

Acts 6:8–7:60

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[0 : 00] 6 verses 8 through chapter 7 verse 60. This can be found in the White Bibles on page 1012.

Again, the scripture reading is Acts chapter 6 verses 8 through chapter 7 verse 60 on page 1012 of the White Bibles. Due to the length of the scripture, we'll ask that you please remain seated. And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the freedmen, as it was called, and of the Cyrenians and of the Alexandrians and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he was speaking. Then they secretly instigated men who said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God. And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes. And they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council. And they set up false witnesses who said, This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.

And gazing at him, all who sat in council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. And the high priest said, Are these things so? And Stephen said, Brothers and fathers, hear me.

The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran and said to him, Go out from your land and far from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you. Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child. And God spoke to this effect, that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others who would enslave them and afflict them 400 years. But I will judge the nation that they serve and said, God, and after that, they shall come out and worship me in this place. And he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day. And Isaac became the father of Jacob and Jacob of the 12 patriarchs. And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt. But God was with him and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household. Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan and great affliction. And our fathers couldn't find no food. But when

[3 : 12] Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit. And on the second visit, Joseph made himself known to his brothers and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh.

And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob, his father and all his kindred, 75 persons in all. And Jacob went down into Egypt and he died, he and our fathers. And they carried back to Shechem and they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for some of silver from the sons of Hamar in Shechem. But as time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt until there arose over Egypt, another king who did not know Joseph.

He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants so they would not be kept alive. At this time, Moses was born and he was beautiful in God's sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father's house. And when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. And Moses was instructed in all wisdom of the Egyptians. And he was mighty in his words and deeds. When he was 40 years old, he came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the

oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. And on the following day, he appeared to them as they were quarreling and tried to reconcile them saying, men, you're brothers. Why do you wrong each other? But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside saying, who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday? At this retort,

Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons. Now, when 40 years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai in a flame of fire in a bush. When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight. As he drew near to look, there came a voice of the Lord. I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob. And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. Then the Lord said to him, take off the sandals from your feet for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their groaning and I have come down to deliver them.

And now come, I will send you to Egypt. This Moses, whom they rejected saying, who made you a ruler and a judge? This man, God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. This man led them out performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for 40 years. This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. This is the one who is in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us. Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside. And in their hearts, they turned to Egypt, saying to Aaron, make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out of the land, led us from the land of Egypt, led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what he is, what has become of him. And they made a calf in those days and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of the heaven, as is written in the book of the prophets. Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices during the 40 years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? You took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your

[6 : 58] God, Raphael, and the images that you made to worship, and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon. Our fathers had a tent in the witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make, to make it according to the pattern that he had seen. Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they had dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for him. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made of 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 what is this place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things? You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears. You always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the righteous one, whom you have now betrayed and murdered. You have received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it. Now when they heard these things, they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.

But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, Behold, I see the heavens open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him.

Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

And falling to his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold the sin against them. And when he had said this, he fell asleep. This is the word of the Lord.

Good morning. It was all me. I want to welcome you on this, what for many of you, at least at Holy Trinity, would be Christmas Sunday, knowing that a number of you will be traveling. And we wish you safety on your travels. And we pray that your own heart would be able to prepare a place for the first coming of Jesus. After a reading of that length in church, I'm quite aware that you're not used to sitting under the oral recitation for that length of time. And so let me give, begin by making

three preliminary comments. First, let me put your eyes, your mind at ease. A lengthy reading of the biblical text is no indication of what would be a longer sermon. You helped by that? I'm sure you are.

[10:29] Secondly, the complexity of Stephen's speech does not sacrifice the clarity or simplicity of the material.

Let me just point it out to you. If you're wondering, how do I hold a reading of that length? Simply like this. An accusation, followed by an apology, followed by an assault. And not only does the whole come down to those three movements, the emphasis is equally clear. The whole message can be held in two words. It's an emphasis on place and an emphasis on a person. Hopefully you saw that even in the accusation. There's a two-fold accusation in the opening verses of the text. Stephen evidently had undermined the place we go to find God, as well as the person from whom we learn how to follow God.

In other words, the accusation against him was, where do you go to meet with God and who are we to read if we're going to hear from God? To put it simply, the accusation dealt with the temple, in some sense, and the Torah in another. I mean, do you see it there? Look at verses 12 through 14 for the emphasis of the application on place. They stirred up the people, the elders and scribes. They came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council. That would be the Sanhedrin. So you are now, again, in a judicial context, in a court of law. And they set up false witnesses. And here's the accusation.

And this man never ceases to speak words against this holy place. Or a little further on, you'll see in verse 14, we heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place. So the accusation is, Stephen is undone where we go to meet with God. And the second on person is equally clear. Take a look at verse 11. For indeed, in the original language, 11 through 14 is one long accusatory sentence. We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses. That's a person. Or later in the text, he will change the customs, verse 14, that Moses delivered to us. So there it is. You're now standing in a courtroom with an individual who had been a preacher of an apostolic message who has claimed to have undermined where you go to meet God. Or whom you read to learn how to follow God.

[13:41] The accusation about a prophet like Moses or a person is easy enough for us to get a hold of. Let me put it to you as clearly as I can. Who do you listen to these days to get an accurate understanding of who God is?

Evidently, Stephen said, you don't listen to Moses any longer. But who has the proper take on God? I mean, that is a highly charged topic, not only in the text, but in our own day.

Do you listen to Moses? Do you listen to Muhammad? Do you listen to the Dalai Lama? Do you listen to Jesus, the Nazarene? Do you listen to the preaching of Peter and that small apostolic band?

Who do you listen to to get the right take on God? In this very city today, you could go to any number of churches and find a multitude of highly charged responses.

But let's talk for a minute about place. The religious significance of place. Because that idea hasn't gone away in our day either.

[14:53] December 6th of this year, President Trump caused quite a stir by formally announcing Israel, Jerusalem, as the capital city of Israel, with the immediate intention in his mind to remove our embassy from Tel Aviv and to replace it in the Holy City.

And the reactions around the world and on every street in our own country are escalating in regard to the import or not, the positive or negative effects of such a presidential decree.

In other words, when you start talking about the significance of religious place, even in our own day, it's a volatile issue. Palestinians, today, Middle East countries, the tensions are escalating, the fear is rising.

Why? Why? Simply because religious people attach an inordinate amount of significance to place. The Baha'i faith, the shrine of Baha'u'llah.

Buddhism, off to the Mahabadi temple. Islam, a number of places of importance, including the mosque, the Grand Mosque in Mecca.

[16:14] For some Christians, most Christians, for Judaism, for Islam, Jerusalem, especially the Temple Mount. So today, place is a highly charged concept.

In other words, it has the effect of being able to put the world at war. So the accusation against Stephen was clear. Equally interesting in that opening section is those who are making the accusation.

Let me just point out the uniting of intriguing bedfellows in Jerusalem that effectuate, over time, the stoning of Stephen.

The first part of the text makes a lot out of a synagogue that is in distinction, perhaps, of where the Hebrew, Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians would have emerged from.

Evidently, there were synagogues that almost pulled from Mediterranean Jews, from Greek-speaking Jews. Or here, the synagogue of the freedmen.

[17:31] You remember that many people who would have been in Rome or been in Jerusalem at this time would have become captives of Rome from a variety of places around the world. And some of those slaves would have been set free.

And some of those freedmen would have been able to worship, in one sense, by joining themselves to Judaism. And there we are. They have their own synagogue. You have people from a variety of contexts that are meeting.

And evidently, Stephen, who was himself a Hellenist, which we saw last week, began to speak in that kind of a synagogue. And that Greek-speaking Jewish Christian context joins then, verse 12, the council, or the Aramaic-speaking ones, strange bedfellows it would have been, to make an accusation and charge against Stephen.

Think of it in regard to last week. Last week, there were Hellenist widows and Hebrew widows and a complaint brought forward that needed to bring these two together so that the gospel could have vindication in its own world.

But in this text, the same two groups are being brought together, but not to further the extent of the message, but to suppress it and to rid it and to be done with it altogether.

[18:53] This is the way it's all introduced. And so in chapter 6, verses 8 to 10, you have met two Jewish groups joined together to make an accusation against Stephen.

The accusation then gives way to an apology. That really is the section from 7-1 all the way through verse 53.

A summary, really, of what the sermon must have been like. You think I preached for a long time.

My guess is they let him go until he had spun all the yarn out.

When you think of the word apology, it's likely that only the first of two viable definitions come to your mind. We normally think of an apology as an expression of regret.

That's one way of thinking about it.

[20:11] An expression of regret. But this section, 7-1 to 53, has nothing to do with that kind of an apology. I mean by apology here, a lesser used definition that you would, in a sense, get the word apologetic from.

He is defending something here. He is standing up against the charges. He is not regretful.

He is not remorseful. He is not repentant. In fact, he thinks he's in the right. He's not saying, I'm sorry.

But he's going to say in those verses, I'm here to tell you why I'm sticking to my story. In other words, he's going to make an argument. And it's not going to be an endearing one.

It's a rhetorical speech that is going to incite division. You might actually say that when it says he looked like an angel here, he had the face of an angel.

[21:18] One of our own congregants is doing her Ph.D. work, even presently now in Vienna, on angels. And angels, one of the characteristics of angels is they are fearful creatures to behold.

So when you and I read the face of an angel, we think of a preacher behind the pulpit. Doesn't he look cute? But it's possible that what's meant here, when he had the face of an angel, he had the face of one who was fearful, ready to explode from behind the lectern, who had eyes aflame, a voice that was ready to froth at the mouth, and indeed he was going to lay it on all of his listeners. That's exactly what he does. You might actually say that he intended by this sermon to stir things up. I can tell you what happened.

Regardless of the intention, his stoning is obviously an indication of a self-inflicted wound, a mortal wound, that was the effect of his own preaching.

So there it is, laid out before you. The accusation is met with an apology. And notice then, it's an apology concerning place and person.

[22 : 44] Let me just highlight a few things here on place. I'm not going to walk all the way through the text. To those in his day, and our own, that attach religious significance to a place or a city, Stephen would say, you have it all wrong.

You and your contemporary fixation on sacred spaces is not a proper reflection or reading of how God works in the world.

He's going to say that God never intended to attach himself to one place. Notice the way the sermon opens. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham. Now notice this emphasis. When he was in Mesopotamia. In other words, wasn't in Jerusalem. Or comma, before he lived in Haran. Or look at verse 6.

God spoke to this effect that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others. And that only afterward, verse 7, would they arrive to worship him in this place.

[23 : 53] Look at the way he appeals to Joseph. In regard to verse 9, where he says, Joseph was in Egypt, but God was with him. In other words, God comes into Mesopotamia.

God comes into years of wandering. God shows up in Egypt. That's the emphasis of the message. In fact, verse 16 and on, 15, talks about Jacob going down and all of the people going down away from the promised land to where God would help them to multiply.

I mean, think of it all the way down in verse 30. When Moses was 40 years old, he had passed. An angel appeared to him. But notice the indication of the writer.

Where? What does the preacher want you to know? He appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai. Which makes total sense then by the end of his message. Verses 48 and following.

Where he indicates, God does not dwell in houses made by man in particular cities. Never has, doesn't, never will. There's no significance, he says.

[25 : 00] Heaven is his throne. Earth is his footstool. What kind of house, what kind of place are you going to make for me? In other words, he appeals to the history of Israel.

To say, why are you so fascinated with Jerusalem as God's place? That's not the way he worked in the past. Indeed. He undoes temple worship in one sermon.

Well, if you came expecting a Christmas message, you got it. Don't go home and say, well, he didn't preach on Christmas.

Oh, I went to church today all dressed up, 18th figured 17th. Certainly they're going to talk about Christmas. Yeah, I am. The point for them and for us is this.

It's not about where you go to meet with God. It's about a God who comes to meet with you. That's the wondrous truth of Christmas.

[26 : 07] You don't got to make any pilgrimage anywhere. God comes to meet with us through Emmanuel, God with us.

In fact, that's the opening salvo of the Christmas story. And the closing words of Christ before the ascension is simply, And lo, behold, not behold God with us, but behold, I will be with you throughout all the ages.

Your access to God this morning comes by faith in hearing the word that you can receive him as close to you as the breath of belief that voices trust in him while it's already emerged in his own presence.

That's the way Stephen handled it. Just as the first speech, Peter's speech at Pentecost, was meant to show that the eternal kingdom was now present.

This second speech has a single takeaway, and that's to provide proof that the old ways of meeting with God are now a thing of the past. The eternal kingdom is present, and the way you come to God in the past is over.

[27 : 50] It is completely the end of temple worship, the sacrificial system, the sacrificial system is now obsolete. There is no need for a priesthood.

It is entirely abolished through the one priest. Let me put it clearly. The religious significance of Jerusalem has been, with the death of Jesus, irreversibly diminished of any contemporary import. Now you say that today, even in evangelical circles, you're likely to be cast out and stoned, and perhaps that may happen to me yet today.

But like Stephen, that's my story, and I'm sticking to it. And I've provided an argument from the history of God with his own people that I believe proves it.

In Jesus, you no longer need to find any other place from which you can find God. Now the way Stephen handled the accusation about Moses as the one person to whom to listen to if you're going

to follow God was equally riveting.

[29 : 06] You remember the second charge against him related to the one you're supposed to be reading in your effort to follow God. Now if the first charge is related to the temple, then the second charge is related to the Torah.

If the first charge is related to the city, the second temple is related to Moses, in the prophetic tradition. For in the Jewish world in which this gospel was proclaimed, Moses and the Torah provided the means by which you learned how to follow God.

And Stephen takes that up, and he takes it up with the rhetorical flair of a man who was almost bent on his own ruin. Yet he is in complete command of his own message.

I love the irony of his argument. Here it is in a nutshell. He says to them, you claim to be the people of Moses, you claim to be the people of the book, but have you forgotten that this Moses was rejected by those who follow the book just as you reject Jesus who is the fulfillment of all that Moses wrote about?

That's the argument. It's unbelievable. Look at the way he does it. Verse 35. This Moses, whom they rejected. Verse 36. This man.

[30 : 22] Verse 37. This is the Moses. Verse 40. As for this Moses, this one that they didn't follow, don't come talking to me, says Stephen from behind the lectern, about the people of God who always wanted to follow the book of Moses.

Always wanted to learn from the prophetic tradition that God raised up. They rejected him and then notice his concluding, cascading moment in the sermon when he's actually going to say, you stiff-necked people, you are rejecting.

And as you have rejected Jesus, you demonstrate yourself to have never been part of the prophetic Mosaic tradition. For he's the one who talked about a righteous nun who would come like him.

He's the one who predicted that there would be a prophet that would resemble him but be greater than him. And so all of a sudden he has with one sermon absolutely detonated a bomb in Jerusalem that if it actually had dynamite in it, it would have taken down Herod's temple on the spot. The whole thing would have collapsed. And so the accusation has been met with a defiant and intended apology which gave way to an inevitable, predictable, perhaps even in his own mind, known ahead-of-time effect.

[32 : 04] An assault that would end his own life. Notice the reaction. I love the terminology. Enraged.

A grinding of their teeth. You know, the preacher who's behind the pulpit, what he wants is he wants to hear the harmonious interaction of the congregation who's with him. Amen, pastor.

Preach it, pastor. We're with you, pastor. Here's a grinding of the teeth. Here's a clenching of response. Here is a resistance of the heart.

Here is a holding of the breath. Until in fact, it says in the text, with incredible force, verse 57, they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together in order to get the preacher out of the pulpit.

I mean, this is like a three-year-old in a grocery aisle at 4.30 in the afternoon who's had a complete meltdown. All limbs moving.

[33 : 09] All ears no longer functioning. All feet kicking in defiance of the one who stands purportedly in control.

And so he's out. The stoning of Stephen is the natural consequence of a preacher who's incited an entire religious tradition.

Well, let me be out of the pulpit before you come after me. What are you to make of the speech?

For some, this speech is a tribute to the first Christian martyr.

In other words, they say, Luke wanted to give us a record of the first of many martyrs. I don't think so. In fact, Luke's concern has been much more about the message than it's been about the man.

For others, we're supposed to read a speech like this and what's supposed to stand behind it is the unstoppable advance of the gospel. In other words, he wrote this so that you would know even when people die, the message keeps going forward.

[34 : 33] But I don't think so. that can't be fully correct. For the content of the message actually demonstrates that what's happening is it's being rejected, stamped out.

Further, that the centralized health and growth of the church in Jerusalem is now under absolute threat.

For others, we're supposed to take from this speech that he lays out in Stephen's death things that will help you recall or reference Jesus' death.

So that through Stephen you think of Jesus. I don't think so. So what do we take? Well, I offer two things. One on place, one on people.

Perhaps like Theophilus who this letter was written to. Perhaps like Theophilus were to take one thing away on place. In other words, don't worry about living in a day when the temple no longer stands.

[35 : 45] Don't worry about it. It has no religious import one way or the other. Remember, Theophilus is obviously living after the destruction of the temple.

And he's wondering how do I hold on to a faith that has now been proclaimed where there's no longer a place that provides its center of gravity and what the sermon demonstrates is don't worry about it.

I know it's politically charged but don't let it be your concern. Jerusalem was never meant to be the ultimate place that anyone went to to find God.

Let me put it differently. To you today, you no longer need to run around in an effort to establish some sacred place. I know books, I could sell a lot of books if I wanted to put sacred space in front of you.

But then I would indicate that I hadn't actually absorbed what I had heard him preach on this day. It is a hopeless endeavor that we leave to religionists and religions who forever have the earthly idol of place and habitation as central to their proclamation.

[37 : 06] And certainly I would say don't worry about any need to rebuild a temple. Much better for you to become a temple. I hope you hear that.

Don't concern yourself with rebuilding a temple. Concern yourself with becoming a temple and supporting the blocks that are presently being erected into a building for God.

You want to get all hot and bothered about place? Then give yourself to his people. Or in the words of a Christmas carol let every heart prepare him room.

Do that and you will have done enough. Secondly on people who are you going to read to learn how to follow God?

Start reading I would say and pay closer attentions to the ones who ultimately teach you about how to follow God. I would encourage you according to this text and I hope you can hear me without the time I would need for all of its qualifications and clarifications but in a bald faced way let me tell you I would encourage you to put down Moses as your guide and to pick up Paul instead.

[38 : 49] I would encourage you to put down Mohammed and pick up Paul. I would certainly encourage you to set aside Oprah and Shirley McClain and pick up Paul.

I think that's what Luke would advise as well for in the very next passage you're going to learn that Saul heard this sermon live real time and what I will argue next from the scriptures is that God uses this Stephen sermon in some measure to either prepare him to know God personally or actually convert him before he knew he knew God personally and it would begin the process of changing everything he had ever learned from the Hebrew scriptures in other words if Stephen's preaching has anything to do about the unstoppable advance of the gospel throughout all the world it is most likely having to do with its role in converting

Saul who would go to the ends of the earth to restore the dispersion that took place as a result of the message at a literary level it's unbelievable and with this I'm done Barnabas brings his gift and lays it at the apostles feet Ananias and Sapphira bring their gift and lay it at the apostles feet and are taken out dead at the apostles feet the cloaks of those who reject this message according to the text are laid now at Saul's feet and it won't be long before Saul tramples on these cloaks and their rejection of this message and shakes his own feet as dust from all those who would not take up simply with Jesus as God's place and simply with his own preaching as given to him by Jesus as forming a solid enough ground for you to begin following

God well I suppose we're a little unorthodox but Merry Christmas according to Saint Stephen let me pray our heavenly father we we walk our way to