

Acts 6:1-7 - Being Truly Deeply Seen

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Preacher: Rev. George Sinclair

[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, we really, 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 pray. Father, we are in your presence. You have spoken to us through your Word. We ask, Father, that you would so move in our hearts, that our hearts would be hungry for your Word, open and receptive to your Word, and that your Word would form us, that your Word would give us life.

And we ask this in Jesus' name, your Son, Father, and our Savior. Amen. Amen. So this is going to be a big surprise to you, all of you. Thank you very much, John. This is going to be a very big surprise to you all. But I was in a coffee shop this week, and something happened.

Some of you might wonder if I have a life apart from coffee shops. I don't. I'm exceptionally boring. I think to myself, if the Canadian government or the Chinese government wants to follow me along and listen in on me, I'd put them to sleep by how boring my life is, by the standards of the world.

[2 : 1 3] Anyway, so I come into the coffee shop, and there's like a table. I'm sitting down, and then there's like two other tables quite close. And there's a young woman at both of the other tables. They're obviously friends. They're chatting away. They're probably... I'm getting really old. They're probably PhD students. I thought they were undergrads, but who knows how old they're. Young women, from my point of view. And they're chattering away. And as I'm putting my stuff down, I notice that there's a bracelet on the... There's a bracelet on the ground. So I say to them, is this your bracelet? Because if it's not, I take and give it into the cash so that, you know, whoever had it could get it back. And one of the young women looked and said, oh, yeah, that's mine. And so I picked it up and give it to her. And she said, oh, thank you.

That's my support Palestinians bracelet in the Hamas war, in the, you know, the liberation of Palestine. So, you know, I gave it to her. And then we had this short conversation. She was very bubbly, not angry or aggressive. She was a very bubbly type of personality. And she said to me with a big smile, you support the Palestinians against the Israelis, don't you? Just like that, with a big smile. Like, of course, I'm going to say yes. And I said, so here's the thing. Some of you know, I can be, I can be sinfully opinionated about politics. But I don't want to talk about politics at a coffee shop. I want to be able to share the gospel with people and not talk about politics.

So I can't remember what I said. I sort of dodged it. But she was persistent. She, I guess, was an evangelist for the Palestinian cause. So she's very insistent. And then finally, I said something about how I, you know, I wasn't really in favor of what Hamas. And, you know, I didn't say Palestinians as I was in favor of Hamas. And then she comes back all with this bubbly, almost flirtatious type of encouraging me to agree with her. And then she said, well, you surely you don't agree with a group of people who bomb hospitals. So I sort of, I probably went like this. Like, you really want me to talk about this? So I said to her, well, they shouldn't hide missiles in hospitals. And they shouldn't shoot Israelis from hospitals. And they shouldn't store their weapons in the hospitals and underneath it. And she just looked at me with a big smile. She said this. And this was the part, the parting word. The Jews are always killing Muslim babies.

The Jews are always killing Muslim babies. Now, I said it to you seriously. She said, the Jews are always killing Muslim babies. Just like 30 seconds after that, she was talking with her friend about where to get their nails done and what hairstyle to get with their haircut. It was just like a bubbly, common sense thing, as if everybody knows that. The same thing that I would say, oh, that's King Edward over there. She would just say, oh, the Jews are always killing Muslim babies. I don't want anybody to think that I always know the right thing to say in situations. And I didn't know what to say to that.

Like, I'd never come across such a deeply horrific, anti-Semitic statement. And some of you know, there's a phrase about the banality of evil. And that was a perfect example. Like, she just, she was cheerful about making that statement. And I literally did not know what to say.

[5 : 52] I've prayed for her off and on, you know, since then. I don't know if I'll ever get a chance to see her again. I'd never seen her in that particular coffee shop before, but maybe I will. And maybe next time I come across such a statement, I'll know what to say. Now, I'm saying all of this because the Bible text that we're looking at today is a story about prejudice causing division in the early church. And some biblical commentators try to downplay the prejudice, but they shouldn't downplay the prejudice. There is prejudice, and it becomes noticeable and a source of complaint in the early church. And so we're going to look at that story. It's not the same type of prejudice as that prejudice of the Jews are always killing Muslim babies. But all prejudice is wrong. And all prejudice has the possibility to grow to murderous extremes and to banal extremes so that you don't even, you're not even thinking that you should repent of it. So let's look at this particular story. It's Acts chapter 6, verses 1 to 7. Acts chapter 6, verses 1 to 7. And some of you are probably thinking, like me, that most of the times they've heard sermons on this, the prejudice aspect sort of gets effaced or done away with, and they get into whether or not, you know, this is the institution of deacons and stuff like that. But here's the story, and it begins like this. Acts chapter 6, verses 1 to 7. Now, in these days, when the disciples were increasing in number, now just before we go any further on that, just to explain, I've said that this is an eyewitness-based history of the first 35 years of the Jesus movement, probably written before the year 67 or 68 AD. And there's two reasons for that. You can ask me about that over coffee or send me an email, maybe even written in 66 or something like that.

Actually, very simply, there are two reasons it was probably written beforehand, is it ends not with Paul having been martyred, but just in jail. And he dies, I think, in 67. And the other thing is that Jerusalem hasn't been destroyed, and that's in 70. So it's almost definitely written before those two events, Paul's death by execution under Nero, martyred, and before the destruction of Jerusalem.

And so in this phrase, it's not like once upon a time language. In fact, what it is, is in the original language, it's, you know, there's a God, I think it's a Greek God, Janus. He's a God that looks both ways at the same time. And it's a very helpful thing. Sometimes there's parts of the Bible that are Janus texts. They look both ways at the same time. And so it's a linking phrase. It's referring to the fact back to what's just happened. And this is all within probably a year of the death and resurrection of Jesus. And it's looking at what just happened, which was the apostles all arrested, spending the night in jail, rescued by the angel, their witness before the Sanhedrin, Gamaliel having them spared from execution, but they're still whipped. And they rejoice that they have this honor to bear witness to Jesus and the church grows. And so that's what they're linking to this. The church is growing. There's hostility, but the church is growing. So now in these days, when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the

Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And in the original language, the word neglected is a very good word. It's a very accurate word. They were being neglected. Now, a couple of things. First of all, Hellenists and Hebrews, there's no really good way to translate it into English. This is a cultural distinction. And so basically, it's a distinction between two groups of people who would have been living in Jerusalem in those days.

What they call the Hellenists are people who, the Jewish people, just like today, you know, there's Jewish people all over the world. Lots of Jewish people in Ottawa, Vancouver, Manhattan, and there's also some in Israel, of course. So the Hellenists are Jewish people who have been part of this diaspora, maybe for decades, maybe for generations and generations. And they've lived in the pagan world, the Greek-speaking, Latin-speaking world. But they've now come back to live in Jerusalem or in the area. And they have become culturally Greek. That's what they've become. So, you know, if they're going to have their salad, it's going to be a Greek salad with lots of feta cheese and black olives.

[10:46] It's, you know, so the food they eat, the jokes they tell, the stories they tell, the things they remember, they all come out of a Greek culture. What are called the Hebrew, so it doesn't, they all speak Greek probably, but it doesn't necessarily mean they don't speak Hebrew or Latin or Aramaic.

But they're culturally Greek. The Hebrews are long-time Palestinian Jews. And just one other aside, we all know that in this culture, for me to talk about Palestinian Jews living in Jerusalem in the year 34 is a political statement, would be viewed as a political statement, maybe even as something colonizing, which is ridiculous. For most of this stuff, we have to have belly laughs at it, because it's ridiculous. C.S. Lewis once said the devil, I think he was quoting Thomas More or something. The devil hates to be mocked, hates to be laughed at. Maybe that's what we need more of.

But this Hebrew group are people who are mainly long-term Palestinian Jews. Their primary language would not be Greek, but Aramaic. Now, they might also speak Hebrew and Greek, by the way, but culturally, they are comfortable, most comfortable that Palestinian Jewish culture. Now, just to show that it's not specifically talking about language, is, you know, some of you know the Bible very well, know that later on in another place, Paul writes that he's a Hebrew of Hebrews. And he uses the same word for Hebrew. But he himself was from the diaspora. He himself grew up not in Jerusalem, but somewhere else. But culturally, he's a Palestinian Jew, and he refers to himself that way.

So there's this cultural difference, two culturally different communities in the same physical area, and there's tension between them. And people from both communities become Christians. And now people from the lesser, in a Jerusalem context, they are the lower ones. Like maybe if they were in Athens, the Hebrews would be the lower ones. But in Jerusalem, they're the lower ones, the Greek-speaking Jews. And look what it says again. They arose a complaint by these group against the Hebrews, the Hebrew Jewish Christians, because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

Now, one of the things which must have made this neglect especially hard is the neglect comes in the context of jaw-dropping generosity and love. Like just jaw-dropping, gobsmacking generosity and love.

[13 : 33] If you go back and you read, what they're doing is they're caring for the poorest of the poor. And how are they caring for them is people with means are selling their property and making huge financial contributions so that the least of the least can be cared for. That's like jaw-dropping, jaw-dropping generosity, jaw-dropping love. And in the context of jaw-dropping generosity and love, there is prejudice still. And the prejudice leads to this one group being neglected.

So what do they do? What are they going to do about it in the rest of the story? And by the way, in the ancient world, in our Canadian culture, we all think we know what should be done. And one of the things, and if you haven't read Tom Holland's book, *Dominion*, or if you haven't read Glenn Scrivner's book, *The Air That We Breathe*, everybody should read Glenn Scrivner's book, *The Air That We Breathe*, which is shorter and easier than Tom Holland's book, *Dominion*. But in the ancient world, the Roman centurion would say, what's the issue? Who cares about widows?

They would say, in fact, the natural order of things is the strong. Stay strong. We earned it. We deserve it. The gods demand that we be fed.

Who cares about widows? They're just women. People in Canada who are going to critique this story unwittingly are speaking like Christians without realizing it. But what are they going to say? Well, let's see what the apostles say.

And it's actually quite shocking to Canadian ears. If we just listen to it, you think about how you read this with your neighbors. Verse 2, so the 12 and the 12 summoned the full number of the disciples and said, it is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.

[15 : 46] What? What did they just say? There's a complaint about prejudice. There's a complaint about people, the least of the least, going hungry. And the first thing they want to say is, it is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables?

Now, let's be honest. All of our Canadian neighbors would say that's the wrong answer. That's the wrong answer.

Now, in a Canadian culture, we'd be expecting an apology. We'd be expecting resignations. There's all sorts of things we'd be expecting. Now, just as we're trying to figure out what's going on here, and by the way, this is the wonderful thing about walking towards difficulties in the Bible, is that it's when you walk towards difficulties in the Bible, you know, you've heard me say before, I wish I could find out where I, somebody asked me about it, and I'm not smart enough to figure this out myself. Like, I read it somewhere. I just can't remember who I read it.

Like, stories like this are both a mirror for us to see ourselves and a window to see God in the world as it really is. And so, it's when we walk towards difficult passages and think about them that we start to see ourselves. You see, so part of the problem is that for Canadians, Canadians generally have a silent mantra that they say to themselves. And the silent mantra is, I need the Bible like the fish needs a bicycle. I need a Bible like a fish needs the bicycle. I need Jesus like a fish needs a bicycle. So to say that the most important thing is to open the Bible is like an eye-rolling comment. And that's partially because that's how Canadians think. And so that's a bit of a problem. But the second problem with their comment, and this is now, I'm going to talk about the Bible in a moment, but this is to make the apostles' words actually seem a little bit more difficult and also more relatable to why it actually is, at least in appearance, a difficult response. See, one of the things which is going on here in the text, and it happens with prejudice, it touches on a very deep human fear and a very deep human longing. And one of the things that we fear is being unseen and unheard.

One of the things which many women say is that when they reach a certain age, they become invisible. Nobody sees them. Nobody sees them. Nobody sees them. It's hard to talk about, but it sure doesn't feel good.

[18 : 49] But interestingly enough, the fear or the complaint of being unseen is genuinely an intergenerational issue.

One of the concerns for teenagers and young people is that they're unseen. Nobody's seen them when they're thinking about what to do about the job market.

Nobody's seen them when they're thinking about what to do with housing prices and rental things. Nobody sees them. Nobody hears them. And then, of course, obviously for lots of other groups, people maybe even right here, they're very frustrated because at their place of work, it feels as if when they speak, they're unheard.

And that when they're even looking for promotions or for other types of people that contribute, they're completely and utterly unseen. In fact, if we were in the right type of context, maybe if you're in the right type of small group or mentoring group, if this topic came up, it might discover that one of the people in our congregation, that they're moved to tears about the fact that they feel deeply unseen and unheard and how deeply wounding it is.

And so their initial response sounds a lot like people, men, who aren't seeing them and aren't hearing them.

[20 : 15] But that's not what's going on. Let's look again at what they say in verse 2 and then read the rest of what they say. And the 12 summoned all the full number of the disciples and said, it is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.

Therefore, it's a funny thing there, therefore. See, what they're doing is they say this neglect, first of all, they're saying that this care for the least of the least is very important.

This neglect is very important. But before we give the response, you're also forgetting something else which is very important, which is the word of God and prayer.

So now we take the importance, it is very important important to care for the least of the least, especially amongst the community. It is very important that there is no prejudice, that that neglect is dealt with, and it's very important that God's word is preached and that people pray.

Therefore, and in verse 3 and following, we see the therefore. Therefore, verse 3, brothers and sisters, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.

[21 : 43] But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicholas, a proselyte of Antioch.

These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. Now you'll notice that they're all Greek names. This doesn't mean that they were all necessarily Hellenists, but it would be very unlikely that none of them were.

It was very common for Palestinian Jews to also have a Greek name, just as it's very common for immigrants to come to our country from another country, and they have their Chinese or their Malaysian or their Nigerian name, which might be hard for Canadians to pronounce, so they have their Chinese name and a Canadian name, or their Malaysian name or their Rwandan name, and they have a Canadian name.

It's a very common thing now, and it's a very common thing back then. But it definitely shows that they pick people who obviously have some degree of sympathy with this, and the whole congregation, both the Hellenists and the Hebraists, love the solution, love the people, and they go for it.

So what we see here then is that the apostles added something which our culture thinks is not needed.

[23 : 10] As I said, to the average Canadian, I need the Bible like a fish needs a bicycle. I need the gospel like a fish needs a bicycle. In fact, you know, and this deeply affects Christians, I might be one of the few people in the room, because I'm a pastor, I read books about, you know, how to be a pastor and all, and there's a very, very common saying in evangelical circles right now which says that if your church was to vanish, would anybody in the community notice it?

And the implication of the question is that it would be a terrible thing if we vanished, and nobody noticed it. And what they mean by that, then, is that really what it is, is if the church isn't running the Boy Scouts and the food banks and doing this and doing that and hosting the AA things and all these things for the community, if they're not doing that, then we're unimportant.

Well, that's actually having the world determine our agenda. It's not what the Bible says. The fact of the matter is that there's only one group in all of Canada that will tell people that there is a God who truly does exist and there is a Savior who loves them.

It's not the Boy Scouts. It's not any other group like that. It's only the church. And so that's actually a fundamentally important thing for the church to do.

I'm not saying that we shouldn't do other types of things to help the poor. That's not the point. But it's... The point is that there is this fundamental priority upon the church to equip Christians and to proclaim the gospel so that people who are lost can be saved.

[24 : 52] That's our fundamental priority. It's the number one job. The others are consequences of receiving the gospel. And the consequences aren't the gospel.

The gospel has consequences. Always does. But the consequences aren't the gospel. What is the gospel? Well, the gospel is that Christ died for both Hellenistic Jews and Hebrew Jews.

Like that very, very fundamental thing that we worship a God who saw human need and Jesus died on the cross for the Dalit, the lowest caste in India.

He died for the elite in Nigeria. He died for the Politburo in China. He died for Biden in the White House. He died for the slave.

He died for, well, he died for everybody. I mean, not everybody receives. But God doesn't say, you know, I think I only want white people or I only want black people.

[26 : 01] No, there's absolutely no prejudice in God. And the other thing about it is that the gospel is this message that Jesus sees you.

Like, he sees you. Nobody gets you like God gets you. He sees you. And the amazing thing about the gospel is he sees you.

He sees how you have screwed up your marriage. He sees how you've been fantastic at your marriage. He sees how you've screwed up with this. He sees the things that you're, he sees you and yet even seeing you, you all the way down for you, he dies for you.

And we have to acknowledge that being seen is a complicated issue. How is it complicated?

Being seen and heard is a bit more complicated because all of us are involved in a dance. I want you to know me and see me. I don't want you to know and see the things that I've done that are really wrong.

[27 : 15] And you don't want that with me either. One of the issues in marriages is, you know, the desire that, you know, the husband and the wife keeping things from each other.

things that are embarrassed about and ashamed about. And so, you see, there's, we think that what we want is to be seen, but we all know that in a different context, what we definitely don't want is to have certain things about us be seen.

Listen to, listen to the gospel, how psychologically insightful and profound the gospel is. If you could put up the text of John chapter 3, we're going to just slip to John chapter 3 verses 16, a very famous verse, 16 to 21.

And this is Jesus speaking. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only son of God.

[28 : 39] Here's the, that's all profound stuff, worthy of profound meditation and memorization. Listen to this next bit, verse 19. And this is the judgment.

The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light lest his works should be exposed.

But whoever does what is true comes to the light so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God. This text brilliantly captures the fact that on one hand we have a profound desire to be seen, but that if we're honest, our desire to be seen is complicated because we don't want those bad things in our current life and in our past to be seen.

And the wonder of the gospel is this. God sees those things that you hide from yourself. He sees those things that I hide from myself and from others.

He sees it. He sees me. And still he loved me, Jesus did, and died for me that I might be forgiven and made right with God.

[30 : 11] Some of us know that one of the best possible gifts that we can get is when somebody gives us a gift that we don't know that we need. But we really do. Maybe it's going to another country or entering into a new stage of life or moving to a new city or entering a new stage of life like in university or living on your own or whatever, and somebody, a parent or a grandparent gives us a gift, and we sort of get the gift, and we sort of look at it and think that's sort of odd, and then a couple of months in or a year in, all of a sudden we realize that, whoa, I really needed that gift.

I didn't realize I needed that gift. And that's also part of the thing which is so wonderful about the gospel. The average human being doesn't realize they need a savior. And God saw and heard our deep needs, and even when we did not desire it, he provided, and even when we did not realize that we needed a savior, he sent Jesus to be our savior.

savior. And you see then, if you understand why do we need the word of God? You see, what the word of God is, the word of God is sort of expressed in a bit of a, sort of a funny type of phrase.

If you go through all of the book of Acts, the word of God refers to the good news about Jesus understood in light of the Bible, and the word of God is the Bible understood in light of the good news about Jesus.

That's what the word of God is. And why do we desperately need it? Because if you think about this, this is exactly the type of medicine we need to deal with neglect and sin and not being seen and not being heard.

[31 : 53] We are reminded from the Bible that God sees me. He even sees the things about me which are terrible. And still he loves me and still he sent his son to die for me.

And he does that for me and for people that I think I'm better than and people that I think, I'm worse than. And he does that. And he does it without prejudice. And if we realize that the very heart of the gospel is a God who sees us and acts to us without any prejudice but only with love, how on earth can I then have prejudice?

And how could I not desire to be one who sees people and hears them? how could I not be one that if somebody says you're not listening to me that I potentially am really struck to the heart by that?

And at the same time as that sin comes to me and confronts me, because I know that Jesus saw it and has forgiven me, it gives me a place to stand.

And rather than getting defensive, and rather than attacking, and rather than getting on my high horse, and rather than trying to cause a power play, or anything else like that, that I can say, it might not be right away, it might be 48 hours, 72 hours, it might be 72 days, it might be 20 years, but say, you know what, you're right.

[33 : 16] You're right. Only the gospel gives us a secure place to stand that does not unmake us. that we can acknowledge those things, and repent and amend our lives, as the gospel becomes more real to us.

And that's why you see, brothers and sisters, it is so essential that the first thing that goes on in a church is that the word of God is shared to those who do not know Jesus, to those who do know Jesus.

It is our life, it is our health. In fact, actually, if you look, if you could go back to Acts, and go to Acts chapter 6, verse 7, Luke sort of coins a phrase, he invents an expression, and it's in verse 7, and the word of God continued to increase.

Well, what does that mean? Sorry, I'll read the whole thing. And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

It's a wonderful picture of what happened. But you see, the fact of the matter is, it's because it's the word of God that feeds the church, that creates the church. The church is a creature of the word of God.

[34 : 27] That's what we're seeing here in that sect. That's why it's so important. And so what's going on here is a very important principle, and it's an important principle. You know, when I said that we need to be praying about whether we're doing God's work and God's way, and just pray that God will provide.

And part of the thing here is to showing that it's not a matter that preaching the word of God is like this, and everything else is completely unimportant. No, it's not a matter of importance.

There is a need for care and for organization and for administration and looking after the little kids in Sunday school and all that type of stuff.

That's very important. It's not like there's this and there's this. There's this. And the church needs to say, we need to make sure that it's not that my only job should be sharing the word and praying.

And by the way, prayers here would have meant both private prayers and what we're doing now, which is corporate prayer. You need to make sure I'm spending enough time on that, folks. And you need to have your small groups that are taking time with that.

[35 : 28] And the Sunday school needs to have that as first and foremost. But on the other hand, like what Shannon does for the church, like she's going to be stepping aside because God's blessing her and Owen with another baby and like there should be high fives all around for what she does.

It's so important. And for Barbara Allen and, you know, for Marlene and what she's done for the Sunday school and I could go on and on with people have a service heart for the needs of children and just the whole congregation.

Those things are very, very important. They have to be done. That's the lesson of the text. Lesson of the text is these things really have to be done. And don't just think of organization at the end of the day.

You need to have that organization involved in such a way that the word of God is being proclaimed and shared and taught and modeled. And that there's prayer because that's our food.

That's what we desperately need. That's what I desperately need every week. That's what we all need. I invite you to stand. Bow your heads in prayer. Let's pray.

[36 : 42] Father, you know the different things of prejudice that we're blind to. Just are. Just part of our culture and we just sort of accept it.

But you see it and you hate it. Father, we give you thanks and praise that you really do see us. That at the last judgment, nobody will be able to say to you at the last judgment that, God, you didn't see me.

Like, nobody will be able to say that. Nobody will be able to say at the last judgment. God, you didn't hear me. You do see. You do hear. You sent Jesus to be our Savior. And so, Father, we ask that this precious Jesus, the person of Jesus and what he's done for us, which is so precious, will become more and more real to our heart so that we will be less defensive when we're caught out doing wrong.

We will be more open to repent for you and when necessary before others of the wrong that we've done and make amendment of life. Father, we thank you for the wonder of the gospel.

We ask that you would kill any prejudice, any racism within us. And we ask all these things in the name of Jesus, your Son and our Savior, and all God's people said, Amen.

[38 : 02] Amen.