

Stephen's Speech Part 3

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Date: 05 July 1998

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[0 : 0 0] This is the AM service on July the 5th, 1998. The preacher is Phil Merlman.

His sermon is entitled Stephen's Speech, Part 3 and is from Acts, Chapter 7, Verses 44 to Chapter 8, Verse 3.

You may like to open your Bibles to Acts, Chapter 7, the passage which we just have seen read and watched on the video. It's on page 891.

Let's bow our heads and pray. Our Heavenly Father, I thank you that your word has been given to us and we thank you, Lord, that we can believe it and please help us to understand it more fully.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Have you ever had to defend what you believe about life? Have you ever felt so enraged about the way someone speaks against something that you passionately believe in that you have defended it?

[1 : 1 7] When I became a Christian in my early years of high school, there came the time in science when we were being taught about evolution. Now I wasn't opposed to hearing about the theory of evolution but I was deeply opposed at the way my teacher taught it.

He taught it as fact and not as theory. He had no belief in God and therefore the Bible was irrelevant to him. God for my science teacher was too incomprehensible.

Science for him proved that there was no God. Well, I defended what I believed about Christianity and suggested that it was not right for him to teach what he was teaching as fact when, after all, it is only a theory.

And this led to a debate in class and ensued in the class that asked the question of whether evolution is fact or theory and whether indeed Christianity is fact or theory.

It was a lively time and we were young and possibly stupid, I guess, but the point was made and the point was well made that evolution was a theory and it should be taught as such.

[2 : 3 6] And evolution was a theory among other theories and it was not fact. Well, in the same way that I defended the Christian faith, we have seen over the past two weeks how this guy named Stephen has defended his own position as a follower of Jesus Christ to those around him who perhaps should have known better.

Stephen taught from the scripture, the Bible, to the leaders of the Jewish people proving that God is not confined to one particular place. And he also taught how God has been active in the world through his people and how he has given his people a law designed to draw others to him as well as helping people to live in harmony.

Well, I want to ask a question and that is, why does Stephen give such a long speech here in chapter 7? We've only read it, just the last portion of it this morning, but it's quite a long chapter.

Why does he give this speech here in chapter 7? Well, like any human being, if we know something is wrong, I think that we will stand up and defend it if you are passionate about it.

Last year, there was the overturning of the euthanasia bill in the Northern Territory. Now, whilst that whole debate is a complex argument, as Christians, we know that life is not something we have the final authority over, don't we?

[4 : 06] But there are many people who think that we should have the final say over life. Well, in the same way, Stephen here is challenging the Jewish leaders and reminding them that they are not the final arbiter on life.

Although our earthly life comes to an end, we all know that, there is the spiritual dimension to it that we need to consider. And no one but God can do anything about that.

For Stephen, then, the most important thing for him is his relationship with God, and that is testifying about the Lord Jesus Christ and not what others think about him.

The important thing is testifying about the Lord Jesus Christ and not what others think of him. We learn from this passage here this morning that this commitment to Christ comes at a great cost.

Stephen dies for his faith. Well, what is it, then, that gives him such a confidence about God that he is prepared to die for? One of the first things that we see in this passage is that Stephen has a healthy perspective of God.

[5 : 24] A big part of Stephen's speech is to tell his audience that God can't be kept in one place. Stephen, therefore, seems to have a sense of the majesty of God, if you like.

The Jewish leaders, no doubt, also had a sense of the majesty of God, but only to the point that it suited their traditions or customs. For them, for the Jewish leaders of that time, God was in the temple and he only lived there.

He only lived in the temple. So often, we too limit God in the things that we do. We tend to put God in a box.

For example, we may do God on Sunday or whenever it is that we come to church and we ignore him the rest of the time. But is that really having a sense of the majesty of God?

No, it's not. It's making a God which is convenient for us. It's making for ourselves a God which is good to come to whenever we want.

[6 : 30] But Stephen's sense of the majesty of God is seen as he quotes scripture here to describe what he knows about God and his majesty. In verses 48 to 50, we see what he says.

he quotes from the Old Testament scriptures and he says to his audience in verse 48, Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands.

As the prophet says, and he quotes from Isaiah, Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord?

Or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hands make all these things? The prophet Isaiah in these verses is reminding Israel that all creation is the temple that God himself had made.

For Stephen, God is not only found in that temple. God is the creator. God can be worshipped for Stephen anywhere and at any time.

[7 : 41] So if God is the creator of all creation of which the earth is a footstool, then how are we able to enter into a relationship with him? One of the benefits for the nation of Israel was that they had Moses as one of their leaders who led them out of slavery in Egypt long before Jesus was born.

And God spoke through Moses and gave him wisdom in all sorts of situations. God gave to Moses the Ten Commandments and the law for his people to follow as well. Sadly, despite all the blessings, and God gave many blessings to the nation of Israel, despite all those blessings, Israel, the nation, still turned away from him and placed their trust in other things.

For example, God marked out his people by the physical act of circumcision upon the male population. For many people, they thought that the physical act of circumcision and the fact that they were the ones who were given the law from God was what made them God's people to a point they were perhaps right.

but Stephen points out that though they had this physical act of circumcision, they had, as in verse 51 says, they had uncircumcised hearts and ears.

In other words, they were acting like the uncircumcised pagans, like the other nations around them. And although they had the law as well, they were the ones who were given the law, they didn't obey it.

[9 : 21] But they weren't, Israel wasn't being a godly people. They were being a sinful people. And in fact, they were no different to the other nations around them.

One of the things that Israel, the nation, was meant to be was a light to the nations. They were meant to be a flickering light or something that shines in the darkness.

And we can read about those sorts of things in the Gospels. Their actions, Israel's actions were meant to draw people to God. Instead, they tried to be in many ways like the people around them.

Whenever the prophets in Israel's history tried to warn the people about their sinfulness, the prophet of that time would be persecuted or killed.

Now there was a well-established tradition in Judaism that the Jewish people had been responsible for the deaths of the prophets. Stephen, in this passage, now takes up this tradition and he repeats it here.

[10 : 28] And we look at verses 52 to 53 and in here we see he makes it more specific. The prophets in question were those who had prophesied the coming of the righteous one or the innocent one.

And Stephen, of course, is referring here to Jesus as the righteous or the innocent one. if the Jews of the olden time had shown their opposition to God by slaying the prophets, those of Stephen's own time, the people that Stephen is speaking to right now, had gone to the limit in handing over Jesus, the righteous one, and murdered him.

Well, it's plain they had murdered him. It is plain that Israel has not kept the law here. For one of the commandments in the Ten Commandments, the Sixth Commandment I think it is, do not commit murder.

Israel has just gone and murdered Jesus. They have ignored who he is. And Jesus is the righteous one. Well, it seems that having the law and the temple as part of their tradition or as part of our tradition is not enough to make us right with God.

The reason being is that even with them, even with the law and with the temple, we are still sinful. We each make mistakes.

[11 : 56] We let others down and more importantly, we let God down. We fall short of his standard. And that's sin. And friends, God hates sin.

He detests it. And God is sad when we don't honour him in the way that he asks of us. He asks us to put him first in our lives and not to worship other gods and so on.

For the Jews, the temple was important and the law was important and they were the most important things and God somehow fitted in amongst it.

Similarly, for us today, the God of the creation is put on the shelf by many people so that they can pursue their own interests or gods. It might be sport, music, family, sexual pursuits, work, study, travel, and so on.

The list can go on and on. Well, those pursuits are fine if that's all there is to life. If that is all there is to this life, then go for it.

[13 : 07] But like Stephen, I believe that there is more to life than just this earthly existence. And for Stephen, that is worth dying for.

Stephen is prepared to die for the God of creation rather than turn his back on God. Stephen's relationship with God can be further understood by looking at verse 55 and the ensuing verses.

Stephen, in a vision, is looking to the heavens and he sees Jesus standing at God's right side. He sees Jesus standing at God's right hand side.

And Stephen is sure that he has a place in heaven because of the work that Jesus has done for him. Stephen's entry to God's kingdom wasn't via the temple or by being a God's law or by the good things that he has done.

It was by trusting in Jesus, the Son of God who died on the cross. And he didn't just die on the cross, he rose again from the dead for the sins of those who put his trust in him.

[14 : 18] Well, while we have that terrible scene going on of Stephen being stoned and he's been stoned to death by human beings, by people who have the law and the temple and they think that's what makes them right with God, while he's been stoned and it's a pretty ugly scene, we also have in the same scene this beautiful image of the dying Stephen welcomed, being welcomed into the presence of Jesus, Jesus standing at the right hand of God and welcoming him into the kingdom.

The implication is that as Jesus was raised from the dead, so too will his followers be raised from the dead. Though Stephen's physical life has ended, his life with God continues on and on into eternity.

He was so certain of eternity with God through Jesus Christ that he was prepared to testify about Jesus Christ despite of the consequences.

Friends, that's certainty, isn't it? And we too can be certain about eternal life like Stephen in this day and age. When things are so uncertain around us, there is nothing like having an assurance about the future.

With the way our society is changing, it's actually hard to believe that there is any certainty available at all. Well, in this world I suspect that might be right.

[16 : 02] But God in his love for us has made it possible for us to have an assurance about an eternal future with him, with God. And all we have to do is put our trust into the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

We don't have to be in a special place or follow some special law. Jesus forgives us for the things which we do wrong. And he continues to forgive us in all matters if we truly turn to him.

The way is made open for us to pray to God through Jesus about any matter at all. And indeed, that's what God wants us to do. Whether we are feeling good, whether we're feeling bad, whether we're feeling indifferent, as Christians, we have an open line to God whenever the need arises through Jesus Christ.

There are two challenges here for us. The first challenge goes to us, for us as Christians. And that is that as Christians, we ought not to become complacent about our faith.

We need to be prepared, as Stephen was, to testify to Jesus Christ no matter how dangerous the situation may be. Are we prepared to do that?

[17 : 27] Do we ask God that we might be able to do that? Does our prayer life reflect this for ourselves and those who we know that are Christians, where it is unsafe to be a Christian?

Do we pray for our Christian missionaries overseas in dangerous places? And secondly, the second challenge goes to those of us who are not Christians.

And that is to ask God to have an assurance about a future, about an eternity with God, and to ask God for forgiveness, for not living as God has intended us to live, and to commit ourselves to following and serving Jesus Christ as Lord.

If you do that, then you can be assured that God forgives you through Jesus Christ and that there is a glorious future for all who turn to him.

When we become Christians, the rewards start here now on earth, and they continue on into eternity. Let's pray. Amen. Heavenly Father, we thank you that your Bible teaches us about how to live.

[18 : 51] And Lord, we pray that as Christians that we would be faithful to you and that we would be prepared, if the need arises, to testify for our faith, about our faith and the hope that we have in you in any situation.

Lord, we thank you that your Holy Spirit strengthens each one of us when we are placed in difficult situations. And Father, we pray that we would not be complacent about that faith.

And Lord, we pray for anyone here who is not a Christian, that they might turn to you and that they can realize that there is a future and an eternity with you.

And Lord, that by turning to you and putting their trust in Jesus Christ, that that hope is realized. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.