

The God who isn't confined by us

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[0 : 0 0] I'm quite nervous about this passage because I think there are legitimately two or three different ways to take it. But also, at the end of the passage, the preacher is stoned to death.

So I'm going to pray. Father God, thank you for your word. Please help me to be faithful and clear and engaging in that order. And please, Father, would you give us ears that would listen and hearts that would obey.

We ask it for Jesus' namesake. 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. So they didn't want the Bible or the hymns or the prayers. But they loved the holy-looking building.

And so, if I can ask you, what is the holiest place you've ever been? So in twos or threes, wherever you're sitting, what is the holiest place you've ever been to? Over to you.

[1 : 0 1] Can I just interrupt you there? I don't think I've given you 30 seconds. Just interrupt. Are we able to... We can call out the answers.

Let's forget the fact that we're grown-ups. What's some of the holiest places you've ever been? Just shout them out. Ellis Park. Is that a rugby field? He's South African. He's so happy.

He won the World Cup yesterday. There's another one. They're everywhere. Anyone else? What holy places have you been to? Jerusalem. Pretty good.

Backyard. Backyard. Well done. Anyone else? St. Barbara's Church in Spain. Yeah, great. Excellent.

Good. That's a good question over coffee later. What is the holiest place you've ever been to? Well, earlier this year, I went around Israel, just like Andrew shouted out, and there were religious pilgrims from all over the world.

[2 : 0 0] You see, they thought they'd be closer to God if they went to the holy lands. At the temple in Jerusalem, arguably the holiest site in the world, people write prayers on bits of paper and literally stuff them into the cracks of the walls of the wailing wall of the temple.

You see, perhaps their prayers will be answered more or heard better by God if they're literally part of that building. You see, that's what holy places are all about, a place to experience the power and the presence and the pardon of God.

Last week at Synod, which is the Anglican General Council meeting, 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 because it now approves of the blessing of same-sex unions.

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

And what about us here in Melbourne? How likely is it that one day we will be part of the Melbourne Twelve? Can we still experience God's blessings and things if we're evicted from our buildings?

[3 : 25] See, this passage is a trial about holy places. Defending himself in one corner is Stephen, who, if you turn back to chapter 6, verse 8, says, is a man full of God's grace and power.

His accusers are, verse 12, the people and the elders and the teachers of the law, the whole Jewish Sanhedrin. You see, the Sanhedrin, they 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 blessings or God's glory, the temple was the place.

But then along comes these new Christians, this new religion, and these apostles who keep proclaiming this word about Jesus. And everywhere they go is God's power with signs and wonders.

There's God's presence as the Holy Spirit is poured out on people. And they offer pardon because of Jesus' death and resurrection.

[4 : 27] Chapter 6, verse 7, that's the beginning of our reading. That summarizes the Christian movement so far. It says, So the word of God spread. 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. And Jerusalem is stage one. So please, Ryan, can I have a slide on the screen?

You can see that this is Acts chapter 1, verse 8, which is the plot of the whole book. And you can see in orange, Jerusalem is stage one. Judea and Samaria are stage two.

And Judea and Samaria, they come into view at the very end of our reading, which Olive gave us. So can you just turn one page over to chapter 8, verse 1?

On that day, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, stage one. And all except the apostles were scattered throughout stage two, Judea and Samaria.

[5 : 30] You see, we begin in Jerusalem and end in Judea and Samaria, which sounds fine to us. Just let the gospel go. No worries. But if you were a Sanhedrin, this would be outrageous.

It's outrageous to suggest God is allowed to operate outside the temple. Outrageous to suggest that filthy Samaritans can experience him as well. And so between stage one and stage two is this passage today.

A lesson about holy places. Stephen is redefining where and how God is allowed to operate. And so please, there's your handout there, which will be really helpful to you.

And if you keep your Bibles open, I'll lead us through. We can't cover all the verses. It's quite a lot. But I'm just going to pick out the main ideas. So just turn to chapter 7. Turn back a page.

Chapter 7. And what Stephen does in chapter 7 is he takes these Bible experts on a tour of the Old Testament.

[6 : 34] And instead of a sort of softly, softly approach Stephen's on trial for his life, instead of softly, softly, he basically denounces their whole temple system.

So verse 2. To this he replied, Brothers and fathers, listen to me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran.

Leave your country and your people, God said, and go to the land I will show you. You see, even from the time of Abraham, God's glory was appearing way outside Jerusalem.

Ryan, can I have a map, please, on the screen? So this is just the ancient world. See, the red line follows Abraham's journey. And on your right-hand side, the beginning of the red line, that's Mesopotamia.

It's near Iran and Iraq today. You see, God's glory was appearing there, miles away from Jerusalem. Verse 4 says that Abraham settled in Haran, which is the very northern peak of that red line.

[7 : 37] Again, that's sort of northern Syria and Turkey today. Again, miles away from Jerusalem. Thanks, Ryan. Verse 5 says Abraham won't even be able to set his foot in the promised land.

Verse 6 says even his descendants will have to wait 400 years to take possession. And so God shows him their commitment. In verse 8, he gives them the covenant of circumcision.

Stephen's point is this. Way before there was a holy place, God pledged himself to a people. God was speaking and appearing and rescuing and promising and protecting a people centuries before there was a Jerusalem or even before there was a temple within it.

We're going to skip to Moses. First, chapter 7, verse 21. This is famous stuff about Moses. When he was placed outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him 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. It's obvious that God's hand is watching over him, even in Egypt. Again, miles away from Jerusalem.

[8 : 50] Verse 30, chapter 7. After 40 years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. Mount Sinai is in Arabia.

Again, miles away from Jerusalem. Over the page, verse 33. This is one of the keys. Then the Lord said to him, take off your sandals for the place where you are standing on is holy ground.

The point is this. Holy places aren't defined by buildings, but wherever God is. And the reason why is verse 48.

Famous passage again. 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. Where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?

[9 : 53] You see, Stephen is showing these Bible experts passages they can't 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 can be limited to Jerusalem. A God who's not allowed to advance to Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria.

How can he be the God of the whole world? When I was at the River Jordan earlier this year, what happens when you get there is busloads of Christians turn up.

Hundreds of Christians turn up and they re-baptize themselves in the filthy water. You see, they think, and you see, they're grabbing their children and throwing their children in the river. They're like, get off me, Dad.

And they're dunking their children in. They think that getting dunked where Jesus was is somehow superior to the baptisms they had as babies in their home countries.

[10 : 55] And for us, there is a similar application. Here it is. Do you feel less able to experience God away from this building?

What about when you're away on holidays or perhaps sick for a few weeks? Another one. Do you think we can experience God's power and presence and pardon better in the blue stone, you know, the beautiful stained glass window at the back there than in this modern building?

Am I the only one who feels sort of 90% Christian out there until I walk in the building and I say the confession and the priest says his, you know, his thing and I feel, oh, 100% again.

Am I the only one? Glenn was talking about the taste and see that's coming up at St. John's in Blackburn. Some of you are thinking about going there. That's next Sunday. Do turn up there.

Don't turn up here. Did you know that the English congregation at St. John's, they meet in a hall, not the formal church building? Are they less able to experience God's glory because they're in a hall?

[12 : 03] You see, in Acts, the Holy Spirit has been poured out. He sort of unshackles God from a building or from a place to a proclamation.

That's what we see amongst these first churches. Everywhere the word about Jesus goes, we see God's power and God's presence and God's pardon.

This lesson about holy places is a really encouraging one for us. But actually, underneath, I think there is something with much more teeth because I think this passage is also a warning.

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

How dare he operate outside the box that we put him in? On the surface, it's temple versus Stephen, but underneath, it's temple versus God.

[13 : 02] They see Stephen, but really, it's God who is on trial. And the author shows us this in many ways. So turn back, can you, to chapter 6, verse 8?

Chapter 6, verse 8. It says, Stephen is full of God's grace and power, that he performed signs and great wonders among the people.

Verse 10 says, he's full of the Spirit's wisdom. See, clearly, God is there in the dock with Stephen. Verse 15, it says a really peculiar thing.

It says that Stephen's face was like that of an angel. This is not about pretty eyes and good bone structure. What it is, is a reference to Moses. You see, when Moses was given God's word from Mount Sinai, God gave him a heavenly glow on his face.

And now Stephen is shining, or his face is sort of shiny as well. He, too, is about to speak God's words. Did you notice all the parallels between Stephen's death and Jesus' death?

[14 : 12] So both of them were tried in exactly the same way. Both tried by the Sanhedrin. Both had false witnesses against them. Both were charged with undermining the temple and the law of Moses.

Both were given their death penalty outside the city. And both men died asking for forgiveness for their enemies. You see, the Sanhedrin have seized Stephen, but really they've got God or Jesus in the dock.

Why? Because he dared to operate outside the box they put him in. For them, their box was about place and geography.

But here's the thing. For us, perhaps, perhaps, we might put God in a box as well. Perhaps we limit how God is allowed to act in our lives.

And if he dares operate outside that, we, too, put God on trial and try and kill him off in our lives. See, perhaps we treat God like a genie.

- [15 : 14] You know, he's only allowed to operate in a box of blessings and prosperity. When tragedy strikes, maybe he doesn't answer our prayers as we like.
- We put him on trial. How dare he? What a naughty genie. Perhaps we put God's word in a box. A box of sort of positive reinforcement.
- Tough passages about sin and judgment and sexuality and relationships. How dare he jump out of my pocket? For the Sanhedrin, their box was about place.
- But maybe our box is about race. Maybe we limit who we think God is for. You know, just 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 act for them?
- [16 : 12] This is a really interesting one. Perhaps we put God in a box of church denomination or worship style. So, churches over there with huge music production or charismatic gifts.
- The other end of the spectrum. High Anglican churches, you know, with all the robes and the bells and the smells. Or churches down the road whose Bible teaching isn't as top-notch as ours. How dare he operate outside our four walls.
- The boxes that we have for him. See, Acts is the story about his work not only outside the temple. But in the coming weeks, he's going to advance into Judea and filthy Samaria.
- And eventually, he's going to get to the ends of the earth. The Sanhedrin need to learn this lesson about holy places. Because they love their buildings. They hate it when God operates outside the box that they confine him to.
- But here is Stephen's point. When it is God versus the box you put him in, Stephen says you choose God. So, Abraham, when God told him to leave the comfort of his home, he went.
- [17 : 26] For Moses, when God told him to risk his personal safety to take on Pharaoh, he did it. For Stephen, when God leads him to boldly speak, even though they later bounce rocks off him, he did it.
- The point is, when it's God versus comfort or God versus safety or God versus anything you could name, whatever box you put God in, Stephen says you choose God.
- Our old friends, the Sanhedrin, when it was God versus temple, they showed that he mattered less. Because how dare he operate outside their holy places.
- And our passage ends with a warning to people who put God in a box. Strong stuff. This is point three. Can you look at chapter 7, verse 51, which is over the page.
- This is where Olive picked up the reading again. Chapter 7, verse 51. Stephen says, in his defense, Stiff-necked, that was from Cynthia's reading she gave us from the Old Testament.
- [18 : 39] What it is, stiff-necked is God's insult at Israel in the wilderness right before he consumes them. You see, the Sanhedrin chose their golden temple the way Israel, or stiff-necked Israel, chose their golden calf.
- In that famous incident, stiff-necked. Verse 51. You are just like your ancestors, he says. You always resist the Holy Spirit. Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute?
- And in verse 54, they prove him right. They were furious and they gnashed their teeth. Gnashing teeth. That sounds funny. But gnashing teeth is what people do when they find themselves outside God's kingdom.
- You see, here are 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.

Where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Famous passage. These are strong warnings. And the Jews are furious. But what really sends them over the edge is what comes next.

[19 : 52] 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, that's what holy places are all about.

But God's glory is no longer in their box, in their temple. Where is it? It's where it belongs, in heaven. Stephen says he sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

What is the right hand man? That's where your power or your ability and where your authority is. He says, verse 56, look, I see heaven open and the son of man standing where?

At the right hand of God. The son of man, that's from Daniel 7. The son of man is God's supreme ruler over all things. But who is he? Stephen looks into heaven as it's open.

He says, I see Jesus standing at the right hand of God, the son of man. And so now, now, if you want God's power, there is Jesus at God's right hand.

[20 : 54] If you want God's presence, he has opened heaven and poured out his spirit. If you want God's pardon, Jesus rules over sin and death and intercedes for us at the right hand of God.

We talked about being evicted from holy buildings, but Stephen is effectively evicting them from their holy building. His vision basically makes the whole temple system redundant from now on.

And this sends them over the edge. Verse 57. At this, they covered their ears and yelling at the tops of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.

And why? Because in a decision about God versus temple, they chose temple. They already killed Jesus a few months earlier.

And now, like an angry mob, they drag Stephen outside the city and kill him too. The first martyr, first Christian martyr. This is a very gruesome picture of what people do when they try to remove God from their lives.

[22 : 00] Because he won't be confined to their boxes. The irony, of course, is that God will remove them from his life. You see, that's what, on your handout I've put it, that's what exile in Babylon, in verse 43, and stiff-necked and gnashing teeth and Jesus ruling in heaven.

That's what all those words are doing. They're all God's warnings that he will remove them from his presence. Very sobering stuff.

Try and remove God, and he will remove you instead. Sobering stuff. But as we finish, let's finish on a positive. Let's talk about some encouraging things about places.

Our buildings here, our buildings are great, aren't they? They're really great. We're grateful for them. We thank God for them. It's right that we spend money to maintain them.

This church here has enabled Christians to hear about Jesus for 150 years. And long may that continue. And it might seem in my talk that I've basically given you a license to stay away from this holy building.

[23 : 10] But in this building, this is where we experience God in a different way. So we have the Lord's Supper. We listen to a sermon. We say the creeds.

And we sing praises. None of those things you can do in a gathering, in a people. Now, none of those things are special because of this place.

Remember, God pledged himself to the people, not to the building. But maybe one day, maybe one day we might have to break fellowship with the Anglican Church in Melbourne, just like the New Zealand Twelve.

If they ever evicted us from these buildings, we need to learn the lesson about holy places. We need to learn that holy places aren't defined by bricks and mortar or blue stones and stained glass windows.

But wherever there is proclamation of Jesus and his rule. How will we experience God's power? Jesus.

[24 : 09] His presence? Jesus. His pardon? Jesus. Do you need a holy place? No. It's helpful, but you don't need it. God is not limited to four walls. God is not limited to four walls.

And that is great news. It's great news. Because if worse came to worse and we end up meeting in a dodgy hall or in Ruffy Lake Park or, God forbid, the back of McDonald's, as long as we, the people keep proclaiming this word about Jesus, we can experience God's glory just as we can in this really great building.

Verse 48. However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me?

Where will my resting place be? Has not my hands made all these things? Let's pray. Father God, we praise you that you are so much bigger than buildings or any of the boxes we put you in.

Please, Father, help us to learn the lesson about holy places and about putting you in boxes. Please help us not to limit or constrain where we think you're allowed to go.

[25 : 31] And we thank you, Father, that even if worse came to worse and we lost this building, that as long as we've got Jesus and the message about him, we can fully experience your power and your presence and your pardon.

We thank you that your glory is found among the people and not necessarily in the buildings. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.