

Stephens Sermon on the Saviour

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[0 : 00] On page 914, Act 7 that begins, and the High Priest said, Are these things so? In 1912, George Bernard Shaw, George Bernard Shaw the author and playwright, he adapted the ancient story of Androcules and the Lion.

And in his preface to that play, Bernard Shaw, actually Bernard Shaw was a very strange individual. He certainly was a very much, very anti-Christian.

But he wrote in that preface to Androcules and the Lion, he said these words. He said this of Stephen. He was a quite intolerable young speaker who inflicted on the Jewish council a tedious sketch of the history of Israel with which they were presumably as well acquainted as he, and then reviled them in the most insulting terms.

Finally, after boring and annoying them to the utmost bearable extremity, he was stoned to death. It was a severe way of suppressing a tactless and conceited bore, but it was pardonable and human in comparison to the slaughter of poor Ananias and Sapphira.

And I hope you're gasping with astonishment as I'm reading these words. Now, I mean, if anything, that sweeping rejection of Stephen, the rejection of Stephen's sermon, that rejection of the Word of God, that even that accepting of what the Jewish council did in their attitude to Stephen and stoning Stephen, it actually shows how little, how little the views of non-biblical, non-Christian commentators have.

[1 : 43] And certainly should be taken seriously, certainly not taken seriously, when you hear them make pronouncements in Scripture. Now, you see that today, you see that in the 21st century, with the many times that you see in the secular media comments and biblical matters, very often in Christian ethics, famous people, so-called celebrities, making sweeping statements in Christianity, people who know next to nothing about Scripture.

When we look at the Word of God, and look at it with a clarity of vision through the enabling of the Holy Spirit, you see the Bible as a whole.

Old Testament, New Testament. That whole picture of God's purposes for mankind revealed progressively, progressively through the pages of Scripture, until the revelation of Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of promise.

And then when you see the wholeness of Scripture, that progressive revealing of the Lord Jesus Christ, then you see how ridiculous comments like those of George Bernard Shaw and the modern day equivalent, you see how ridiculous they are when comments are made in Scripture which simply don't stand up to the truth that Scripture reveals God in His work of salvation, that great work of salvation.

Then you might say, okay, I certainly can't go along with George Bernard Shaw. I certainly can't go along with him and his comments and Stephen's sermon. But what are we to make of it? I mean, it's one of the longest sermons in the Bible.

[3 : 28] It's certainly the longest recorded sermon in the book of Acts. And okay, it does seem rather monotonous. It just seems just like a long rehearsal of Israel's history from Abraham to King Solomon.

I'm not sure if I've ever heard a sermon on Acts chapter 7. Certainly our preachers can be very hesitant to tackle this passage. So what do we make from this long sermon that appears just so factual?

And how can we use it for our application? We might be tempted to think, it just doesn't seem to fit the bill for a well-rounded 3.5 hour sermon so that we're the more nourished by the Word of God. The more that you read this sermon, and crucially, the more that you understand the context in which Stephen was giving his address, the more you'll see why Stephen preached in this particular

way.

You'll see why Luke recorded this sermon in the fullness of the sermon content. And I pray too that we'll see there is application that you can derive from a close reading of Stephen's defence of the Gospel that would cost Stephen his very life.

[4 : 49] Now, okay, there are several ways we can approach this. We could go through each of these little sections. We could go through them with a fine toothpick. We could analyse each stage in the address.

Or as I hope to do this evening, we can take the bigger picture. We can take from this address, because it's such a long address, of course, long sermon, we can bring out the main points to help us to understand where Stephen's coming from in his defence.

and, of course, to help you and I in our application, in the application of this passage for our walk with the Lord. So, we're going to take the bigger picture, the bigger picture perspective.

You've got your headings there in your notes, three headings. Firstly, Stephen's directness, and then secondly, his biblicalness. I think there is a word, biblicalness.

And then thirdly, this we'll see certainly throughout and even at the end there, his Christ-centredness. So, firstly, Stephen's directness.

[5 : 53] Those of you who were here last Lord's Day evening, remember we were looking at Stephen's godly character, looking at his witness. This Greek-speaking Jewish convert, remember who'd been chosen along with the six other men, remember they were chosen to engage in practical help and the distribution of assistance to the death-tube believers in Jerusalem.

But remember, as we noticed, as Acts 6 informs us, Stephen stands out. He stands out amongst these other men. We noticed how he was described in terms of fullness, full of faith, full of wisdom, full of grace, through his being full of the Holy Spirit.

And he's not just providing for the needy. He's proclaiming Christ through his preaching. And it's that preaching that antagonised these free Jewish slaves.

These slaves who'd come from the Mediterranean area of North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean. And then, as we said, he comes before the Jewish council.

And they're enraged at what Stephen's been saying about the temple and about the law of Moses. And they've brought in false teachers who are brought in to twist Stephen's words.

[7 : 08] Words about the temple, words about the law. And then the Jewish council, they've heard these false teachers. They've heard their accusations against Stephen. And they consider what Stephen's been saying as blasphemy.

And the high priest speaks to Stephen directly. It's a few simple words. Are these things so? Are these things that you've been accused of, are they actually what you have been teaching?

And with a direct question, Stephen gives a direct reply. Okay, it's a very long reply, but it's still a direct reply. Stephen doesn't avoid answering his accusers directly.

He certainly doesn't fly into rage and direct personal abuse against the high priest. No. He's going to answer his accusers with truth, with biblical truth.

He's going to do it in a God-glorifying, Christ-centred, spirit-enabled way. He's taking a stand for truth. Now, obviously, he has no idea how his accusers are going to respond to his defence.

[8 : 14] He has no idea what the outcome of his defence is going to be. But he's still going to speak the truth in love. He's full of the Holy Spirit. He's full of faith. He's full of grace. He's full of wisdom.

And he'll be fulfilling what Jesus says. Remember what Jesus says to his disciples concerning when you proclaim the Gospel, even in these times before Jesus returns.

Mark 13. They will deliver you over to councils. And you'll be beaten in synagogues. And you'll stand before governors and kings for my sake. When they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you're to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, that it's not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.

Because that reality isn't just for Stephen in first century Jerusalem. That reality is for all who are filled with the Holy Spirit, for all who are God's children, for all who take their stand for truth, to take that stand before a world, even before a religious elite.

So the promise, yes, the promise of being persecuted is there. Jesus has given us that promise. But remember, with that promise comes the promise of the enabling power of the Holy Spirit to help you.

[9 : 34] To help you when you're faced with such intense opposition, those who are opposed to your faith. And there's also that encouragement when you're faced with the opponents of the one true faith.

You see that in Stephen's immediate response. He's been given this invitation to speak and notice verse 2. Notice how he begins. He begins, Brothers and fathers, hear me.

This is, I mean, this man's full of grace. You see that in his words. He's showing no malice towards his accusers. He's not showing any hatred towards them. What does he do?

He's addressing fellow Jewish nationals. He's calling them brothers. And then he respects the authority of those in authority. He calls them fathers. Here's a man who's going to conduct himself as a man of grace.

He's going to reveal his Christ-like grace even in loving his enemies. And you'll see that again at the end of the passage when he's been stoned by these same people. Notice what he says right at the very end before he dies.

[10 : 44] Father or Lord, do not hold this sin against them. Think of the contrast. Think of the response of the natural man who's devoid of grace.

The person who'll retaliate when he's confronted, confronted by his beliefs. But that is not the way of the Lord Jesus. The same Lord Jesus, remember who cried out on the cross, Father forgive them for they do not know what they're doing.

And it's for you and I, for you and I, however much were riled and hurt and pained when the world throws its jibes at you, when the world mocks you for your faith, when the world shows such hatred for you and for the way of the Lord Jesus.

It's not for you and I to retaliate, but it's to show love. It's even to speak the truth in love and doing so through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. So yes, take your stand for truth.

Don't, don't be afraid to take that stand and trust, trust in the one who's promised to be with you. Even when you're facing the roaring lions, even when the strong bulls of Bashan are surrounding you.

[11 : 58] Well, Stephen certainly faced these strong bulls of Bashan, these roaring lions and he faced them in grace. He faced them directly. But notice secondly, how Stephen deals with this question of these things.

So, you see it in his biblicalness, his biblicalness. I mean, he's been asked to defend, asked to defend what he's saying about the temple and about the law of Moses and to defend what he's been saying in relation to the Lord Jesus.

And notice what he does. He goes straight to Scripture. He goes straight to the Bible. And he begins with Abraham. And he progresses through to Moses.

Then David. Then Solomon. And the way you read this, it suggests that he's been cut off in full flight, as it were. His opponents stop him.

So, what do we make of all this? I think several things to notice. Notice firstly, notice first of all, Stephen's defending his preaching and he's doing so as he begins in Scripture in the Old Testament.

[13 : 07] Now, of course, that was the Bible before the Gospels and the Epistles were written. We now have what we call the full canon of Scripture. But Stephen wants to show his accusers how essential, how essential an understanding of the Old Testament books are to their understanding, to our understanding of the coming of the Lord Jesus.

Jesus, the fulfillment, the promises that the prophets were giving many hundreds of years before. So, Stephen has that full knowledge of, we would say, how the Old Testament works in relation to the coming of the Lord Jesus.

And surely, it's for you and I to be immersed in Scripture, New Testament and Old Testament. It's for you and I to keep searching the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

for you and I to grow in the knowledge, yes, knowledge of New and Old Testament and grow to love God's Word. The psalmist in Psalm 119, he wrote of his delight in the law of God.

He said it was his study day and night. Well, think of Ezra as the scribe. Ezra set his heart in studying the law of God. And as we're thinking this morning of the early church, the early church that was a learning church, he delighted in learning in the apostolic teaching.

[14 : 33] And so it's for you and I for our heart's desire, our delight to be in God's law, God's Word, and our delight from the first page of the Old Testament right through to the last page of the New

Testament.

And certainly, as far as Stephen's concerned, you can see, it comes through clearly that he delighted to know the Word of God. You see that as he's narrating the events regarding the spiritual fathers of Israel.

But it's not just a recitation of church history for the sake of it. George Bernard Shaw utterly, utterly wrong. It's not just a recitation. But Stephen is giving this address for a deliberate purpose. He's answering his accusers in two points. As we said, one in connection with the temple, the other in connection with the law of Moses. So we have to try and understand Stephen's line of argument. So, the accusation. Accusation that he's opposed to the temple in Jerusalem. Teaching that Jesus said he'd destroy this temple. And of course, Jesus did say that he'd destroy this temple.

[15:43] Three days later, raise it up again. Of course, Jesus was referring to his death and resurrection. He wasn't referring to the physical temple of the Jews in Jerusalem and elsewhere that they revered.

They revered as they considered the place of God's residence among his people. And they revered that place, saying that as long as the temple is there, then God's with us. God's going to bless us as long as the temple is there.

He believed that God actually dwelt in the temple. But Stephen wants to do two things from Scripture. Firstly, he wants to show that God wasn't and isn't confined to any one place in order to be with his people.

And secondly, secondly, the temple that had been the meeting place between a holy God and sinful people, that temple where sacrifice was made for sins, that temple was replaced by Jesus himself. And it's by the death and resurrection of Jesus that he's now our meeting place, the meeting place between God and his people. And the reason Jesus is with us always.

[16:54] He and us, me and him. So, we come to God. We come to God through the Lord Jesus. We're reconciled to God through our Savior. We don't need a physical temple in which to meet with God.

Jesus has replaced that physical temple with himself. We don't need any more sacrifices because Jesus is the once for all sacrifice. We don't need a high priest to intercede for us with God. Jesus is our high priest. He offered himself up for us. He's the fulfillment of all that the Old Testament wrote and all its elaborate detail about the temple.

So, Stephen, he's on a mission. He's on a mission to tell his accusers of what we call the omnipresence, you know, the all-presence of God. God with his people. Telling them that Jesus has replaced the temple as that meeting place between a holy God and sinners.

And so, Stephen's going to go through the key aspects of Israel's history. He's going to make his point clear. And he begins with Abraham. And you go back to that section there in chapter 7 at the beginning there.

[18:05] Did Abraham meet with God in the temple? No, he didn't. He met with God or God met with Abraham in Mesopotamia. Pagan Mesopotamia, modern-day Iraq. Hundreds of miles away from Jerusalem.

And God was with Abraham as Abraham journeyed to the land of Canaan. That land of promise even though Abraham didn't own any of Canaan. And then we move on to Joseph.

The one through whom the family of Jacob saved from famine through Joseph's wisdom as prime minister in Egypt. And you see the point there in verse 9.

God was with Joseph. Where was he with him? He was with him in Egypt. And at every turn in Joseph's life God is with him. God's not confined to a temple. Not even confined to a location in Jerusalem.

And then you go into from verse 20. We move on several hundred years. We come to Moses. It's a long section in Stephen's sermon. But notice God was with Moses where God chose to bless Moses.

[19:08] And you see as Stephen outlines in each of these three 40 year periods of Moses' life God was with Moses. The first 40 years in Egypt. The next 40 years in the Midianite Desert.

The last 40 years in the wilderness. God with Moses. There's no word of a temple in any of these three periods of Moses' life. And particularly in verse 33 you see that how Stephen highlights this. Moses meets with God on Mount Sinai. Notice how it's described. Holy ground. Holy ground. But then of course there was a construction built where God met with his people.

You see that in verse 44. The tabernacle the portable tent that accompanied the Israelites through the wilderness through the desert. Then the more permanent construction. the temple that David had wanted to build.

King David. Forbidden to do so. But Solomon is sundered. The temple of course that would later be destroyed by the Babylonians. Then another one is built. A second temple built in Mount Zion in Jerusalem.

[20 : 17] Wasn't that proof enough that God dwelt with his people? Stephen echoes the words of King Solomon and says no. Solomon prayed his prayer of dedication.

You read it in 1 Kings 8. But will God indeed dwell in the air? Behold heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you how much less this house that I have built.

And you see in verse 48 Stephen commenting on that truth that the most high that God doesn't dwell in houses notice made of hands. Stephen's directing us here directing us to what's made with hands to what's made not made with the hand of man but the hand of God.

And there in verses 49 and 50 Stephen's quoting from Isaiah heaven as God says heaven is my throne the earth is my footstool did not my hand make all these things?

And the crucial point surely is this that Stephen's showing through scripture through the Bible how wrong his accusers were in their attitude to God because his accusers had regarded the temple as that permanent residence of God a sign of God's presence a sign of his blessing as people but Stephen's saying no this is surely the point he's saying to the people as we have been told ourselves what you have created with your hand no value no permanent value anyway no permanent value what you create with your hand is idolatry that's why Stephen goes to the Israelites when they made the golden calf how did they make the golden calf?

[22 : 01] They made the golden calf with their hands they worshipped what they made with their hands so they're worshipping God just as the people whom Stephen has been giving his sermon to they were guilty of that same idolatry they were trusting in a temple made with hands you see that expression they're made with hands that's why we stopped to focus on that expression as we were reading through that chapter that's the clue the idolatry of those who were hostile to Stephen see the people thought they were safe through that which was made by their hands with all that of course that went along with the physical temple the sacrifices the ceremonies the outward forms of religion that the temple provided and that surely is a reminder a timely reminder to ourselves now we don't talk about finding security in a temple but what about those things that we make with our hands material the material things the physical whatever form even the very place we worship in you know you can even idolize a building you can even idolize outward forms of religion you can idolize even the very outward forms of worship without truly knowing the one whom we are to worship without knowing the Lord

Jesus without knowing the temple that God has made with his hands Jesus is the true temple he's the one he's the temple where we meet with God he's the temple that Stephen was directing his hearers to know and to follow but the same Lord Jesus they would not listen to they would not follow but Stephen did as we see finally finally in his Christ centeredness and we can see clearly that Stephen knows his savior and he knows from reading the Old Testament he knows that Jesus was promised the one who Moses spoke of you see there in verse 37 in quoting from Deuteronomy 18 the Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you from your brothers it's to him you will listen but the Israelites didn't listen to the Lord Jesus just as they hadn't listened to Moses when Moses came as a deliverer for his people as we read there in that chapter and just as the

Israelites rejected Moses leadership even rejecting it in the wilderness so move on centuries and the people reject Jesus reject the one who was foretold by Moses that's why you see that expression in verse 51 stiff neck people just as the Israelites were stiff neck people in the wilderness when they rejected Moses so those who are accusing Stephen of blasphemy or stiff neck that expression that comes from the animals in a plough animals that refuse to bend their neck to the yoke so with those who are accusing Stephen accusing him of blasphemy against God they were the guilty ones not Stephen they were the ones who were refusing to bow their hearts to God they were rejecting the one who Moses had prophesied about they were the ones who were trusting in the outward forms of religion yet their hearts were far from

God they were the ones they were the ones who shared in the guilt of killing of the one whom Moses had foretold they were guilty of Jesus murder guilty of sinning against the Holy Spirit by that

perpetual resisting of the Savior and their Stephen testifying to the Lord Jesus testifying of Jesus the Messiah Jesus who had come to replace the temple Jesus who had come to fulfil the law of Moses the same Jesus whom Israel had rejected and so found guilty in their pride they were blind to their own sins in their pride and their arrogance they wouldn't listen to Stephen anymore as we said the way it's written it would suggest that they cut him off in his address and they begin that swift process of putting Stephen to death stoning him but notice this and I think this comes through so wonderfully in this last section there from verse 54 because just as Stephen showed his Christ centredness in his defence so he shows his Christ centredness in his death you know look at how it's described look at how his death is so full of Christ even as his life was so full of Christ I mean there's his accusers they're so wild wild with hatred against Stephen but what do we see Stephen doing he looks up and he declares that he sees heaven open the son of man standing at the right hand of God and then secondly as he's been stoned to death he's crying out Lord Jesus receive my spirit and then thirdly as he's falling to the ground as he's falling on his knees about to die he's crying out with words that as we said are reminiscent of Jesus on the cross Lord do not hold the sin against him you see the contrast of Stephen dying well compared to that murderous fury of those who hated him Stephen even with his very last breath calling on the [27 : 47] Lord and whether in life or whether in death the Christian whose life is Christ centred he she will reflect the grace of the Lord Jesus he she will testify to the eternal presence of the Saviour with him and that surely has to be the conclusion of our sermon this evening because just as God was and is with his people wherever his people are wherever his people go he's not confined to one place so we know that the Lord Jesus who's promised to be with us that promise is sure it's true he's our temple not made with hands he is with you always so you can have that great assurance that you can meet with God anywhere at any time you have that free and open access to God through our Saviour our meeting place so it's for you and I to rejoice to rejoice in that way opened up for us in Christ you can meet with God if he calls you to himself you know you can meet with him and you can enjoy that sweet fellowship that every believer enjoys through the finished work of the Lord

Jesus the righteous one the Lord Jesus the one whom Stephen loved the one whom Stephen testified to the one whom Stephen beholds face to face in the glory of heaven itself so we give thanks to God for this chapter we give thanks that the Lord Jesus Christ is seen in the pages of scripture even before us this evening call upon him while he's near amen let us pray our God our Father our Heavenly Father we give you praise for your word we know Lord that you have given to us each and every line of scripture help us to love your word to follow it to live by it and to rejoice in the Lord Jesus our Savior our Lord our King help us Lord in every aspect of our life to live for him to know that Christ centeredness in everything that we are so that he might have the glory and the praise strengthen us we pray we ask we pray all these things in Jesus name amen now a slight change from the notice sheet we're going to sing the older version of Psalm 116 getting three 10 10 10 10 10 meters Psalms isn't the easiest thing to do we're going to sing from verse well firstly page 396 page 396 we're going to sing from verse 13 to the end I'll offer salvation take the cup in God's name I will call I'll pay my vows now to the Lord before his people all then of course in relation to what we've been reading dear in God's sight this his saint's day thy servant Lord am I thy servant sure thy hand made son thy band thou didst untie 13 to the end Psalm 116 to God's praise God love and love God love God peace.
God God God God you God God God God God