

The God who isn't confined by us

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[0 : 00] I'm quite nervous about this passage because it's quite difficult. I think there are two or three ways you could take this passage. But also by the end of the passage, the preacher was stoned to death.

So I'm going to pray. Breathe on us, O breath of God, by your spirit and through your word.

Father, please help me to be faithful and clear and engaging in that order. And please give us ears to hear and hearts that would listen.

Please use this sermon to inch us closer to become more like Jesus. We ask it in his name. Amen. This past fortnight, I conducted a funeral for a non-Christian family.

And they wanted the service in the old chapel over there. But they said to me, we don't want it too religious, though. They didn't want the Bible or the hymns or the prayers, but they loved the holy looking buildings.

[1 : 04] And so let me ask you, please turn to your neighbor. What is the holiest place you've ever been in? Over to you. What is the holiest place you've ever been in? All right. Are we able to do...

Are we able to... Yeah, Andrew's not here. We can do this. Let's pretend we're not grownups for a second. And call out, what are the holiest places you've ever been in? Just shout out. God's presence.

Gold star, Barry. Well done. Any other buildings people have been in? St. Paul's? Oh, Canterbury Cathedral. Oh, pretty good for Anglicans. Great.

Great. Well, earlier this year, I toured around Israel. So I think that means I take the cake. And in Israel, when you go to Israel, there are religious pilgrims from all over the world.

You see, they think they might be closer to God in the holy lands. At the temple in Jerusalem, I think the most holy place in the world, people write their prayers on bits of paper and literally stuff it into the cracks of the wailing wall.

[2 : 06] You see, perhaps their prayers will be answered if they're literally part of that holy place. You see, that's what holy places are all about.

A place to experience God's power and presence and pardon. Last week was Synod, which is the Anglican General Council meeting.

And the hottest issue we debated was about the New Zealand Twelve. They're not a rugby team. But they're a group of 12 churches who had to break away from their Anglican diocese over there because their diocese now permits a blessing on same-sex unions.

And so now these 12 parishes are homeless. They've been evicted from their buildings. Can they still experience God's power and presence and pardon without their holy places?

For us here, how likely is it that one day we're part of the Melbourne Twelve? What would happen to our experience of God if we were evicted from these buildings?

- [3 : 12] This passage is a trial about holy places. Defending himself in one corner is Stephen, who, chapter 6, verse 8, says, a man full of God's grace and power.
- His accusers on the other side are verse 12. The people and the elders and the teachers of the law. The whole Jewish Sanhedrin. You see, the Sanhedrin were the authority on holy places.
- They held the keys to God's temple in Jerusalem. In the ancient world, if you wanted to experience God's glory, the temple was the place. But then along comes this new Christian religion.
- And these apostles who keep proclaiming Jesus. And as they preach, God's power abounds with signs and wonders.
- His presence is poured out as the spirit is poured out. And they receive pardon because they preach Jesus' death and resurrection. Chapter 6, verse 7, the start of our reading, it summarizes Christianity so far.
- [4 : 18] Please have a look. 6, verse 7. So the word of God spread. And the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly. And a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.
- You see, Christianity has now reached all of Jerusalem. That is stage 1. Please, could I have a slide on the screen? So this is Acts, chapter 1, verse 8.
- It's the plot of the whole book. And you can see that stage 1 in orange is Jerusalem. Well, stage 1 has been achieved. Judea and Samaria are stage 2.
- And if you turn your page over to the end of our reading, to where Gwyneth read, to look over to chapter 8, verse 1. Judea and Samaria come into view.
- 8, verse 1. On that day, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem. Stage 1. And all except the apostles were scattered throughout. Stage 2. Judea and Samaria.
- [5 : 15] You see, we begin in Jerusalem, but end in Judea and Samaria, which sounds fine to us. Let's go. Stage 1, stage 2. No worries. But for the Sanhedrin, it was outrageous to suggest that God could operate outside their temple.
- Outrageous to suggest that pagan Samaritans could experience him as well. And so between stage 1 and stage 2, the author includes this trial or this lesson about holy places to redefine where and how we think God is allowed to operate.
- And so you should have a handout there, which should be really helpful to you. And please keep your Bibles open. I can't cover all the verses, but I'm just going to highlight the main points. But you'll need to keep your Bibles open.
- So go back to chapter 7. In chapter 7, what Stephen does is he takes these Bible experts on a tour through the Old Testament.
- And instead of a sort of softly, softly approach, he's on trial for his life. Instead of softly, softly, Stephen basically denounces their whole temple system. So 7 verse 2.
- [6 : 27] So this he replied, brothers and fathers, listen to me. You see, even from the time of Abraham, God's glory was already appearing way outside Jerusalem.
- Please, Kirin, there's a map on the screen. Next one. So on your very right-hand side, the start of that red arrow is where Mesopotamia was.
- You can see it's sort of near Iran and Iraq today, way outside Jerusalem. Verse 4 says Abraham settled in Haran, which is the sort of northern peak at northern Syria.
- Again, way outside Jerusalem. Thanks, Kirin. That's fine. Have a look at verse 5. It says that Abraham won't even be able to set his foot on the promised land.
- Verse 6 says even his descendants will have to wait 400 years to take possession. And so God shows them his commitment. In verse 8, he gives them the covenant of circumcision.

[7 : 37] Stephen's point is this. Way before there was a place, God had pledged himself to a people. He was appearing and speaking and sending and promising and protecting a people for centuries before there was a Jerusalem or a temple within it.

We're going to skip to Moses. Look at chapter 7, verse 21. When Moses was placed outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him in and brought him up as her own son.

Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action. See, it's obvious that even in Egypt, God was watching over him. Look at verse 30.

After 40 years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush. Where? In the desert near Mount Sinai. That's in Arabia. Again, outside of Israel.

Please turn the page to verse 33. Then the Lord said to him, take off your sandals for the place where you are standing is holy ground.

[8 : 44] The point is, holy places are defined not by buildings, but by wherever God is. And the reason is verse 48. 7 verse 48.

However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says, heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord?

Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things? You see, Stephen is showing these Bible experts passages they cannot disagree with.

To change their idea about holy places. How can God be contained to one country or a building within it? Verse 50. Has not my hand made all these things?

A God who is limited to Jerusalem. A God who is not allowed to advance to Judea and Samaria. He can't be the God of the whole earth, can he? When I was at the River Jordan this year, what they have is busloads of Christians from all over the world.

[9 : 52] Coming to re-baptize themselves. See, they think getting dunked in a dirty river where Jesus was, a really holy place. That must be superior to the baptism they had when they were babies in their home churches.

It's quite laughable when you see it. But for us, I think there's a similar application. Do you feel less able to experience God away from this building?

What about when you're away on holidays or perhaps you're sick for a little while? Do you think we could experience God's power and presence and pardon if we went to the old, you know, Bluestone building more than this sort of modern one?

Am I the only one who feels only 90% Christian out there until we come into this building, we say the confession and Andrew does the, you know, the sort of the absolution and I feel 100% Christian again?

Am I the only one? You see, in Acts, the Spirit has been poured out. He unshackles God's operations from a building or a place to a proclamation.

[11 : 01] That's what we see amongst these first churches. Wherever the word of Jesus is spread and preached, people experience the power and the presence and the pardon of God.

This lesson about holy places, it's really encouraging for us. But underneath, I think, is something with more teeth. Because underneath, I think, this passage, there's also a warning.

And this is point two. You see, on the surface, the Jews were furious with Stephen. But underneath, they're outraged at God.

How dare he operate outside the boxes we put him in? So on the surface, it's Temple versus Stephen. But actually, it's Temple versus God. They seize Stephen.

But really, they've got God in the dock. And the author shows us this in many ways. So can you please turn to chapter 6, verse 8? A little bit of flicking here.

- [12 : 00] Chapter 6, verse 8. It says that Stephen is a man full of God's grace and power, that he performed great signs and wonders.
- Verse 10. It says he's full of the Spirit's wisdom. Clearly, God is there in the dock with him.
- Verse 15. Look down at verse 15.
- Verse 15 says something peculiar. It says Stephen's face was like that of an angel. Now, this has nothing to do with pretty eyes or good bone structure. But this is a reference to Moses.
- You see, when Moses was given God's word, his face had a heavenly glow. Now Stephen is on trial. His face is also shining in the same way.
- He, too, is speaking God's words. I wonder if you noticed when Gwyneth read that Stephen and Jesus' trial happened exactly the same way. So both Stephen and Jesus were tried by the Sanhedrin.
- [12 : 58] Both had false witnesses produced. Both were charged with undoing the temple and the law of Moses. Both were given the death penalty outside the city. And both Jesus and Stephen died asking for forgiveness for their enemies.
- You see, the Sanhedrin have seized Stephen. But really, it's God or Jesus in the dock. The reason why? Because he dared to operate outside the box they put him in.
- For them, their box was all about places. But for us, maybe, maybe we, too, put God in a box. Perhaps we limit how God is able to act in our lives.
- And if he dares operate outside our box, we, too, put him on trial. See, perhaps we treat God like a genie who's only allowed to operate in a box of, like, three wishes and sort of blessings.
- When tragedy strikes, or perhaps he doesn't answer our prayers the way we want. How dare he have other plans? What a naughty genie. Perhaps we put God's word in a box of sort of positive reinforcement.
- [14 : 11] A passage is about sin and judgment and relationships, sexuality, that sort of difficult stuff. How dare he jump outside of our pocket? For the Sanhedrin, their box was about place.
- Maybe our box is about race. Maybe we limit who we think God is for. The people who walk and talk and look like us. But a different race, a different class, a different political persuasion.
- Our enemies. How dare he operate amongst them? Here's an interesting one. Perhaps we put God in a box of church denomination or church worship style.
- So other churches out there with a huge music production and charismatic gifts. Or the other end of the spectrum, high Anglican churches with all the bells and the smells and the robes.
- Or churches down the road whose Bible teaching isn't as top notch as ours. How dare he operate outside our little box here? Acts is the story about how his work is not only outside a temple, but in the next few weeks, how he dares to operate outside or advance in Judea and Samaria and eventually to the ends of the earth.
- [15 : 28] The Sanhedrin need to learn this lesson because they love their holy places. They hate it when God operates outside the box. But Stephen's point is that when it's God versus the box you put him in, you choose God.
- So Abraham, when God told him to leave the comfort of his home, he went. Moses, when God said, take on Pharaoh and risk your personal safety, he did it.
- But Stephen, when God leads him by the spirit, he speaks, even though later they bounce rocks off him in the car park. The point is when it's God versus comfort or God versus safety or God versus anything, any box we put him in, Stephen says you choose God.

The poor old Sanhedrin, when it was God versus temple, they chose temple. Because God mattered less to them than their holy places.

And our passage ends with a strong warning to people who put God in a box. This is point three. Chapter seven, verse 51. Please look at that.

[16 : 40] Chapter seven, verse 51. You stiff-necked people, your hearts are still uncircumcised. A stiff-necked, that was from our Old Testament reading, which Guy Emanuel brought to us.

It was God's insult to Israel at the golden calf. Remember? Right before he's about to consume them in the wilderness. You see, the Sanhedrin chose their golden temple just like their ancestors chose the golden calf.

Verse 51. You are just like your ancestors. You always resist the spirit. Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? And verse 54.

They prove him right. They were furious. They gnashed their teeth at him. Gnashing teeth. That's what people do when they find themselves outside of God's holy place, outside of his kingdom.

So here's a people all about holy places. But Stephen's warning is they're heading to the unholy of places. What Jesus calls the outer darkness in Luke 13.

[17 : 44] Where there'll be weeping and gnashing of teeth. These are strong warnings and the Jews are furious. But what really sends them over the edge is verse 55.

Please look at 7 verse 55. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God. You see, the glory of God is what holy places are all about.

But his glory is no longer in the temple. Where does Stephen see it? In heaven, where it belongs. He says he sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

The right hand man. That's where your power and your ability and your authority are. Stephen says, look, verse 56. I see heaven open and the son of man standing at the right hand of God.

The son of man is God's supreme ruler from Daniel 7. But who is it? Stephen looks into heaven and says, look, I see Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

[18 : 48] So now, if you want God's power, there's Jesus at the right hand of God. You want his presence, heaven is open. He's poured out his spirit on the world.

If you want God's pardon, Jesus rules over sin and death. He intercedes for us at God's right hand. We talked about being evicted from holy buildings.

But Stephen is effectively evicting them from their holy building. His vision basically makes the temple redundant. And this sends them over the edge.

Verse 57. At this, they covered their ears and yelling at the top of their voices. They all rushed at him and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. You see, in a decision of God versus temple, they chose temple.

They've already killed Jesus a few months earlier. And here again, like an angry mob, they drag his friend Stephen outside the city to kill him again. It's a very gruesome picture of what people do when they try to remove God from their lives.

[19 : 54] Because he won't conform to the boxes that we put him in. The irony, of course, in these warnings is that God will remove them from his life.

So that's what all the warnings. So I put them on your handout. So exile in Babylon, verse 43. Being stiff-necked, gnashing teeth. Jesus ruling in heaven. They're all God's warnings that he will one day remove them from his presence.

It's very sobering stuff. But what I want to do is finish with an encouragement about holy places. An encouragement about our buildings here. So our buildings here are terrific.

We should be really thankful for them. It's right that we spend money to maintain them. This place has enabled Christians to hear about Jesus for 150 years. Long may it continue.

And sure, we can experience God differently on a Sunday. So in the Lord's Supper, in the sermon, in the creeds. But that's not because of the place. Remember, God has pledged himself to the people.

[20 : 59] It's wherever we gather. Maybe one day we might have to break fellowship from the Melbourne diocese, like the New Zealand Twelve. If they ever evict us from these holy buildings, we need to know that holy places aren't defined by bricks and mortar.

But wherever the people proclaim Jesus. How will we experience God's power? Jesus. His presence? It's Jesus.

His pardon? It's Jesus. Do we need a holy place? No. God is not limited or confined to our four walls. And that is great news.

Because if we ever have to meet in a dingy old hall, if we ever have to meet down at Ruffy Lake Park, or in Cram into someone's living room, or if we ever have to meet at the back of McDonald's, God forbid, as long as we keep proclaiming Jesus, we can still experience God's glory.

7 verse 48 says, However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool.

[22 : 12] What kind of house will you build for me? Where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things? Let's pray.

Our Father God, we praise you, the Lord of heaven and earth. We praise that you and Jesus are not limited by four walls, that you won't fit into the boxes that we might want to put you in.

And we thank you, Father, that even if worse came to worse, and they evicted us from these buildings, that we can still fully experience your power and your presence and your pardon.

And thank you that all of your glory is found in this message of Jesus. Long would it continue in this place. In his name and for your glory. Amen.