors.

You always resist the Holy Spirit. So as the rejected Stephen makes this speech to people that are rejecting God, we're going to see two big themes in the speech.

[3 : 52] And then we're going to see the glory of Jesus. So that's where we're going. First of all, first big thing, God is not confined. He is on the move.

I wonder if you ever sort of put people in boxes. Sort of think, well, that person, they are good for that, but they're no good for that.

I remember so clearly watching Britain's Got Talent. It was something like 15 years ago now. When this lady came onto the stage, nobody looked at her and thought, she's going to be an amazing singer.

And yet, as the judges were questioning her and she said, my dream is to be a professional singer, you could sense the sniggers in the room. The camera even cuts to someone sniggering.

But then the music pipes in from Les Miserables. I dreamed a dream. And then her mouth opens.

[4 : 57] And the world discovers the great singing talent of Susan Boyle. And the lesson, don't put people in boxes.

Don't confine them to what you think they should do. And what about when it comes to God? Do we limit God?

Do we put God in boxes in any way? Well, that's what Stephen is accusing those who are opposed to him, those who are rejecting him.

Stephen's been accused of a few things. Have a look in chapter 6, verse 11. They say of Stephen, And then in verse 13, They produce false witnesses who testified this fellow never stopped speaking about this holy place and against the law.

So Stephen, he's speaking blasphemy against God. And he's speaking up against this holy place, the temple. And as they accuse Stephen of doing that, They are actually guilty of confining God down to a little room in the temple, the holy of holies.

[6 : 20] And yet Stephen wants to show them how much bigger and how much greater God is. Don't confine him to a little room in your temple.

He is bigger than that. God's presence has never been confined to just there. Or even to the land of Israel. He is much bigger than that.

And so look where Stephen begins his speech in verse 2. To this he replied, Brothers and fathers, listen to me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham whilst he was still in Mesopotamia before he lived in Haran.

So Abraham was spoken to by God, not in Canaan, not in the promised land, but in Mesopotamia, there in the brown. Don't limit where God is.

Don't limit where God can speak. Verse 9, have a look at what verse 9 says. Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt.

[7 : 35] Egypt is not the promised land. But look, God was with him in Egypt and rescued him from all his troubles there.

Don't confine God to one place. He is on the move. And then look at where God appears next in verse 30.

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.

And Moses trembled with fear and dare not look. The Lord met with Moses in the middle of a desert place, in the burning bush.

[8 : 44] Don't confine God to one little place. An old preacher called Chrysostom says this of the burning bush.

Holy ground of the burning bush was far more wonderful than the holy of holies. For God is nowhere said to have appeared in the inner sanctuaries like he did in the burning bush.

And so the lesson to learn from the experience of Moses is that God is everywhere present. And that the holy place is there wherever God may be.

Don't limit God. It's a bit like God is like Amazon.

Amazon is not confined to one single place. It's not confined to just a website on the internet.

Amazon is everywhere. It probably goes to every single home, more or less, in the UK.

[9 : 51] And is all over the world. Amazon delivery vans, Amazon boxes are seen everywhere. But God is even greater.

But don't limit God. He is everywhere. He's on the move in his worlds. Don't limit God to a little bit of land. To a little room in a building.

Stephen goes on to speak of the temple. Where God's presence dwelt. Especially amongst his people.

He speaks in verse 44 of the tabernacle. That was on the move. It was like a tent which kept on moving.

It wasn't until Solomon that a permanent place was built for the Lord. Have a look. Verse, end of verse 45.

[10 : 48] 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. But it wasn't until his son Solomon who built a house for him.

But just because a wonderful temple was built. So that the people of God could worship God.

Could draw closer to God. Doesn't mean he was confined to that temple. Because look what Stephen says to them in verse 48.

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 hands made all these things?

[11 : 55] No human being can contain God in one little place. He is the mighty maker of all things.

You cannot put God in a box. And so Stephen is saying loud and clear to his persecutors. To those who are rejecting him.

Do not confine God down to what your little brains come up with. We are talking about the sovereign God who has made the heavens and the earth. The mighty king and maker of all things. Do you know what else Stephen was accused of? In chapter 6 and verse 14. Have a look. He was also accused of saying this.

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

[12 : 59] He speaks of Jesus. He speaks of Jesus who says of himself. Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days.

And Jesus did say that. And it wasn't to change everything that Moses had said. Rather it was to fulfill God's words.

The temple, the tabernacle, it was all pointing to the Lord Jesus. There's no blasphemy in what Stephen is saying.

We don't limit God because he's so unconfined to a building that he himself would come down and dwell amongst the people of God in human flesh.

That he would come and live in a weak, failing and decaying human body. But what kind of God would stoop so low to do that?

[14 : 13] We've read God is so great. Heaven is his throne and earth is his footstool. Is God not too big and too great and too awesome and too powerful to become a lowly human being?

Well praise be to God that our God has come down in the person of Jesus Christ. And so if you destroy Jesus, you are destroying the new temple, the new meeting place between God and human beings.

Destroy Jesus and you are actually putting to death the sacrificial lamb of God. Destroy Jesus and you are putting to death the great high priest who has offered himself for us so that we may come to God.

So accusers of Stephen, you may say that Stephen speaks blasphemy against God. You may say that he speaks blasphemy against this temple. But actually Stephen wants to show you how great your God is.

He is so much bigger than this temple. And he is on the move in this world and he's even stooped down to become like you in order to save you.

[15 : 45] Our world may accuse Christians of all sorts of things. They may think we serve a weak and pathetic God.

But we stand and declare this morning that our God is alive and well. That yes, Jesus did die.

But he was raised again three days later in order that God's salvation plan might be fulfilled. For us as Christians, do we limit God?

Maybe some of us limit God to a building. Like these Jewish people did. Maybe we say we meet with God in that building on Viaduct Road in Brighton on a Sunday.

There we have our God time in that building. But don't limit God to a building. God is on the move.

[16 : 59] God is present everywhere. We have a very simple church building. There's nothing particularly grand about our building.

Maybe some of you would wish there was grand architecture and silver and gold. But that's limiting God. That's making God in our own image.

We can meet with God confidently in this place because God is here. Just as much as he would be if we met in the park. And he is present specially with his people.

He is with us. He is inside us by his spirit. Don't limit God to a building. And he's going to show us throughout the book of Acts.

The gospel isn't limited to just one place. It's not limited to just Jerusalem. The gospel is going to spread throughout the ends of the earth.

[17 : 58] Just as Jesus said. It began specially, wonderfully with calling Abraham and his descendants. Began with the Jewish people.

But it goes far broader and far wider than that. God is on the move to save people throughout the world. So don't limit God's power to save.

Heaven is his throne. And earth is his footstool. Secondly, God's words and messages should be listened to.

That's the second big thing that Stephen's saying. They should be listened to, not rejected. Stephen is accused of this in chapter 6, verse 11.

We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses. God's man, Moses. But Stephen responds by saying, actually, you are the ones who have rejected Moses.

[19 : 04] And not just Moses, but God's messengers throughout the years. And he's also accused of this in verse 14.

At verse 13 even. This fellow never stops speaking against his holy place and against the law. Against God's law. Against God's words spoken to his people.

But Stephen is saying, to these people, God is a speaking God.

And you are the ones who are rejecting his messengers and his words. Look down at verse 3. Look at what God said to Abraham.

God is a speaking God. And he said this to Abraham. Leave your country and your people. God said, and go to the land I will show you.

[20 : 04] God spoke to Abraham. And God said, there will be a land that will be yours. And also, there will be a people that will be yours.

Verse 5. He gave him no inheritance here. Not even enough ground to set his foot on. But God promised him that he and his descendants, he would have a people after him.

He would possess the land. Even though at that time, Abraham had no child. And God spoke some more to him.

In verse 6. God spoke in this way. For 400 years, your descendants will be strangers in a world, in a country not their own. And they will be enslaved and ill-treated.

But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, God says. And afterwards, they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.

[21 : 04] So Abraham, he's going to have descendants. And they are going to dwell on the land. But first of all, they're going to be slaves in a country. And his promises, God's promises, God's words spoken to Abraham were fulfilled.

Have a look. Abraham's promise. At verse 8, first of all. Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth.

Later, Isaac became the father of Jacob. And Jacob became the father of the 12 patriarchs. God did give Abraham descendants. He was faithful to his word and to his promises.

But the accusations that Stephen has been particularly accused of is speaking against Moses and against the law.

So let's come to Moses, verse 17. As the time drew near to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt greatly increased, just as God says.

[22 : 20] Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our ancestors by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.

So just as God said, there would be slaves in Egypt and the Pharaoh dealt treacherously with them. But God was working his mysterious ways in the world and Moses was born.

And Moses was a baby born but didn't die. Verse 20. At that time, Moses was born and he was no ordinary child. For three months, he was cared for by his family.

And when he was placed outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him in and brought him up as his own. Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.

God was raising up Moses in a very special way. He was brought up an Egyptian in Pharaoh's household.

[23 : 31] He should have been killed but God preserved his life. God was raising him up to do a special work amongst his people. And Stephen in his speech sort of splits up Moses' life into three

parts, three 40s.

Verse 40 years growing up in Egypt. And then the next 40 years, we read this in verse 23. When Moses was 40 years old, he decided to visit his own people, the Israelites.

He saw one of them being ill-treated by an Egyptian. So he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. And yeah, let's read some more.

Verse 24. He saw one of them. Sorry, verse 25. Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. The next day, Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting.

He tried to reconcile them by saying, Man, you are brothers. Why do you want to hurt each other? So Moses was trying to...

[24 : 39] He knew the Lord was working in him in some special way and was trying to sort of be Israel's savior. But he still had more to learn.

And so went out into Midian. He had a family there. And then, in verse 30, the Lord called him in a special way.

We've read about it already. At the burning bush. The bush filled with flames. Looked like it was burning. God specially there.

And there, God commissioned him. Have a look at what he said to Moses in verse 34. I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt.

I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come and I will send you back to Egypt. The focus that Stephen particularly is giving on Moses is Moses' rejection.

[25 : 44] Moses has been raised up. But Moses has also been rejected and will be rejected by the people. So verse 35.

This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, Who made you ruler and judge? Yet he sent them to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself.

And he was sent. And we know, I'm sure we know the story well. He led his people through the Red Sea, Out of slavery in Egypt, To the wilderness.

He was a great leader of God's people. And yet, He was rejected. He was a rejected servant of the Lord.

Verse 39. But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, Instead, They rejected him in their hearts and turned back to Egypt. Stephen is far from speaking blasphemy against Moses.

[26 : 52] He is speaking of one who the Lord has raised up, And who the Lord has worked powerfully through. But who the people have rejected. Moses also had another special thing to do.

And that was to give the people the law. God's law. God's living words. Verse 38. He was in the assembly in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, And with our ancestors.

And he received living words to pass on. God spoke living words. His living, powerful words to Moses.

To the people. But even those words were rejected. Even those words, They refused to obey.

Verse 39 again.

Our ancestors refused to obey him. They rejected him. God's living words. They rejected him. They said, No, too.

[27 : 55] We'd rather be slaves in Egypt. What a terrible thing to say. And Stephen says, You are just like them. Verse 53.

You who have received the law that was given through angels, But have not obeyed it. You're just like them. You've rejected God's living words.

Not only have you rejected God's living words, But you've also rejected God's messengers as well. A speaking of Jesus in verse 37.

This is the Moses who told the Israelites, God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people. And then have a look in verse 52.

What do they do with this prophet? Was there ever a prophet like your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the righteous one.

[28 : 59] And now you have betrayed and murdered him. See, that special prophet, the one like Moses, But better was Jesus. And they've even murdered him.

They've even rejected him. They've even killed him on a cross. And yet Jesus was God's son. God's precious son. Who God spoke living words through.

But they rejected him. And just as they rejected him, They were rejecting Stephen now. God's servant.

God's messenger. Who was speaking of the Lord Jesus. God's servant. God's servant. But as Stephen is rejected by the cruel men who claim to be God's own people, But really are not.

Stephen is not rejected by the Lord. Stephen knew that it was in the Lord that he can find his home and his worth.

[30 : 08] They are rejecting Stephen. But really, it's God they're rejecting. And so he can lift up his eyes.

And he can see Jesus standing there. He can see that Jesus is God. And he is glorious.

Have a look. Just quickly. At chapter 6. Verse 15. As all who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, They saw his face was like the face of an angel.

As Stephen was being rejected, His face was shining brightly. And why was it shining brightly?

Because look at verse 55. Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, Looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God.

And Jesus standing at the right hands of God. Jesus is God.

[31 : 17] And Jesus is glorious. And as Stephen's rejected, it's okay. Jesus is glorious.

He is his glorious saviour. And Stephen knew where he was going. They tried to limit Jesus.

They tried to kill Jesus. But they cannot limit Jesus. For he rose and he's now standing As the glorious saviour at the right hand of God.

And so because our saviour lives, Because Stephen's saviour lives, The worst that people can do Is kill us.

But to live is Christ. And to die is gain. Our souls belong to God And are safe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[32 : 21] And so look at what Stephen could say. As he was dragged out of the city, Verse 58, And people began to stone them. Stephen in verse 59 could say, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

Our souls are safe with Jesus. Even, And even, When Stephen was about to be stoned to death, He was concerned For their forgiveness.

He knew he was forgiven. He knew where he was going. But he was concerned about his persecutors. And he said Of this, This To the Lord, Verse 60, Lord, Do not hold this sin against him. And when he had said this, He fell asleep. And as Stephen says those things, I think we can see real echoes With what the Lord Jesus did on the cross.

With what the Lord Jesus said on the cross. In Luke 23, Have a look. What does Jesus say on the cross?

[33 : 38] Luke 23, Verse 34. Jesus said, Father, Forgive them.

For they do not know what they are doing. So Stephen said, Lord, Do not hold this sin against them. That's what his saviour Said on the cross.

As our Lord Jesus Christ Was being brutally murdered on the cross, He was concerned for people's salvation. And Jesus could also say this To his father In verse 46, Father, Into your hands I commit my spirit.

And when he said this, He breathed his last. Jesus could entrust himself Confidently to his father.

And so can all Christian people Stephen does.

He is his hope In life And in death. And on the cross, As we see Jesus, Our saviour, Rejected.

[34 : 54] As we see with Stephen The authorities rejecting God's servants. As we, In our world And in our city Feel rejected.

We shouldn't be surprised. We noted at the beginning Jesus said, If they persecuted me They will persecute you also. We shouldn't be surprised.

But we are called By Jesus To walk the way of the cross. The way of suffering. And so we can stand up And we can boldly say To the world around us, God is working in this world.

God is on the move In this world. God is saving Boys, Girls, Men and women From across the world. He is at work. And he has spoken Living words Through his son, The Lord Jesus.

And yet even with such good Wonderful Things that we can say The world may still hate us.

[36 : 05] They may still mock us. But we are walking the path That Jesus has walked first for us. The pathway that is suffering first.

But the glory of heaven to come. Stephen walked that path. And we are walking that to you. Let's pray.