

Where God Lives

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[0 : 00] Thanks so much Simon. Morning folks, it's great to see you, great to have you with us. Let me invite you to have that passage open in front of you. We're going to be in Acts 6, 7 and 8 today. A big passage, but it's one I think that will challenge us and encourage us greatly in our walk with Jesus Christ.

So have it open in front of you. And as we begin, let me tell you about a conversation I had in my six-year-old a few days back, a few weeks ago. We're watching the TV and she says, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, who is that man?

And I said, well, that's the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Ah, she says, and where does he live? And I said, well, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom lives in the capital city of the United Kingdom.

And he kind of lives and works in one of the kind of most affluent and influential places in the city. That's where he lives. Oh, right. So a few days later, we're watching television again.

We do do other things in our house, but we're watching television and having a very similar conversation. She says, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, who is that lady on the screen? I'm sure you can guess where this one's going, right?

[1 : 07] Who's that lady on the screen? Well, that is, she is the First Minister of Scotland. Ah, and where does she live? And I kind of thought, well, at this point, I'll try and kind of harvest the knowledge seed that I'd planted in her head a few days before.

And I said to her, well, if the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom lives in the capital city in London, one of the most important bits, where do you think the First Minister of Scotland might live and work?

And she kind of paused on it for a minute. She thought, and then straight away she says, Edinburgh Castle. And I joked for a minute, I thought, that's quite cute and funny.

And I thought about it, and I thought, the logic there is impeccable, is it not? She should live in Edinburgh Castle. So, Nicola, if you're watching this manifesto, when you come for the next one, there it is.

Butte House, Old News, Edinburgh Castle. But what this passage invites us to do is to channel our inner six-year-old. Okay? Here's the question of this passage. Where does the God of the Bible live?

[2 : 09] Where does he live? If you'd have asked the Jews of this day, in this passage, they would have pointed straight at the temple. It's where God lives.

Okay? The building that dominates the skyline in Jerusalem. The building that the whole moral and physical life of Jerusalem kind of revolves around.

And the building which gives the Jews in this day, gives them their whole identity. Okay? And that identity has led to a mindset.

That if the peoples of the world want to meet this God, they come here. That if the peoples of the world want to know this God, then they become one of us by becoming obedient to the law.

And all the extra traditions and customs that we've set up around it to help us think that we're keeping it. So in their minds, they think to themselves that they have got a monopoly on the God of the Bible.

[3 : 13] And that this whole setup with the temple and the law has what it's been about all along. In other words, this is where the journey ends.

Now think about it for a minute. Okay? When was the last time you were on a train? Just picture it in your mind. Last time you were on a train. Okay? The first thing you hear when you get on a train is what?

This train terminates at. Isn't it? This train terminates at. In other words, this is where the journey ends. Remember at school, we always used to get the train back from school.

I was growing up. That was always in our minds. Make sure you get on the right train. Right? We're always saying to ourselves, don't get on the Balak train. Don't get on the Balak train. Don't get on the Balak train. If you look on the map where Balak is from central Glasgow, you'll understand why you had to not get on the Balak train.

Okay? You would end up at Loch Lomond. Lovely place. But you didn't want to end up there as a teenager. You've got to know where the journey ends. Right? And that's what they think. In terms of the unfolding plan of God, the story of the Bible, Because we are God's people, in God's place, living according to God's ways, we have reached the end of the line.

[4 : 29] This is it. This is where we're at. I think it was Tom Wright, New Testament historian, talks about at this point how Israel have surrounded themselves with mirrors. Okay?

Think about that image. Looking at themselves. Looking at themselves. And that's why they're absolutely livid at what the apostles and the early disciples, and particularly this guy called Stephen, what they are saying and what they represent.

Okay? Because if you'd have asked them where God lives, they wouldn't be pointing at the temple. They are talking about the crucified, the risen, and the ascended Jesus.

Jesus. And they're speaking about him as the very one who fulfills everything that the temple and the law were all about.

Jesus of Nazareth, the one that they thought they'd got rid of, continues to speak through his people. And this Jesus has turned everything on its head.

[5 : 31] Let me just say at this point, that's what he does. Okay? And just in case you're thinking of nodding off at this point, asking yourselves, honestly, I couldn't care less where God lives.

Let me just encourage you to see that these people have a way of understanding the world. And you too have a way of understanding the world. Right?

We all do. I think our culture tries to tempt us to think that we're all neutral. Right? No, not at all. Everyone has a way of understanding the world. You might not have a world that evolves around the temple and the law.

But let me just say it might be your job. It might be your home. It might be your holidays. It might be your family. It might be your relationship status. It might be your sexuality. The things that your world orbits around.

Jesus challenges it. I mean, nobody comes to meet Christ. Meet Jesus as we encounter him in the scripture. Nobody comes to him and thinks to themselves, at last I've found somebody who thinks and acts just like me.

[6 : 37] No, make no mistake. The message of Christianity to Jesus, it is come as you are. Probably more accurate to say come despite of who you are. Come as you are. To Christ. Are you not so thankful that it's not like you're putting your house on right move?

People come around to see it. You tidy it up before they come in. Are you not so thankful that Jesus, the deal is not like that? It's not how grace works. It is come as you are. Nothing in my hand to bring simply to the cross I claim.

Come as you are. But make no mistake that Jesus does not leave us as we are. He challenges the very core of our identity.

The things that we look to for purpose and satisfaction. And the way the Bible describes it is it's as if we are trying to build an Ikea flat pack furniture. We're trying to do it blindfolded.

And by God's grace, Jesus comes along and says, let me take the blindfold off you and let me show you the instruction manual. And by the way, I wrote it. I love you enough.

[7 : 41] I want you to know it. See, Luke records this episode. He focuses in verse 8. We've got our Bibles there on Stephen.

Do you see this guy? Come with me. Verse 8, Stephen. Do you remember we met him last week? Do you remember him? Verse 5 of chapter 6. Just a little bit back. He's a man full of faith.

This is how he's presented to us. Who's been set aside to care for the widows in Jerusalem. Okay, so this guy walks around constantly with a dish towel around his waist.

I spent a bit of my week this week trying to renew my home insurance on the phone to Admiral. The first question the customer service team asks you, how can we help you today? I thought it was really nice. How can we help you today?

Then it suddenly occurred to me, that's their job. Right? Couldn't care less about me. But with this guy, it's not his job. It's his life. Isn't it?

[8 : 40] It's what Jesus has done. And let me just ask you, who does he remind you of here? Jesus. And as he's serving and doing miracles, God, I take it just authenticating him in the eyes of the watching world.

Do you see how he's described as a man full of grace and power? However, when the Jews start arguing with him, do you see verse 10, that they cannot withstand the wisdom with which he spoke? Again, who does he remind you of? We're going to see this over and over again in this passage as this man, Stephen, is described to us.

Who does he remind us of? And I think that's maybe the one way Acts has challenged me, Persis, we've been going through it. To ask ourselves, who do we exhibit to the world?

Who do we model to the world? Right? Does the world look at us and do they see Christ? It's true, isn't it? The Christianity, way before it's a box that you tick, it is a life that you own.

[9 : 40] Do people in our world see us and do they see something of Jesus? That's why you flick on a few chapters here, when the gospel gets to Antioch, the nickname that the locals give the disciples is Christians.

Christian just means little Christ. It's what they see in them. You're like a little Jesus. That's the challenge, isn't it, friends? Do people see that in us? Do your work colleagues see it in how you conduct yourself in that business meeting, in that team meeting, when the pressure's on, when you're up against the deadline, everyone else is losing their cool?

But you're remaining patient and gracious. Right? Students, when everyone else is flaunting their new found freedoms, is your life marked by self-control and love?

I find it even in the school setting, taking the kids to school, speaking to the other parents, it's so easy just to slip into complaining about stuff. Right? Do people see Christ in us?

You know, it's the words of Robert Murray McShane, it's not so much great talents that God blesses as great likeness to Christ. And that's Stephen to a T.

[10 : 52] Verse 9, the group who meet in the synagogue begin, verse 12 onwards. They're kind of stirring up the false witnesses. They confront him and they seize him. Again, who does Stephen remind you of?

What do they say? This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the Lord. You see, the very two things that they get their whole identity from.

That's what Jesus is challenging. That's what the apostles are challenging. And notice the fascinating detail at verse 15. Okay, all who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Fascinating. Okay, because the only person in the Old Testament who has that kind of language used of them is Moses. Moses, who we read, spoke face to face with God.

And when he comes out of the tent of meeting, the people have to cover their eyes. Moses has to put a veil over his face because it is that glorious. His face is shining.

[12 : 01] And that's not a throwaway detail here. When Luke is telling us about Stephen's face shining and people could see it. He's been with God. And the high priest, what does he say?

Are these charges true? And Stephen responds by giving him not a yes or no answer. Okay, it's a kind of a closed question, isn't it? But no, no, it doesn't. It doesn't answer it like a closed question. He responds by giving them the longest sermon in the book of Acts. Probably fair to say they get more than they bargained for. Okay, we don't have time to go through every single detail.

But let me implore you to read it in your own time. It's fascinating. But maybe let me try and give us the headline so that we can see the details as we go through them. Okay. The essence of what he's saying is that the temple and the law, remember the train, this is not where the journey ends.

How could the, think about it, how could the creator of the heavens and the earth be boxed to one place? Okay, like some kind of Aladdin style genie in a bottle.

[13 : 11] How could that be true of the creator of all things? Located to one place. How could the intention of God's heart be limited to just one people? How could the creator of every single human being whose image is stamped on them?

How could he care about only one set of people? You see, what they recognize here, the heart of the promise that God made to Abraham is a multi-ethnic reconciled people who display God's glory to the world and who will be God's agent of grace wherever God puts them.

And so in doing, Stephen is saying that the death and the resurrection of Christ, the train is moving on towards its glorious heavenly destination.

And to help them see it, he just makes four really quick stops that have come previously on the train journey. Okay. Track with me. We'll see these really quickly. Do you see how he starts with Abraham?

Abraham. Verse 2 of chapter 7. Stephen knows his Old Testament. He knows the story. Okay. I think it's a great example for us of the importance of knowing the story because we can understand our place in the story.

[14:22] He starts with this pagan man, Abraham. Who he is. He's a nobody. God plucks him from nowhere and he says, and follow with me, verse 3 of chapter 7. God says, leave your country and your people and go to the land that I will show you.

So Abraham, his life is marked walking by, not by sight, but by faith, verse 5, in the promise of God. That's why he's always held up as an example of what it means to be justified by faith alone. Here he is walking by faith in the promise of God. So long before there was a holy place, there was a holy people.

A people who knew and who were walking in and trusting and loving the promises of God. You see, this God has never been constrained to one place.

He's always on the move. You cannot box him in. The purposes of his heart are too big and too glorious. And then as the train moves on, Stephen moves from Abraham, verse 9, to Joseph.

[15:29] We're going through this really quick, okay? So we can kind of see the big picture. Moves to Joseph. And the thing to see about Joseph is that God was with him. Do you see that there in the text, verse 9?

God was with him. Even in Egypt, he was with him. In fact, we get the word Egypt. If you count it, I think it's eight times in these verses that come after it. Egypt, Egypt, Egypt.

Egypt, Egypt, Egypt. Egypt, Egypt. Even in Egypt, God was with Joseph. God was sovereign over the details of Joseph's life.

Remember, right at the end of Joseph's story, end of the book of Genesis, what did he say? You meant it for harm, talking to his brothers, but God meant it for good. God is sovereign over the details of Joseph's life.

God is sovereign over the life of Egypt. We're not even in the land yet, but God is with his people. At verse 20, he moves from Joseph to Moses.

[16:31] And I think Moses probably, if you look at it there, gets the most airtime, because Stephen's specifically accused of speaking against Moses.

Right? And Stephen kind of traces Moses' life there in the kind of 40-year sections. And verse 33, and I think this is the key thing to see, is that Moses could be said to be standing on holy ground as he encountered God at the burning bush, do you remember?

He could be said to be standing on holy ground in God's presence again, even away out in the desert of Mount Sinai. Again, God not restricted to being in one place.

And even Moses, verse 37, who these Pharisees love and who are pinning their hopes on and who are saying to the world, we are obeying the law. Stephen's pointing out, no, you're not.

You're not obeying what Moses said, because Moses, verse 37, talked about the greater prophet who God would raise up. And yet the tragedy is, verse 39, that they were unwilling to obey him as God's leader.

[17:42] And in their hearts, they turned back to Egypt. Right? Rose-tinted spectacles about what life as slaves was like.

In their hearts, they turned back to Egypt and to their old ways of thinking and to their old gods. And then lastly, he moves to David and Solomon, verse 45. David, who, once they were in the land, had it in his heart to build God a home.

But it was Solomon who was the one who eventually built the temple. Right? But even Solomon, as he builds it, and you get this in his prayer in 1 Kings 8, which says, Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house which I have built.

How could this God live in this place? This God has never been constrained to one place. This God is always in the move. This God cannot be boxed in.

This God is not limited to our understanding of who he is and what he can do. The loving intentions of his heart are too big. And verse 51, by rejecting Jesus, Stephen is saying that they are just like

their forefathers.

[18 : 54] You see in this lookalike competition, Stephen looks like Jesus. He's saying here, you look just like your forefathers. What did they do? They killed every single prophet, every single messenger that God sent you, them, to turn back and repent.

And you've done it again with Jesus. And how did they react? Verse 54, they're incensed. Just livid. Because they are challenging the very way that they are living.

And so they drag him out of the city and they kill him. Again, who does Stephen remind you of? And notice just two profound details here.

And I recognize we've gone through that so quickly. But just let me pick up two profound details. Just before he died, you see verse 55. Stephen gazes into heaven.

Okay, and what does he see? Who does he see? He sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And watch the phrase that comes just before it. What else does he see?

[20 : 06] The glory of God. He looks at Jesus. He sees the glory of God. He's not looking at the temple. He's looking at the risen and ascended Christ who's reigning in heaven.

And he sees the glory of God. That is hugely significant. And notice in the text as well that Jesus is, what is he doing? This is beautiful. And I hope this encourages your soul today.

What is he doing? He's standing. It's almost at this point as if Jesus stands. Not just to welcome Stephen home.

But he stands as if to say, I identify with my servant. He is mine. You kill him. That's fine.

He's coming to my presence. Friends, I hope that encourages us. This is who Jesus is. And breathe that in today.

[21 : 04] Maybe particularly if you're going through a hard time as you continue to witness and speak for Jesus wherever he has put you today. Right? In the lecture hall, you're speaking about him.

And you're taking, you might not be killed, but you're taking many hits for him. Right? You're at school. You're standing up for Christ. Again, taking many hits for him. You're loving a friend at the minute and it seems to be going nowhere.

Am I wasting my time? Again, it's taking many hits for him. See that this Jesus stands with us, friends, when we stand for him and we feel the rejection of a world.

Jesus stands. This is who he is. This is who Jesus is for us in those moments. And you see Stephen's parting words.

Do not hold this sin against them. Again, who does he remind you of? And notice verse 58. Who's holding the coats of those who stone Stephen?

[22 : 10] It's a man named Saul. Right? Who at this point in the story is all about killing Christians. Because as a cream of the crop Pharisee, what they are saying, it grates so much against everything that he's built his life upon.

But you flick over a few chapters and this is the very man who Jesus stops in his tracks on the road to Damascus and says, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

Saul wasn't persecuting Jesus. Saul was persecuting his people. But again, just see how much the risen Jesus identifies with his people. It's also encouraging for us today to keep on speaking for him.

The one in heaven is for us. The answer is not to look to our circumstances or how we feel it. The answer is to look to a strong Christ. And it's incredible because this God specializes in taking the people who we thought had no chance of coming to know him and using them in his service.

I mean, you flick over a few chapters and Saul is taking the news of Jesus to countless people across Asia Minor and even into Europe. And what's likely the case, as historians reckon, is that Paul could not get the words and could not get the example of Stephen out his head.

[23 : 31] So he's going about his business. He's persecuting Christians. All the while Stephen is in there. Right? He's like the washing. He's like the clothes in the washing machine of Paul's head going round and round and round and round.

Cannot get him and his words out his head. And it's almost as if God uses that exact example to convert him.

And I take it that's why we should find that again enormously strengthening. Because it tells us that, friends, if you and I live the cross-shaped life, as we, like Stephen, remind the world of Jesus, that's why we should find that again and that's why we should find that again and that's why we should

find that again.

Okay? And it might be sometime after the event. You know, I was speaking to my friend Paul this week. He was telling me about a friend of his who received a letter in the post one day.

And it was from a friend that he knew during his university days some 15 or 20 years before. Right? So his friend opens the letter and it simply says, and it's from another of his friends, and it says, Do you know what?

[24 : 41] When I was going through a really dark time at uni, you were kind to me. This is 15 or 20 years after the event. I remember that you were kind to me. And in that moment, you shared your faith with me.

And I'm just writing to let you know that many years later, do you know what? I was going through another really dark time in my life. And who you were in that moment came back to me. And I just want you to know, and I remember just 15 or 20 years after the event, I want you to know that in that tough time, I remembered who you were, I remembered what you said.

I went to the local church at the bottom of my street, and I gave my life to Jesus as I heard about who he was. And I'm just writing to let you know that you were part of the journey. Friends, let us never underestimate the remarkable power of a simple life of godliness.

You know, maybe you're discouraged today in your witness, thinking, am I wasting my time in the lecture hall, in the hospital, in the home, wherever you are?

Am I wasting my time witnessing? This passage tells us that we're not. That God can use these things, right? Have you ever thought, here's what I was challenged about, have you ever thought to yourself, that person, do you know what?

[25 : 57] God could never save them. Have you ever thought to yourself, never in a million years, when I think about that place, could I ever see a church planted there? Let this be an encouragement to us, that we should be thinking and praying for these people and these places.

This is why we love the work of 20 schemes so much. Parts of our country that we thought, never in a million years could we think about a church being planted there. And boom, it's happening. Isn't that not incredible? You see how easy it is, friends, to box God in.

He couldn't possibly do that. Couldn't possibly do that. Couldn't possibly reach there. Think again, this passage tells us. Verse 1 of chapter 8.

And make no mistake that Stephen's story, friends, is encouraging as it is to us. It's a brutal one for him. And we do well to remember that for countless people around the world, brothers and sisters, they will get stoned for their faith.

Okay? But look what happens at verse 1 of chapter 8. On that day, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem. And all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

[27 : 07] What's going to happen after this point? Well, do you know what I'm seeing everywhere at the minute in our fields? I'm seeing dandelions. Picture a dandelion in your head.

See her other little girl, Grace? Loves dandelions, right? She calls them blowy things. That's what she calls them, right? So we're walking to school every day and she's tons of them in the graveyard on our walk to school.

She's picking up the dandelions. She's blowing them and she's killing them, right? And she's doing it again and again and again and again. Rips it up, blows it, throws it away. Rips it up. Seriously feel like I'm walking down the street with some kind of dandelion assassin, right?

She's doing this. She's throwing them away. But what happens, if you think about it with a dandelion, when you kill it? Kill it. Blow it. And it scatters.

What happens? Spreads. And it pollinates. Doesn't it? You see, that's exactly what's happening here.

[28 : 06] A great persecution broke out, but the Christians were what? Scattered. What do you think they did is they got scattered. Chapter 8, verse 4, Luke tells us, Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

See it, dandelion? Kill, blow, scattered. That's what these guys are doing. Have you ever thought about the fact that we'll scatter from here when we go today? That we're going to scatter to different homes in different parts of the city.

Tomorrow we're going to go, I'm sure, to different places to work. Involved in different circles of friends. Have you ever thought about the fact that we're scattered as well? It's a different scattering

to the one here. But we are scattered.

You see, the challenge, friends, is as we scatter, is to go and preach the word wherever we go. Where does the God of the Bible live? Where does he live? As he lives in the hearts of all those who respond to the word and put their faith in his son, Jesus Christ, as the Holy Spirit takes up residence in the hearts of God's people.

All those who, like Abraham, live by faith and not by sight. Let me encourage you today. Listen, we watched something on our news screens last night. We watched that football game.

[29 : 20] How short life can be taken from us. And if you haven't made that decision today to trust Jesus, today is the day. Friends, life is short. Did you see all the stuff on social media last night about that man's life?

Everybody recognizing how short life is, how it can be taken away from us. On a world stage, it can be taken from us anytime. Today is the day to put your trust in Jesus Christ.

Where does God live? He lives in the hearts of all those who give their life to this man, Jesus Christ. And just as we close, let me tell you this story. Let me tell you about Andy, who was here last week. Many of you know his grandpa, Derek, who ministered in Edinburgh for years down at Charlotte Chapel. And Derek died during the first lockdown. And I'll never forget what Andy tweeted was the lasting impression of his granddad.

Right? He said, every time I used to go and visit my granddad, it was as if Jesus was sitting next to him on the sofa. What a description. It was as if Jesus was sitting next to him on the sofa.

[30 : 22] And the reality, friends, is where does God live? He lives in the hearts of all those who had put their faith in Jesus Christ. This God is not limited to one place.

This God is for all those who had put their faith in Jesus Christ. You can do that today, not by traveling to Jerusalem. You can do that today by trusting him as you read about him here. Isn't this God glorious?

I hope you're encouraged this morning as we see who he is, that man's worst, the world's best attempts to stamp out the gospel, do you see how they only play into God's best?

This is who he is today. So let's pray. And why don't we just pause for a second, just before we close our service and we go from here. Let's just be still before our God today.

And let's remember who he is. And then I'll close in prayer. Paul would write this later on in the book of Colossians.

[31 : 22] To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

We thank you so much, Heavenly Father, for who you are today. Thank you so much for Jesus and for the grace which we have found in him.

So, Lord, I pray today that you would be moving amongst us here who are physically in the building, all those who are watching this live, or maybe who would watch it in the days and the weeks to come, that you would be ministering amongst us, Lord.

For those who are doubting, would you be at work? For those who are struggling, for those who are doubting, for those who are feeling the pressure of living a cross-shaped life for Jesus in this world.

Father, would you be with us? Would you strengthen us with the knowledge of who your son is today? And we commit ourselves to you, Father, in Jesus' worthy and in his precious and in his strong name we pray.

[32 : 28] Amen. Amen.