

# Opposition To The Gospel

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[ 0 : 00 ] On this lovely but warm summer evening, as we turn our minds and thoughts to the scriptures in order that you through them might speak to all the differing circumstances of our individual lives, we pray that our hearts may be broken so as to admit your word, that our deafness may be removed so that we can hear it, and that you will help us not to be proud and stubborn so that we can submit to it.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. It is not unlikely that of a Sunday evening such as this, if you've ever been in church before, you heard the story of the prodigal son who went to a far country and how he came back to the father.

And you yourself to be accused of possibly being such a prodigal son that has wandered away in disobedience and in the enjoyment of all that you possess, only to find yourself broken and brought back to a loving father.

And if this is your case tonight, I want you to come forward. I don't, but I just, I suspect you may have heard it. I suspect you may also have heard something to the effect that a father goes to Jesus and says to him, in the agony of his heart, come down ere my child die.

You know, the totally critical situation in the agony of his despair. And he calls on Jesus and Jesus wonderfully answers.

[ 2 : 08 ] And you and your despair can call on Jesus and he will wonderfully answer you too. And that's true. But then there's also the story of, of the man who hung, nailed to a cross, awaiting that moment when his legs would be broken.

And Jesus spoke to him in that situation and said, as Jesus alone had the authority to say, today you will be with me in paradise.

paradise. And you couldn't be in a worse situation. And yet, Jesus has the authority to do that. And to say those words. But tonight, this is a very interesting story because it's the story of how God deals, not with a prodigal son that's wandered away, not with a blind man that's desperate for sight, not with a parent who's filled with anxiety for a child, not with a thief that's hanging on a cross, but a proud, deeply intelligent, and deeply angry and committed man and how he brings him to Christ.

how his heart is broken, how his ear hears, and how he bows in submission to Jesus as Lord.

[ 3 : 51 ] and I suspect that such people as that may indeed be sitting in this congregation tonight, and you indeed may be one of them.

And I deeply pray that your heart may be broken and with it your pride, and that you may be able to hear what you perhaps have never heard, and that you may be able to submit being a proud and self-reliant citizen of this century.

Okay, that's what I want to say, basically, and I'm going to go at it this way. You, when we, when there was read for you by Rob tonight, the 105th Psalm, and he said, this is the word of the Lord, your response, thanks be to God, did not express a great deal of gratitude.

It would have been perhaps more appropriate if you just scratched your head and said, what is he going on about? And some may indeed have had the same reaction to the reading from the Acts, chapter 7, because you weren't very enthusiastic about that either.

And so what I want to tell you is that it's really very important that you hear that. The reason we read Psalm 105 is because it tells the whole story of the Bible in one chapter.

[ 5 : 31 ] If you want to know the whole story of the Bible, just read Acts, chapter 7. There it is. From Genesis right through to the opening of the Gospels. It's right there.

So, it's, you know, it's like Cole's Notes. Have you ever resorted to that? And you can get it lots of times in the Bible.

Deuteronomy 32 does it in a wonderful way. And time and time again, the way it always works in the Bible, and the thing that you need to remember, and what Psalm 105 says, is that God created the world.

God chose the people in Abraham. God gave the law in Moses. God established a kingdom like David's.

God sent prophets into the world. And all that points to the great act of God in coming into the world in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 6 : 39 ] God that happens over and over again. Last week, when John Friesen played that beautiful postlude, he said, I said to him, where did that come from?

He said, well, the composer had written something on the creation, something on the giving of the law, something on the establishment of the kingdom, something on the coming of the prophets, something on the birth of Jesus and the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And it was part of that. Because it is the great theme that runs throughout our world. So whenever you have a great question to face, the way you face it biblically is to say, well, I may not know the answer to this question, but I do know God created the world.

God made a covenant with Abraham. God gave the law through Moses. God established the kingdom through David. God sent his prophets into the world. And then the last of the prophets was John the Baptist, the herald of Jesus Christ.

And the fullness of the revelation of God is in Christ. Now, what's your problem? Well, then you work it out from there, you see, always laying that foundation.

[ 7 : 58 ] Now, that's, of course, what Stephen did. Stephen was, I mean, one of the, I have a lot of questions about this because the difficulty is that I am a very elderly gentleman.

And when somebody as young as Stephen gets up and preaches a sermon as clear and comprehensive and direct as Acts chapter 7, you wonder where you've been all your life. because he does it with such wonderful finesse. How can a young man do that?

Well, that's one of the things I've been thinking about all this week. I realize that when you get old, you get clever. And so, you learn how to manipulate arguments, how to protect your backside, so to speak, you know, how to use the masses of accumulated information that you have over your life in order to say, whatever life is all about, I am the result.

and you defend that position. But here was a young man who took 70 of the elders and the wisest men of the nation to which he belonged and confronted them and they treated him very badly, as you know.

[ 9 : 37 ] It, I read a story this week, I wasn't, it was a story, but it was in a book by Polanyi. And, everybody should read Polanyi, only to take you the rest of your life.

But, there are things which even I could get hold of. He tells a lovely story about Albert Einstein. And, he says, in order to understand where Albert Einstein got hold of the theory of relativity, relativity, the first thing you've got to recognize is cut through all the mythology that's built up around it to get to the heart of it.

Isn't that interesting? I mean, I think it's interesting. And then he says that what really happened was that Einstein got onto the theory of relativity when he was a boy of 16.

It took him a few years before he had worked out the implications of it, but he had the vision then, and then he worked it out. But he said the vested interests of the scientific and philosophical community was not prepared to allow that Einstein could have done that without the enormous help of some more recent scientific work which gave him the clue.

And so, Polanyi says they always tell that Einstein had this information from these experiments. earth. But Einstein said he didn't. That that was no part of his thinking.

[ 11 : 12 ] And you see, what it means is I think that you have with Stephen, you have, what happens to young people sometimes is that they have a brilliant awareness of what it's all about.

they suddenly see what the Bible is getting on about. I have a friend who's an Australian. I have other friends too, but I, he was at college in Toronto way back when I was there and he had never, I mean, he was, he was a very intelligent person.

And somebody sat down with him and pointed out to him what the gospel was all about, what the Bible was teaching. And because he had this, I mean, he was really very intelligent, he suddenly saw the whole thing.

And one of the Christian groups on campus not long afterwards asked if he would preach at their morning chapel service. He said, all right.

And he came to the morning chapel service and preached on the first to the tenth chapter of the Epistles of the Romans.

[ 12 : 45 ] Not because he was an experienced preacher, but suddenly the whole thing made sense to him in the most amazing way and he wanted to tell it. Now I think that's comparable to what happens to Stephen here.

Suddenly this whole thing has made enormous sense to him. He has not been healed of blindness or his crippled feet or his destitute condition or his prodigal wandering.

what has been met is the deepest longing of every human life to know what it's all about. And suddenly he discovers what it's all about.

And that's why he has, as the story opens, become a Christian. But look at what it says about him as a Christian. I mean, this is hard.

why was this man so unanswerable? He was full of wisdom and spirit.

[ 13 : 54 ] Full of, these are all direct references to chapter 6, you can look at them yourself.

Stephen was full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Stephen was full of grace and power.

power. And he suddenly, you know, I mean, he suddenly saw what it was all about. I mean, he was an extremely intelligent person.

Just the way the whole chapter is put together and the way he answers as he stands before the Sanhedrin and answers the charges against him, he does it with supreme intellect as well as great conviction.

You see, what happened, I mean, I want to take a dig at you here, you see, if you happen to be a very intelligent person, and I suppose some of you are, and quite accomplished intellectually and academically, the big problem for you is that all those intellectual gifts you have will probably be prostituted to selling McDonald's hamburgers or underarm deodorant or some great drug company or something will pay you more money than you've ever dreamed of to use your intelligence for the furthering of our free enterprise system.

But you see, if you have that kind of intelligence, the thing that you ought to give it to is the most worthy possible cause. And the most worthy possible cause is to know the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ.

[ 15 : 35 ] That is the most deeply challenging and profoundly satisfying intellectual quest that you could ever involve yourself in.

The public lecture at Regent this week was by Dr. James Torrance from Aberdeen, Scotland. And there is a godly, godly man, who like Stephen, his face shines.

And he's been doing it for the whole of his life. But the wisdom and the understanding and the profundity and the implications of what he says is just amazing.

I mean, you're open mouthed with awe when you look at the breadth of his understanding. He's not some guy who's picked up a couple of Christian slogans and tried to build a life on them.

He's a guy who may have been initially attracted by a Christian slogan, like Jesus died for my sins on the cross.

[ 16 : 47 ] And he may have accepted that in the first instance as a slogan, but then the whole of his life is given to discovering what lies behind that and where it comes from.

And what an amazing and profound statement it is. But that's what we have our intelligence for is to try and go beyond the slogans and to understand the profound reality which is at the basis of it.

So you get this amazing picture in Acts 7 of a young man full of the Holy Spirit, full of faith, full of grace, full of power, full of wisdom.

And you get him with having obviously applied himself with great diligence to know the content of the scriptures. And he's brought before the Sanhedrin.

Now I've had such a lovely time reading about Stephen this week. I wish you could have such a lovely time every week. I mean, having to do this on Sunday night is a bit of a drag, but preparing for it is wonderful.

[ 18 : 02 ] And so that maybe you can go away and spend next week with Stephen and see all that is there.

because what happens, you see, is that chapter 7, after enormous opposition, has been roused against Stephen, this terrific opposition.

And I would love you to spend the week figuring out where this opposition comes from. why a man who is so obviously good, why a man who is so obviously wise, why a person who is so deeply committed, why a person who has such intellectual understanding, should arouse such anger and animosity and hate, is hard to understand.

Where does the opposition come from? And where did it come from then? And where does it come from now?

They charged him with blasphemy. Now you know how dangerous it is in our world to be charged with blasphemy. Somebody contributes a few thousand dollars to have you shot because you blaspheme.

[ 19 : 28 ] That's not in our particular culture, that's in another culture. In our culture, we pay people to blaspheme. And we get them to write newspaper articles and head up TV shows and radio talk shows.

You know, that's so that blaspheming is an industry in our society. And the Christian church is getting so weak, it's harder to get anything to blaspheme about now.

But that's the way it worked. But in those days, you see, blasphemy, when Stephen was charged with blasphemy, it was a very serious charge.

And on the basis of it, as chapter 7 opens, they say to him, all right, this is, well, the words themselves. He's the high priest, says, are these charges true?

true. Now, the charges were brought forth by the blasphemers in our society.

[ 20 : 37 ] We might call it the media. And you see, what the media does is to take an issue and blow it up until they get a case going around it. You know, and sometimes they're right and sometimes they're wrong.

And sometimes they try and it fails. But now, the false witnesses spoken of here have brought together two apparently very sophisticated charges.

And Stephen has been arraigned and he stands before the court and the high priest says to him, are these charges true? Stephen answers by bringing forward several witnesses in his defense in a brilliant presentation.

Now, I'm just going to do this in summary, but this is the whole of the more than 50 verses of chapter 7. You can watch him do it. The first one he brings forth is Abraham from the book of Genesis.

And he says, I mean, the two charges against him were first that Stephen was speaking against the temple and that Jesus had said that it was to be destroyed.

[ 21 : 58 ] And the second was that they were messing around with the law that had been given by God. So Stephen brings in his witnesses.

And all of them, you see, it's not that Stephen has discovered something new. which this court knew nothing about. They knew all about it.

They knew it far better than he did. They were the students of the Bible. And they knew who Abraham was. But they didn't know what Stephen was going to do when he brought Abraham ahead and said to them, you think the temple is in Jerusalem?

How come the God of glory appeared to Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees? God doesn't live in Ur. He lives in Jerusalem. How did he do that? How come the God of glory appeared to Abraham in Haran? How come the God of glory made a covenant with Abraham and gave him a promise that his children would be more than the stars in the sky and the sands by the sea when Abraham had a barren wife and not one square foot of land?

[ 23 : 29 ] How could that be? Strange, wasn't it? It's hard to believe how God could ever honor a promise like that to a man like Abraham and having dealt with Abraham, he brings Moses on into the witness box as it were and says, now this is Moses.

We all respect him, don't we? We are the children of Moses, aren't we? I mean, Stephen's pretty good at this and he says, how come all the way through the life of Moses, you argued with him? You disobeyed him? You murmured against him? You rebelled against him? Why did you say to Aaron, make us gods that we can worship?

We don't know what's happened to this guy, Moses. Where's he gone? All these things happen and you wouldn't obey him. You didn't believe. what Abraham believed.

You didn't obey what Moses taught. And you know as I do. He brought the next witness on who was Joseph and Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt and the God of glory appeared to Joseph in

Egypt.

[ 24 : 56 ] Which again is where the God of glory doesn't belong. Could never be. And yet that God appeared to Joseph. And Joseph was the one through whom the purposes of God were carried forward.

So that when they were in captivity for more than 400 years, it was through Joseph that they were given a place in Egypt. I guess they should have put Joseph before Moses.

Sorry about that. If you could reverse them. You see, and that was the third witness. And then he goes on and he talks about David and Solomon.

He said, you think this temple is being blasphemed by me? Who was it that wanted to build the temple? It was David. And what was he told?

that God had tabernacled or tented with his people wherever they were. God was present among his people. And he told Solomon, and Solomon didn't understand, or did understand, as it were, that the God of glory does not live in temples made with stones.

[ 26 : 19 ] so why should you think that you rightly understand this temple? Why should you disagree with the teachings of Jesus about it?

Then he goes and he brings the prophets to bear witness again, and he says, the prophets came, and they told you that there is a righteous one coming, and consistently you took those men and you put them to death because of what they were saying?

So, in a sense, Stephen builds his case. The promises made to Abraham, he accepted in faith and you haven't.

God's redeeming of his people through Joseph, you know it happened, and you know that God met with Joseph in his captivity, and that he was exalted to be the ruler of Egypt, and he saw a time when the people would be free, and God gave Moses to give you the law, and you rebelled against that, and God gave you a kingdom in David and Solomon, and you rebelled against that, and God gave you the prophets who told you of the coming of the righteous one, and you rebelled against that, and now what have you done?

You've murdered the righteous one, the one whom Abraham, and Joseph, and Moses, and David, and Solomon, and the prophets in your scriptures told you was coming to affect God's purpose among you, and what have you done?

[ 28 : 14 ] You have ignored them one after the other, and then you have murdered the righteous one. Well, this is a very dramatic moment in the trial of Stephen, because what happens now is they turned on him, gnashing their teeth in the terrible anger they had at the interpretation that Stephen had put on the scriptures which they knew so well and could not deny.

And they were filled with anger. Now, I don't know how this happened, but at that very dramatic moment, what took place is something I'd like just to recall.

when they heard this, they were furious, gnashed their teeth at him. You know, the anger and the hostility of the council, the Sanhedrin, came against him, and Stephen, full of, always Stephen was full of everything, I mean, just full of the Holy Spirit, called his last witness, as it were.

heard, and said to them, he looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God standing at the right hand of God, and he said to them, look, I see heaven open, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

May I present my final witness? What a kind of amazing story this is. What it was he saw, it obviously was something he understood, and it was obviously something they didn't see, but he brought in this final witness to, in a sense, bring his case to a close.

[ 30 : 19 ] And then you get at this, they covered their ears, and yelling at the top of their voices, they rushed at him, dragged him out of the city, mob violence took over, anger took over, they dragged him out of the city, and began to stone him.

And while they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. that's a great statement.

You see, he wasn't, you know, totally taken up with the violence of the death that he was suffering at that very moment. He was very much aware of the one to whom he was going.

It speaks to us. This is, it speaks to us of something, I think, pretty important, because we're so totally absorbed with death and what's involved in it in terms of suffering.

But Stephen suffered a very violent death, and in the midst of it he said, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And then, you see, he fell on his knees and cried out, and his last words were, Lord, Lord, do

not hold their sins against them.

[ 31 : 57 ] Very much, you see, the pattern of the Lord Jesus, to whom he had committed his whole life, and he experienced that. You see, what it looks like on the surface is that this court is assembled, and Jesus is, and Stephen is standing there making his defense, but Stephen knows that it's not he that's on trial.

It's Jesus that's on trial. But you see, the unique and wonderful thing about this, to my mind, and I pass it on to you that you may consider it, is that that one whom Jesus raised from the dead, that he might become the judge of the living and the dead, comes into the courtroom as the accused criminal, and he passes judgment on those who think they are passing judgment on him.

It wasn't Stephen that was under condemnation. It was that courtroom and those people who were under condemnation on the grounds not of new evidence that Stephen had been able to procure, but on the basis of the ancient evidence that they knew in their hearts and they knew in their bones and they'd known all their life, as so many church people have known that.

And then this most poignant line from chapter 7, which comes just at the end, and it says, while they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him, the witnesses, those who had accused him, no longer were prepared to argue their case except with stones.

And the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. And that's the young man who turned the world upside down.

[ 34 : 22 ] That's the young man whose heart was at this moment uncircumcised. It wasn't broken. Whose ears were deaf to the thing that he knew as well as Stephen knew, and whose back was as straight as a ramrod because he would not bow.

And there he was. And that's why in a sense I'd like to have a word for the arrogant intellectual among you whose hearts are not broken, whose ears are deaf, and who will bow to nobody. Read this story and consider that the basis of your condemnation as you stand in condemnation of Jesus Christ.

The basis of your condemnation is not that he's going to look up some secret thing about you and bring you under judgment for it.

The evidence he's going to draw on is the evidence of your own heart confirmed by the scriptures. And in that way he will bring you under just condemnation because of your uncircumcised heart, your deaf ears, and your inability to bow.

[ 36 : 09 ] But remember as you face that condemnation which is yours because you choose to condemn the Christ of God, when you face that, the one whom you condemn is the one who says for you, Lord, do not hold their sins against them.

It's amazing, isn't it? And I just, I mean, I am so aware that you as a congregation have such sophistication and have such intelligence and have such understanding, such wisdom, and yet you, you may not yet have understood.

You may be standing on the fringe as the young man saw, stood on the fringe and heard Stephen. and when Stephen died, Paul in effect came to life and shortly afterwards was broken and blinded and led into the faith and obedience of Jesus Christ so that you were you and I to stand up.

we would say, there's Abraham, there's Joseph, there's Moses, there's David, there's Solomon, there's the prophets, there's Jesus, and there's Paul.

[ 38 : 22 ] And he speaks to the heart. That testimony is to be born to the heart of our world, that our world may hear and believe, and that happens after you have heard and believed.

Amen.