

Acts 6:8-7:60 "The Martyr and the Hard Heart"

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[0 : 0 0] Hi, my name is George Sinclair. I'm the lead pastor of Church of the Messiah. It is wonderful that you would like to check out some of the sermons done by Church of the Messiah, either by myself or some of the others. Listen, just a couple of things. First of all, would you pray for us that we will open God's Word well to His glory and for the good of people like yourself? The second thing is, if you aren't connected to a church and if you are a Christian, I would really like to encourage you to find a good local church where they believe the Bible, they preach the gospel, and if you have some trouble finding that, send us an email.

We will do what we can to help connect you with a good local church wherever you are. And if you're a non-Christian checking us out, we're really, really, really glad you're doing that. Don't hesitate to send us questions. It helps me actually to know, as I'm preaching, how to deal with the types of things that you're really struggling with. So God bless.

Let's just bow our heads in prayer. Father, now, Father, this is just so appropriate. We come to read your Word, and in the background there are sirens. I don't know if it's police or ambulance, and there's the singing of children singing Christmas carols. And Father, this is just really so much. This is the real world as we come to think about your Word. And so, Father, we ask that your Holy Spirit would lead us and guide us into all truth. Help us to know Jesus.

Help us to know your Word. And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Please be seated. It's a nice distraction. I might be a bit distracted by the Christmas carols, which just sound so beautiful by the children. It sort of will seem maybe odd to some of us that on this Advent-y Christmas time of the year. And most Canadians think of Christmas as sort of beginning at least a week or two ago, and it will culminate with Christmas Day. That's how most Canadians think of it. And so it will seem odd to some that today we're going to look at a brutal murder.

It doesn't seem to be very Christmassy, because we're going to look at the martyrdom, the first martyred, the first Christian martyr, Stephen. But just a bit of a, I mean, this is just because we're going through the book of Acts and we want it to reach a certain point, then take a bit of a break for Christmas and then deal with some other, then go back to Acts. But it's actually very appropriate. Older Christians, before sort of consumerism, Christmas began on Christmas Eve, and you'd celebrate Christmas for 12 days. Now we begin to celebrate Christmas after Halloween, and Christmas ends with Christmas Day. But for the older Christians, Christmas, the celebration of Christmas began on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning, as the case might be. And if you look at how the older Christians thought about how to pray during that time period, what we now call Boxing Day, which of course is a prime high holiday of consumerism, and is in fact, in the older Christian understanding, the day after the birth of Jesus was the day they thought of the death of the first Christian, the first Christian martyr, which seems sort of very counterintuitive to us. But that's how they wanted us to understand things. In fact, they went from the death of Stephen by martyrdom, they talked about St. John, and then they talked about the death of the innocents slaughtered by Herod. So it is in fact, there is some appropriateness to look at a brutal murder in this Canadian season of Christmas. And so it's, yeah, there's something actually pretty good about doing it. So let's do that. We're going to look at Acts chapter 6, verses 8 to the end of chapter 7, which is a really big passage of Scripture. We won't be able to look at all of it. I'll summarize some of it.

[4 : 16] But it's really important that we begin with the beginning of the story. And if you're using these little pocket Bibles or these journal Bibles, it begins on page 36. And here's how it goes. This is taking place, by the way, approximately a year or so after the death and resurrection of Jesus. And last week we saw how to help to make sure that the preaching of the Bible and the sharing of the gospel and prayer kept going forward. They set aside seven people to make sure that their very important works of feeding the hungry kept going. And one of the seven people that was set aside for that was this person by the name of Stephen.

And here's how it goes. And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. Wonders and signs means he was performing miracles. One of the ways that the New Testament often talks about miracles is they call them signs. They're real, but they point to something. Amongst other things, to our atheist and agnostic friends, if miracles actually happen, it means they're wrong. It means that, in fact, the world is more than just cause and effect, that there is a God that does exist. It points to something. It points to, in fact, that God exists and a little bit about what God is like. So in the New Testament, miracles are often called signs.

And they're wonders because they leave us gobsmacked when we see them. So I'll read that again. 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 freed men, 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. Now, we need to pause here and notice the details of this story.

Like, why is it that... So at this point in time, if I was to go back, I could have done something with each one of the bits of the Book of Acts up until now that you can begin to see little bits of separation between the early Christians and the larger Jewish culture. But all of the Christians in the world were all Jewish. And at this point in time, they still fundamentally see themselves as Jewish.

[6 : 47] So these Jewish believers in Christ are still going to the synagogue. They're still going to the temple. And so Stephen is performing miracles. He would have been performing miracles in the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and Israel. So you think about it for a second. Why exactly is it that this Stephen performing miracles would cause an argument?

Like, why would that be? Like, what's going on that that would happen? Like, just think about it for a second. I know that there are many Christians who've had periods of doubting in their life, and they say, if God could just do, like, a real obvious miracle, I'd be fixed for life.

Like, I would never doubt again if I could just see a real undisputed miracle. I've talked to lots of people outside of the Christian faith who've said to me, listen, if God wanted me to know him, if Jesus wanted me to know him, why doesn't he just do a miracle in front of me? Like, if he just did a miracle in front of me, that, you know, an indisputable miracle, and I would be set. I would be a follower of Jesus. Like, why doesn't he just do that? And even for those of us who don't need it to bolster up their faith, let's just be honest. How many of us would just love to see a miracle?

Like, many of us would. Like, you know, and that's separate from those who'd like to see a miracle so they could set up their 1-800 number, their web page, and make lots of money from it, you know, have people buy them beer for the rest of their lives. But lots of us would love to see a miracle.

So why is it that these people seeing indisputed miracles, this causes them to argue against Stephen? So, like, what's going on? Well, the story gets even more curious. Look at what happens next, verse 10. So they've been having a discussion, an argument. Well, they've been arguing, and he's been answering. But look at verse 10. 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 Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and God. Now, once again, like, what's going on here? Like, why don't they say, gosh, that's like a really wise insight.

[9 : 13] Like, I should think about that. Like, that's just, like, that's, oh, that's like a good insight. I hadn't thought about that before. Like, I need to, I need to think about it. You know, I remember the first time I heard Eugene Peterson speak live. He's now with the Lord. And I wished that every 10 minutes I could be like, you know, the doctor and the X-Men. I could just freeze it and walk away for, like, half an hour, an hour, think about it, then go back and have it restart. Because it, like, there's just so much wisdom. I was just having to really think about it. And so why don't they respond that way? Instead of responding that, like, gosh, I never thought about that. I never put those things together. That's like a profound insight. Instead, what they do is they pay people to smear Stephen.

Like, why do they respond like that? Like, why don't they even just walk away and leave? But why instead they just smear him? And it gets, like, what's going on? Well, it gets even more curious. Look at what happens next. They double and triple down on the smearing. Look at what happens. It's in verse 12.

And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes. And they came upon him, that's Stephen, and seized Stephen and brought him before the council. That's like the supreme, the group that sort of rules the Jewish people underneath the Romans. And they set up false witnesses who said, when they set up false witnesses, that means they've now decided they're going to bring charges against Stephen. Like, what's going on? Right? This starts with him being a man of good repute, who's doing miracles in the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who's giving them good, wise answers. And rather than them just thinking, wow, like, this is something remarkable.

Like, I need to think things through. They're smear him. They set up false witnesses who said, verse 13 continuing, this man never ceases to speak words against this holy place in 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. Well, like, just think about this, what they've just, the charges, like, just, like, what's going on here? Like, okay, like, this is actually really, I think nowadays you're not allowed to say stupid to kids or anything like that, but this is stupid, okay? Like, if somebody came up, if after church we met somebody and said that Napoleon Bonaparte was going to destroy the parliament buildings, we'd laugh at him, because he's dead. So they all think Jesus is dead. So how is Jesus going to destroy the temple? Like, this is ridiculous. It's no more likely for a dead person to destroy the temple than would be for a dead person to destroy the house of commons, the parliament buildings, to level it. Like, that just makes no sense. Like, even the charge doesn't make any sense. So what's going on? Like, what would push people to be so upset and to believe such, like, just frankly, nonsense, and treat this nonsense as if it's somehow something very, very serious? What's going on? And it even gets more curious. Look at how the next verse goes. Verse 15, and gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face, that Stephen's face, was like the face of an angel. So here's another gut check moment. So first of all, just to understand, when we think of the word angel, we have to understand this probably the way people thought of it back 100, like in the first century. Today, we think of it as hallmarky, as if all of a sudden he became young and had nice rosy cheeks and, you know, little wings sprout out of his back or something like that. Like, very hallmark and Walt Disney-ish. We'd probably be closer to how they thought about it then if we've watched

[13:07] Raiders of the Lost Ark, and you remember the very ending of it when the angels are unleashed, those of you who remember that old movie. It's probably what an angel would look like was closer to that. It would have been something bright. It would have been a, he, the angel would have been a creature, would have been a very bright face. There would have been a type of beauty about the face, a beauty that would take your breath away, and there also would have been something dreadful about the face. And by dreadful, I mean dread-inspiring, dread-causing. Something, well, that's something that the Steven Spielberg angels at the end of the Raiders of the Lost Ark captured. Something terrifying. So once again, there's that, like, this is a miracle. Like, if this was happening here in the room to somebody, like, we would all take note. We would, I mean, surely we would have questions. It would make us pause about what's going on.

But it doesn't do that to them. What's going on? So what happens next? And chapter 7 is part of it. I'm going to skip 38 verses, because there's 60 verses in chapter 7. It's a lot of verses to read.

And we're all in trouble, because my stopwatch stopped working. So this could end up being a three-hour-long sermon. No, I'm joking. I'll just have to keep watching the time as it passes. But here's the thing. What happens next is the high priest says to Steven, how do you answer to these charges? And I have to confess this week that I really labored over this sermon. Like, I really labored over it. And I found the commentaries that I read. I read three commentaries on it, and I found them all very unhelpful. And I think the reason I found it unhelpful is that they tried to show how Steven, in the next 50-some-odd verses of speaking, how he answered the charges.

And I just keep reading it, and I just couldn't see it work. I just didn't see how that happened. And then I realized, and once again, thank you for whoever was praying for me this week, and I got an insight about it. And it's because one of you was praying for me. That's the only reason. And I realized that what Steven was doing is he was doing what they teach you in counseling.

He was doing what a good supervisor or boss does. You know, some of you who have to supervise lots of people, you'll have somebody, and they're maybe really upset about something. They're saying certain accusations. And a good boss will say, okay, time out. Like, what's going on? Like, what's going on to cause all those questions? Like, what's going on with you? Right? You realize there's something else going on. And you deal with what's going on rather than the questions. Because if you don't deal with what's going on, you can't actually answer the questions. And what Steven is doing, he's doing something a little bit like that. He's going, okay, one moment. Like, this is the same group that put Jesus to death. This is the same group that's been hostile to the apostles. I'm in trouble because God did miracles through me when I prayed, and I gave really wise answers. Like, what's going on here? And until you deal with what's going on, you can't answer the questions. So some of you have heard this illustration before, but I'll still use it again. This is quite a few years ago.

[16 : 43] I had a special sort of evening service, and we did morning prayer. And just like this, I had the text I was going to preach on, and I just used the other text from the lectionary. And the other text touched on a little bit about women's roles in the church. And I didn't touch it. I actually preached at the early service about that a couple of months earlier, so I didn't talk about it. I preached on what I was going to preach on. But afterwards, I had a couple, a very, very, very, very, very bright couple, really concerned about the Bible text and wondering why I didn't address it. And so I asked them a little bit about what was going on and what they meant by addressing it. And then I started to realize that they... So I started to give them a little bit of an answer about this and about that and about that. And I wasn't getting anywhere with either of them, the fellow and the woman.

And so all of a sudden, I had one of these words of knowledge. If I was a charismatic, I said I had a word of knowledge. And I said to them, listen, you're both exceptionally bright. They probably had IQs vastly higher than me. They were better educated than me. Very, very bright, career-minded individuals. And I said to them, listen, let's say that you're going to take 10 years to sort this out. And over the next 10 years, you're going to learn Hebrew. You're going to learn Aramaic. You're going to learn Greek. You're going to also do a lot of work in anthropology to understand anthropologically what was going on at that time period. You're going to study sociolinguistics. You're going to study any type of thing. You're going to study rhetoric.

You're going to study translation. You're going to look at all of the different variants in the text to get at this text. You're going to study all of those things. You're going to spend 10 years. You're going to become an expert. And at the end of it, if it comes out that what it says in English is an accurate translation of the Greek, would you believe it and accept it? And they instantly said, absolutely not. To which I said to them, then we have a very different issue.

And that's what's going on here in the text. Sure, Stephen could give them an answer about those two charges, but they've already shown themselves to be impervious to miracle and argument.

So this is a, this, you see, one of the things which is so, so one of the things which is going on in this story, I didn't talk about the Gamaliel incident earlier on that just didn't work out with our time. But if you go back and you read, I think it's the end of Acts chapter five and Gamaliel, who's a Jewish teacher, even remembered and revered today, actually. Basically, what Luke does is he hears about Gamaliel's speech, and he puts it in the book of Acts because Gamaliel explains why the church grows. Gamaliel explains why 2,000 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, there are still Christians meeting today in Ottawa and all around the world. Out of all of the religions that began during the entire Roman Empire, there's only one religion which is still being practiced, and that's Christianity. And Gamaliel explains it. God is at work. It's not just human ability, it's God is at work.

[19 : 58] And in a sense, what Stephen's going to be doing now, he's going to explain why it is that everybody isn't a Christian. The other aspect of it. And in so doing, he does something to really profoundly challenge each of our hearts. So what he does, if you go back and you read it, what he does is he takes a bit of a survey of key incidents in the Bible. He looks at Abraham's story, then he looks at the story of Joseph, you know, the guy of the coat with many colors. Then he looks at four sort of stories in Moses' life. And in each one of those cases, what he does, he points out several things.

First of all, he points out how when God says to do things, some people agree to do it and trust him, and some don't. All the way through the whole biblical story. Some say, yes, we'll do that. Even people like Abraham, where the promise isn't an obvious, quick, like you quickly get an answer.

Like he really had to trust. And so some people say yes, and some people say no. And he shows it in these key incidents in what we now call the Old Testament and our Jewish friends called the Tanakh.

And then he also shows how God works good out of people's rejection. Not necessarily good for them, but he works some other good out of people saying no, because God is sovereign. And this leads us to verse 39, which is where we're going to catch up with the story as Stephen's bringing his argument to the end. And so remember now, Stephen is addressing the underlying issue of what's going on and why it is that people would want to argue with him after a miracle. Why after he gives them wise insights, they want to smear him and then ultimately have him put to death. And so he continues, and we'll continue on skipping verses 1 to 38, go to verse 39. And here's where it says, our fathers, this is still a Moses story, and they're in the wilderness. And Stephen's recapitulating it. Our fathers refused to obey Moses, and ultimately that means God, but thrust him aside. In their hearts, they turned to Egypt.

Now, this is an accurate summary of one of the things that happened in what we now call the Old Testament. In fact, actually, it's really astounding because these are people who, they would have seen the plagues that came close to ruining Egypt. They would have seen how God made a clear distinction between the Jewish people that he was going to deliver and the Egyptians. And they would have all witnessed firsthand how God parted the Red Sea, and they were able to cross on dry land, and then God closed the Red Sea and killed the bulk of Pharaoh's army. They would have seen that. And they would have seen other miracles, and they would have seen that.

[23 : 06] And now we have this instance where Moses has gone up the mountain to receive what we now refer to as the Ten Commandments. And he's gone for 40 days. And they don't even last 40 days before now they want to go back to Egypt. That's what this just said. And it's what happened in the story. They, in a sense, reject Moses, who God has been using. God's the one who delivers them, not Moses, but God's been using Moses to deliver these to the Jewish people, to take them out of slavery into the Promised Land. And now Moses is gone just a couple of weeks. And in their hearts, they want to go back to slavery in Egypt.

Like, that's what they want to do. And then it gets even more crazy. Look at verse 40. Verse 40. It goes like this.

And they say to Aaron, Make for us gods. Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him. And they made a calf. It's an image of a calf out of metal in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the work of their hands. Now, once again, this is quite astounding. And we, of course, think that we're far too sophisticated to do something like that. But, you know, if you go back, one of the things which is so brilliant, sometimes people find the Old Testament prophets hard to read. I find them hard to read at times as well. Place names and all that stuff that I don't follow. But one of the things that they do very regularly to mock people who worship idols is they say, don't you realize how ridiculous it is? You go out into the forest, you kill something to eat, and then you say, well, I guess I need to cook it. So you go and you cut down some wood, and you take half of the wood, and you make a fire with it to cook the meat. And you take the other half of the wood, right? You killed the animal, you made the fire, you cut down the wood, you made the fire, and half of it you use for the fire so you can eat the animal cooked. The other half you turn into an idol, and then you bow down and worship it.

And the Old Testament prophets, they mock people. And we think we're way too sophisticated at that, but you know what? We made money, and people worship money. We made bureaucracies, and people worship having particular positions of power in bureaucracies. We created power structures, and people worship that. You know, people worship, they don't, you know, they worship, you know, they don't even worship, I mean, some people, they worship marriage. They worship just, you know, sex. They worship, like, these, mainly, these are things which, in a sense, people just make, and they organize their life and get meaning of their life all around that. They make sacrifices for that. People will ruin marriages over making money. They'll ruin marriages over, you know, seeking out pornography, things which are just made by human beings. They worship what their hands have made.

It's still an issue. Idolatry is still a fundamental human problem and issue. And this analysis is still completely and utterly bang on. And they, and these are people who've seen all these miracles, and even then they still want to try to say, like, how could they possibly believe that this calf, which they just made is the one that, that got them where they are? But they do. Just as we somehow think that our own idols, making idols of all sorts of things like that are, like, how do we think that?

[26 : 49] But we do. But we do. And then verse 42 is, is very chilling. The first half of 42 is very chilling. And it, and it, those of you who know the Bible, if you go back and you read Romans chapter 1 verse 18 to chapter 3 verse 20, this verse in some ways summarizes the main argument there. And it, it's, if you go back and you read the book of Romans, there's a bit of a preface, and then there's like a thesis or summary of the whole book in chapter 1 verses 16 to 17. And then 18 to 320 is the problem.

What is the bad news? And then after he set forth what the bad news is, he shows from chapter 3 verse 21 on what the good news is in response to the bad news. And so verse 42 in some way summarizes that in the book of Romans. It says this, but God turned away, excuse me, and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, like the stars and, and everything like that, as it 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 God, Raphon, the images that you made to worship, and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.

So what you see here is that they have turned away from the true and living God. God provides them the manna every day. He's speaking to them directly. He's provided them deliverance from, from slavery in Egypt. And they turn away from that to idols and they're, they turn away and they turn away and they turn away. And at some point in time, God says to you, you will get what you will. Even when you're in church, even when you're doing your spiritual acts, underneath all of that, you are singing the song, I did it my way.

And at some point in time, God says, your will be done. And he gives them rope. In a sense, he gives them rope. He gives you rope to hang yourself.

See, there's this double action. On one hand, this is something we long to do. And at some point in time, God says, well, it's not that he just completely relinquishes sovereignty. He sends you away as well.

[29 : 24] But he, you, you, you, you choose this. You choose your own things in the face of the true and living God.

Now, just, I need to read the next bit. It's going to sound a little bit, you know, if, if, if we had a Muslim friend here, they'd probably think that this is actually a good proof against Jesus.

But it's the next thing that, that, that, that, that Pete, that Stephen says. And it actually helps us to see a little bit about more really about who Jesus is and what the gospel is. Look at what happens next in verse 44.

Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it according to the pattern that he had seen. Notice it's called the tent of witness.

Our fathers, uh, verse 45, in turn brought it in with Joshua when they 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 for a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built the house for him.

[30 : 37] Now, David asked for a dwelling place, but, but what the Bible points out is that the asking, while well-intentioned, is impossible. Look at what he says next in verse 48. And he's going to quote, by the way, uh, from the book of, I think it's Isaiah. Yet the most high does not dwell in houses made by hands.

As the prophet says, heaven is my throne. The earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? Says the Lord. Or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things? By that he means the entire universe. And if in fact God created that entire universe, how on earth can he dwell in the house?

How can the house capture him? Now, as you can see, our Muslim friends would say, ah, it's pointing to Allah.

How a temple is far bigger than a person. And if God cannot fit in a temple, how can he fit in a person? We'll get to that in a moment.

Or what am I supposed to do right now in my notes? Um, actually, no, I'll answer it right now. Um, the, the, the, the broader answer is, and this, this, this, this church's point is to Jesus is, um, first of all, the temple, uh, is made as a witness and his God's presence isn't required.

[32 : 07] But, and this is going to be especially hard for us. Uh, we are in a cultural time moment right now where human beings are viewed increasingly as having less worth and dignity.

Uh, increasingly, that's the case. Um, and we, because we're very, um, materialistic in our culture, we see in many cases buildings almost as being more important than people.

Or certain things that we've made as being more important than people. Uh, but the biblical viewpoint is that, um, one human being, even the most handicapped, even the most, uh, addicted, uh, even the most, um, person with the worst dementia is worth vastly more than any building.

Because every human being is made in the image of God. And so, in a sense, what Stephen is saying is, you know, when Isaiah says that, you should just realize that the temple can't contain God.

He can't dwell there if he's created the entire universe. And then if the response is, well, what about Jesus? But then he says, well, just think about it. First of all, a person is greater than a building. And secondly, a person is made in the image of God.

[33 : 34] And so if a person is made in the image of God, why can't the image itself, a human being just bears God's image, why can't the image itself come among us?

I don't know how many of you, uh, like the Jack Reacher novels by Lee Child, or how many of you have watched the, the different film adaptations of them.

But Lee Child wrote these novels, and he had a role in these being turned into film productions. And in every one of his film productions, Lee Child shows up in the movie.

Just might be very brief. You might have to, if you, if you, you know, sneeze, you might miss it. But obviously, the author of a story can appear in the story.

But here's the most important thing. It isn't that God had to squeeze his divine nature into a tiny human being named Jesus, but that God took our human nature into God, the Son of God.

[34 : 38] And in God, there's lots of room. That's what the Athanasian Creed teaches, what the Bible teaches. And we're going to see in a moment that we need a very, very, very deep solution to our problem of our heart.

And the only deep solution that we can get for the deep problem of our heart will have to involve somebody like God himself coming into the, into the world that he's created.

That he comes in the form of his image bearers. The image itself comes and takes into himself the image, the nature of the image bearers. And so only God can stand for all people who bear the image of God.

Only Jesus can deal with the problem for every image bearer. But Stephen takes a very un-Canadian turn.

And it troubles some people when they see how Stephen speaks. And in our hearts, some of us might think that Stephen's responsible for the problems that he gets in after this. But this is a very shocking thing to say to you.

[35 : 48] And I know that there are people in our room who weren't born in Canada. You're from other parts of the world. So for those of you who are not from another part of the world, Canada is not the pinnacle of human communication.

The entire world does not have to live up to and match how we talk. We're very passive-aggressive. The first time I was ever in Israel, the two fellows at the front of the bus, they were talking at each other like this and waving their hands.

And they were yelling at each other and pointing fingers. And then a moment later, they stopped and they patted each other on the back with big smiles. Like if they had talked to a Canadian like that, we would have needed therapy for years.

And I had a friend who was Australian who became a pastor of a Canadian church. And he was warned by somebody who had been from Australia, come to Canada quite a few years earlier, that he had to watch because Australians can be very blunt.

And Canadians don't want a blunt pastor. And so he was warned that he had to learn to be less Australian and more Canadian. And so Steve, and even some of you, you might see me at different times.

[37 : 04] And we all know this, sometimes to snap somebody out, you have to be very direct to them. You try subtle, you try passive-aggressive, and you finally just have to be very, very direct. Some of you have had to supervise people.

You probably know at some point in time, you just got to speak really directly to them. And that's what Stephen does. Listen to what he says. You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised, verse 51.

You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised and hardened ears. You always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so did 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. And you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it. What's going on with them?

Why is it that they see miracles and it makes them want to argue and prove the other person wrong? What is it that when they get good wisdom, they want to smear them?

[38 : 09] Like, what is it about them? And it's not about them. What is it about human beings that this happens to? Because, see, one of the things you have to understand is what Stephen is not saying.

Stephen is not saying, by the way, compared to you, I'm not stiff-necked. By the way, compared to you, I did not have an uncircumcised heart and ears. By the way, compared to you, I did not resist the Holy Spirit.

Like, sucks to be you, but I'm way better than you. No. That's not what Stephen's saying. All human beings are stiff-necked.

Stiff-necked means you just refuse to change. That's what stiff-necked means. You refuse to change. And not just change for the sake of change or keeping up with the time or getting the latest thing, but change when truth or beauty or goodness or justice is revealed to you, and you just refuse to change.

Uncircumcised of heart and ear mean circumcision is the sign that you've entered into a covenant, but it's just an external thing. Has the covenant, in a sense, entered into you?

[39 : 16] It's like when I have done confirmation services for 12 and 14 and 18-year-olds and all, and I say to them, listen, you're going to go through a ceremony up front, basically saying that you want to give your life to Jesus for the rest of your life.

We're going to take you at your word, but only God and you know whether you actually mean it and believe it. It's the same thing I'll say sometimes to couples in marriage preparation. You're going to get up and you're going to make these vows in front of people, these vows, but only you know whether, in fact, you believe it, whether you mean it, whether, in fact, you're going to discard it.

You don't intend to keep them at all. And you can fool human beings, but you can't fool God. And that's what's going on. Their hearts aren't covenant hearts loyal to God.

They're understanding. That's what ears mean. They're not ears that are now ruled by the covenant that are loyal to God and resisting the Holy Spirit.

But you see, what Peter is, what Stephen is describing here is the human condition. In a sense, he is, if he was saying, the Bible is saying, if you point a finger like this, you have three fingers pointing back at you.

[40 : 27] How on earth, then, can anybody be made right with God? If you could put up the next text, Romans 1, 16 to 17, which is the sort of the, when I said earlier that in the book of Romans, there's a sort of a summary of the whole book.

And Romans 1, 16 to 17 is a summary of the whole book. And this is what we need to, listen to what it says. For I am not ashamed of the gospel. The gospel, remember, is good news.

It's the good news that God, the Son of God, came to do for us, to rescue us, to have us be forgiven, to do something for us that we could not possibly ever do for ourselves.

And that out of love for us, that God, the Son of God, died on a cross so that we could be made right with God, that we could be forgiven. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, the good news, for it is, notice this, the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

For the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God, that's his justice, etc., is revealed from faith for faith as it is written, the righteous shall live by faith.

[41 : 46] I'm not going to get into an exposition of that. It's a wonderful verse. But the point of the matter is that the gospel is this story, that God doesn't just write a story or think a story.

He has a story actually happen in the real world. And in the real world, God, the Son of God, does take into himself our human nature. He is completely and utterly God, but takes into himself our human nature.

He lives the human life that we should have lived, but could never live for ourselves. He dies the death that we deserve and he does not. And he does all of that for us, out of love for us, out of love for you.

Seeing your need, he does that. And it's not just a story. It's a story that we hear that comes with God's power. Because unless God's power comes to change my stiff-necked neck and my uncircumcised heart and ears and my inherent propensity to resist the Holy Spirit, unless this news about Jesus comes to me with power from God, I can't say yes.

I mean, that's why quite literally, quite literally, when the gospel grasps you and you grasp the gospel, pride is always ridiculous.

[43 : 11] It is why Spurgeon said that the gospel, Christian life, is one beggar telling another beggar where to get free bread. That's all it is.

If we can go back to Acts, we need to, I need to finish up the sermon now.

The result of Peter's, of Stephen saying this is that the crowd gets enraged and ultimately he dies a brutal death.

But if you just look at verses 55 and 56, we won't look at all of that last bit. If you could put up just verses 55 and 56, that would be great. They're enraged.

They grind their teeth. They're about to stone him to death. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

[44 : 17] So just verse 55, that's the verse. He sees the heavens open, the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

And Stephen says, behold, I see the heavens open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. And shortly after this, he's going to be stoned to death. Brothers and sisters, this is the Christian hope.

It's very significant that Jesus stands. Normally, it's always pictured of Jesus sitting. You sit at the right hand of God. That's what the creed says. So why is Jesus standing?

Stephen is about to endure a horrible death. But he sees not only his end, but the end of every Christian who's put their faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

That whether it's dying a martyr's death, whether it's hooked up to machines, whether it's after a long season of dementia, whether it's in a car crash, whatever it is, your final breath and the final thing that your eyes see will close on this side of the grave and your eyes will open and you will see Jesus standing who has been sitting beside the Father, that he will stand and he stands to welcome you.

[45 : 44] He stands to welcome you. I'll say it again. He stands to welcome you. That is your end in Christ.

The worst thing that the world could do to Stephen only meant that he fell asleep and was welcomed by Christ. And brothers and sisters, when we know this, we know that our hope is secure when we put our hope and faith in Jesus.

But it helps us to understand another very important thing in terms of discipleship. The first thing, of course, is you cannot have this hope too deeply when you face the troubles of this world.

You cannot have this hope too deeply when you face the troubles of this world. That the moment of your death is the moment that Jesus stands to welcome you. But we also already know that that's not yet.

We live... We live... It's already happened. It's guaranteed for us. But that's not yet. And so on this side of the grave, with the person of Jesus beside us and his word and the power of the Holy Spirit, day by day, we need to see our stiff-neckedness, our uncircumcised heartedness, uncircumcised iridness.

[47 : 13] I know those aren't words. And our tendency is to resist the Holy Spirit. And we need to take times like this on a Sunday when we confess our sins and we can, in a sense, say, Father, I know that in Jesus that's my destiny and that can't be taken away from me.

But Lord, this week, I had a very stiff-necked week. I had a very uncircumcised heart week this week, Father.

And I say sorry and I ask for your help that my life will reveal your glory. That is the Christian hope and that is the Christian path.

I invite you to stand. I just want to say one other thing, especially for maybe some of those who are listening. If you're thinking, that's just so wonderful to hear, and George, it's so nice that God, that that gospel story came to you with power, a power to deal with your stiff-neckedness, but that would never happen to me.

I want to tell you, friend, if you ask that question, it means it's happening to you. That's what it means. Not that you're going to be passed over, but that Christ is knocking at the door of your heart and saying, now is the time.

[48 : 32] Open the door of your life to me and I will come in and I will be your savior. That's what you're experiencing.

Let's pray. Father, we give you thanks and praise that the good news of Jesus didn't just come with words, true words, and we thank you that it did, but that it came, Father, with a power of grace from you to deal with our stiff-neckedness and uncircumcisedness and all those other types of things and resistance, and enough, Father, that we could truly say to you yes.

And Father, we are not worthy of such grace. We are not worthy of such mercy. We are not worthy of the forgiveness that comes in Jesus, Father. We are not worthy of it. And Father, we are just gobsmacked at your kindness to us and your goodness to us.

And we ask, Father, that you bring this story and this is the wonderful news that it came to us with your power of grace to change us as undeserved and unworthy as we are.

Father, help us to become more real to our hearts. And Father, as it becomes more real to our hearts and as we're more gripped by what will happen at the moment of our death, well, Father, we thank you for your word and we thank you for Jesus and we thank you for the Holy Spirit and we ask, Father, that you reveal to us our stiff-neckedness and those other things that we, with you, in your power, must put to death day by day.

[50 : 02] And, Father, we ask that if there are any who are listening to this who have not yet given their lives to Jesus and they hear this, Father, that this would be the moment that your Holy Spirit helps them to say yes to give their life to Christ.

And we ask these things in the name of Jesus, your Son and our Savior. Amen. Amen.