

Rejected by Men, Received by God

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[0 : 00] Here is in the book of Acts. We are going to cover Acts 6, 8 to 7, 60 today. It's a relatively long section and so during the sermon I'm not going to be reading large chunks of scripture like I normally do. I'll be summarizing a lot of it so when I'm reading it in the beginning please try to pay attention and pay attention in particular to the themes of rejection and themes of God's presence transcending Jerusalem and its locale. But let me pray before for the reading and preaching of God's word. Heavenly Father, we humble ourselves before you. Lord, it is our sin. To care so much about looking good than being good. To care so much about seeming righteous rather than being righteous. To care so much about the recognition and acknowledging from men and not from you, Lord. Forgive us and now address us by your word.

Transform us so that we might be faithful witnesses who live with an eternal perspective, who live to receive that acknowledgement and commendation from the heavenly court, from our Lord Jesus Christ.

And not to please men. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Acts chapter 6 verse 8 to chapter 7 verse 60. And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.

Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the freedmen, as it was called, and of the Cyrenians and of the Alexandrians and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.

[2 : 35] But they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he was speaking. Then they secretly instigated men who said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.

And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council. And they set up false witnesses who said, This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law.

For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us. And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

And the high priest said, Are these things so? And Stephen said, Brothers and fathers, hear me.

The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.

Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, who he had no child.

[4 : 02] And God spoke to this effect, that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years. But I will judge the nation that they serve, said God.

And after that they shall come out and worship me in this place. And he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day. And Isaac became the father of Jacob and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs. And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt. But God was with him and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household.

Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan and great affliction. And our fathers could find a food. But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit.

And on the second visit, Joseph made himself known to his brothers and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob, his father, and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all.

[5 : 15] And Jacob went down into Egypt and he died, he and our fathers. And they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abram had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

But as the time of the promise grew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt. But until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph, he dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants so that they would not be kept alive.

At this time, Moses was born and he was beautiful in God's sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father's house. And when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son.

And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds. When he was forty years old, he came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel.

And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed men and avenged them by striking down the Egyptians. He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand.

[6 : 27] And on the following day, he appeared to them as they were quarreling and tried to reconcile them, saying, Men, you are brothers. Why do you wrong each other? But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?

Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday? At this retort, Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.

Now, when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai in a flame of fire in a bush. When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord.

I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob. And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. Then the Lord said to him, Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.

I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now, come, I will send you to Egypt.

[7 : 35] This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, Who made you a ruler and a judge? This man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush.

This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.

This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give us.

Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, saying to Aaron, Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.

And they made a calf in those days and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven.

[8 : 42] As it is written in the book of the prophets, Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? You took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god, Rephon, the images that you made to worship, and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.

Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it according to the pattern that he had seen. Our fathers, in turn, brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers.

So it was until the days of David who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built the house for him.

Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands. As the prophet says, Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool.

What kind of house would you build for me, says the Lord? Or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?

[9 : 50] You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.

Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have not betrayed and murdered.

You who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it. Now when they heard these things, they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.

But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

[10 : 57] And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And falling to his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against them.

And when he had said this, he fell asleep. This is God's holy and authoritative word. We were introduced to Stephen in the preceding passage as one of the seven appointed to distribute bread, food, to the widows in the church.

He was described as full of spirit and wisdom, full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. And so it's not surprising then now to see him ministering effectively among the Greek-speaking Jews.

He says that he was ministering full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people in chapter 6, verse 8. But as always, as Stephen is growing in favor with God and man and his ministry is thriving, there are detractors that come to speak against him.

It says in verses 9 to 10, then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the freedmen, as it was called, and of the Cyrenians and of the Alexandrians and of those from Cilician Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.

[12 : 13] It's unclear whether this represents all distinct synagogues or whether it's one synagogue of the freedmen that had all these people from different ethnicities or different regions represented there.

But it seems that Stephen was ministering to the Greek-speaking Jews in particular. These are all regions of parts of the Roman Empire of where the Jewish diaspora lived.

The synagogue of the freedmen likely was a synagogue made up of Jews who had been formerly slaves but emancipated. And so he's ministering to fellow Hellenist Jews.

Stephen himself was a Greek-speaking Jew who is culturally Greek, Hellenist, even though he's ethnically Jewish. But some of them, it says, disputed with Stephen, but they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he was speaking because Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit. However, when prideful, foolish men can't win, they cheat. So in verses 11 to 14, it says that they secretly instigated men who said, we have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.

[13 : 33] They're conspiring to destroy Stephen by accusing him with blasphemy, which was supposed to be punished by stoning with death, according to Leviticus chapter 24.

So on the one hand, they secretly instigate men to falsely charge Stephen with blasphemy. And on the other hand, they stir up the people in public in response to that charge that they themselves instigated.

And so they fire up the crowd and see Stephen and drag him before the court in the Sanhedrin. And once there, they continue their malicious work by setting up false witnesses.

And they say this, this man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.

So the charge is primarily twofold. The charge of blasphemy. First, they allege that Stephen said Jesus will destroy the temple. And then secondly, they charge that Stephen said Jesus changes the customs of Moses.

[14 : 44] As is often the case with false accusations, there's at least a modicum of truth in both of these allegations. And that gives it an air of credibility because Jesus did prophesy during his ministry of the destruction of the temple.

What's false, however, is that he never claimed that he himself will destroy. And Jesus also said in John 2, verse 19, destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.

The Jews misunderstood this statement to mean the literal temple, the physical temple standing in Jerusalem. And John clarifies in that context that Jesus was not speaking of the temple but of his body.

If they destroy him and kill him, that he will be raised on the third day. He was pointing to the once and for all sacrifice he would make in his own flesh by dying and being raised from the dead so that to make sacrifices for sin in the temple no longer necessary.

But to devout Jews and maybe especially to the diaspora Jews, the Hellenist Jews who had returned to Jerusalem to be near the temple, this would have been a particularly offensive claim because they had come intentionally to be more actively, intentionally Jewish and to practice their faith within the temple.

[16 : 17] And so they twist Stephen's words and charge him with blasphemy and we can see their murderous intent because they know very well that the punishment for blasphemy is stoning.

And in their wickedness, they raise up false witnesses even though they know that the law also prohibits being a false witness. But they're willing to violate the law as long as it suits their agenda. And in chapter 7, verse 1, the high priest calls upon Stephen to defend himself and he says, Are these things so?

Are you really preaching against the temple of God and the law of Moses? Are you really preaching that Jesus will destroy the temple and change the customs of Moses, the two charges?

This is not a question that Stephen can answer with the simple yes or no. because he could have totally disavowed those claims in order to get himself off the hook.

[17 : 17] But if he did that, he would not be bearing faithful witness to Jesus. Because it is true that salvation is found in no one else but in the name of Jesus.

Jesus does supersede the temple. Jesus does bring the law of Moses to its intended end, as it says in Romans 10, verse 4. Jesus does not destroy the temple or abolish the law, but he does fulfill both of those things.

Jesus is the new and the greater Moses. And so simply replying yes or no would not have sufficed. So he chooses to use this last opportunity, his last few breaths, to preach the gospel, to speak of Jesus.

Jesus. And Luke's main point in including this narrative here in Acts is to teach us that whoever acknowledges Christ before the court of men will be acknowledged by him in the court of God. And he answers the two charges. So first, he talks about how Jesus is the new temple. And then secondly, he talks about how Jesus is the new Moses. First, Stephen recounts the history of Israel to make a biblical case that God's presence has always transcended Jerusalem and its temple.

[18 : 39] And in doing so, he supports his assertion that Jesus is the new temple of God. And beginning with Abraham, the father of faith, he speaks about this in verses 2 to 8.

He begins with a conciliatory tone, addressing the Jews as brothers and fathers, affirming that they're his fellow Jews. But then later, when he's speaking of Abraham entering the promised land, in verse 4, he distances himself from his audience.

And he says, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. He doesn't say this land in which we are now living.

He distances himself from the land and from the fellow Jews. He's trying to make a theological point. This is a point that he, notice how he emphasizes Abraham's geographical movements in that section, verses 2 to 8.

In verse 2, he says that God appeared to Abraham where? Not in Israel, but when he was in Mesopotamia. And after that, Abraham doesn't enter the promised land right away, but then he lives in among the Chaldeans in Haran.

[19 : 58] It's only after that that Abraham finally enters the promised land. But even when he does, Stephen notes in verse 5, God gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him.

This is a remarkable point. God didn't merely promise Abraham that he would give his land to his offspring. He promised it to Abraham himself as a possession, but then he didn't give him a foot's length.

This is why it says in Hebrews 11, 8 to 10, that by faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as inheritance. And he went out not knowing where he was going.

By faith he went to live in the land of the promise as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

In other words, the land of Canaan represents and points to something far bigger, far better. It represents the city of God. Living in the presence of God, in perfect communion with him, it's a type or a foreshadowing of heaven.

[21 : 24] Similarly, Abraham's descendants won't immediately possess Canaan either. God told Abraham that his offspring would be sojourners, aliens, foreigners in a land belonging to others.

Stephen's pointing out to his Jewish audience that though they make much of the fact that they now occupy the land that God himself had promised to them, that though they occupy the Jerusalem where the temple is, Abraham and many of his descendants never themselves physically possessed the land.

They were instead sojourners, and yet they were fathers and exemplars of the faith. Being a faithful Jew, in other words, is not so inextricably tied to the Holy Land.

moving on from Abraham, Stephen makes the same point about Joseph and the other patriarchs in verses 9 to 16. Joseph was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that Joseph had been forcibly disinherited from the land of Canaan and removed from the promised land, Stephen notes in verse 9 that God was with him in the foreign land.

[22 : 37] And by God's favor, Joseph rose to become a ruler over Egypt. And during the time of the great famine all over Egypt and Canaan, God used Joseph to summon all of Jacob and his household to live in Egypt because in Egypt there was still grain because of God-given wisdom that Joseph had.

So once again, the 12 patriarchs during this time did not live in the land of Canaan, but in Egypt where God's nonetheless blessed them and prospered them.

Of course, Stephen is aware that Joseph specifically asked his brothers in Genesis 48-25 to carry his bones from Egypt and to bury them in the land of Canaan after his death.

This was his expression of his faith in God's promise to Abraham that he would occupy the promised land. But then, even in recounting that detail, Stephen highlights in verse 16 that they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

The city of Shechem mentioned twice here is significant because it's a Samaritan city at the foot of Mount Gerizim, the holiest site in Samaritan worship.

[24 : 01] As some of you might recall from Jesus' dialogue with the Samaritan woman in John chapter 4, there was bad blood between Jews and Samaritans. They avoided each other like a plague because the Samaritans were descendants of Jews after the Assyrian invasion who had remained in the land that was occupied by their conquerors.

They stayed and settled there and intermarried with the Assyrians. And because of this, the Jews saw them not only as political rebels but also as racial half-breeds whose religion had been adulterated.

And one notable difference between Samaritan worship and Jewish worship was that Samaritans constructed a rival temple on Mount Gerizim at Shechem.

And the Jews worshipped on Mount Zion in Jerusalem. And Stephen makes it a point to emphasize that Joseph, a patriarch that the Jews revered, is not buried in Jerusalem, not in Judea, but in Shechem, in Samaria.

This is yet another way that Stephen is undercutting the Jewish contention that the gracious presence of God is confined to Jerusalem and its temple.

[25 : 26] moving on from Joseph, Stephen recounts the story of Moses, which is the longest section of this speech, verses 17 to 43. And here, too, he emphasizes the same theme.

He notes that because of a wicked Pharaoh who threatened to kill the Jewish infants, in fact did, the Jews were forced to expose their infants to the elements. And Moses was exposed, it says in verses 21 and 22, it was the Egyptian Pharaoh's daughter who adopted him and brought him up as her own son.

And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and he was mighty in his words and deeds. The Moses that the Jews revered, the person that the Jews revered above all other forefathers, was born a Jew but reared as an Egyptian.

And not only that, when Moses tried to come to the defense of his fellow Israelites and struck down an Egyptian who was oppressing his fellow Jew, they rejected him saying, who made you a ruler and a judge over us?

And it's their rejection, his Jewish brethren's rejection of Moses that made him free, he says, to become an exile in the land of Midian.

[26 : 42] Once again, a sojourner, an exile, removed from the promised land. After another 40 years, he says in verse 30, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai in a flame, a fire, and a bush.

And when God spoke there, he says in verse 33, he said, take off the sandals from your feet for the place where you are standing is holy ground. Later, Jewish rabbis commented on this saying that God's revelation in the wilderness proves once and for all that there is no place that is too desolate for the presence of God.

That's a similar point that Stephen is making here. Where did God appear to Moses? Not in Jerusalem, but in the wilderness. Not in Mount Sion, but on Mount Sinai.

The Jews charged Stephen in verse 13 of chapter 6 with speaking against this holy place, but Stephen insists that even the desolate wilderness of Sinai was consecrated and became a holy place when God revealed himself there.

In other words, Jerusalem and its temple are not the only holy place. The holy place is wherever God's Spirit rests. all this serves to make the point that being a sojourner and an exile is the norm and not the exception in the life of God's people.

[28 : 13] That God's presence is not limited to Jerusalem and the temple. And even when God's people finally did come to occupy Jerusalem and built the temple, they did so with the understanding that God cannot be confined to such physical locales.

to make this point, Stephen mentions in verses 44 to 45 that the tabernacle, the tent of witness, which was the portable tent where the Israelites worshipped and made sacrifices and such during their time in the wilderness, that this tabernacle preceded the temple of God and God's presence moved with it.

And even after conquering the land of Canaan in Joshua 18.1, this tent, the tabernacle, was set up in Shiloh and people continued to worship God there for approximately 300 years until the time of David.

And when time finally came for them to build the great temple, it wasn't David the great king who built the temple, but it was his son Solomon. And when Solomon was dedicating the temple, Solomon himself said in 1 Kings 18 verse 27, Solomon well understood this and Stephen does as well.

And so Stephen says in verse 48, the most high does not dwell in houses made by hands. And to drive that point home, he cites Isaiah 66 verses 1-2 in verses 49-50, saying, heaven is my throne, where God says, heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool.

[30 : 02] What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord? Or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things? How can the God who created the cosmos dwell, be confined to a man-made temple?

How can the Most High God be constricted to such a lowly place on earth? It's absurd to think that God can be confined to a physical location.

The temple was never meant to be the permanent exclusive dwelling place of God. It was a type, a shadow of the reality to come.

And that reality is Jesus. In Jesus, the Son of God took on human flesh and became simultaneously Son of Man. And it says, in Him, the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily in Colossians 2 verse 9. But that's not the end of the story. This amazing condescension of God in taking on human flesh continues in Colossians 2 verse 10 when he says that to believers, you have been filled in Him who is the head of all rule and authority.

[31 : 19] This is similar to what Paul says in Ephesians 1 22-23 that God gave Christ as head over all things to the church which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

Human beings were alienated from God due to their sin and guilt before God. And God was alienated from human beings, sinful human beings because of His righteous wrath towards sinners. But by dying on the cross for our sins, Jesus simultaneously removes our guilt and satisfies God's wrath so that we can be reconciled to God.

and when Jesus died on the cross, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, indicating that the barrier between God and man had been torn down.

And now Jesus is the one mediator between God and man and when we repent of our sins and believe in Jesus, His death and His resurrection on our behalf, we are united to Jesus by faith.

[32 : 27] we become one with Him, we become His body and by extension because Jesus is the temple of God, we ourselves become temple of the Holy Spirit as 1 Corinthians 3 says.

And that's why where we meet for corporate worship is ultimately not important. We are looking hard right now for a place to meet, for a permanent home for our church. But in light of this truth, it's not ultimately important.

we can worship God at a building dedicated to His worship like this place, or at a rented school facility like we used to, or even outdoors.

The Spirit of God indwells God's people. The church is the gathered people of God. So it's not inside a church building, but wherever we are gathered as God's people, that God is present. And this is such a wonderful privilege. Think about it. God dwells with us. All of the other major religions have pilgrimages to sites that they deem holy.

[33 : 41] You have to make long, arduous journeys in order to make merit by visiting these holy sites. Every other major world religion has this. but true biblical Christianity has no such requirement.

God is not over there in the distant land, in some holy place quarantined from rest of sinful humanity. He is with us.

He is imminent. He inhabits us. He befriends us. us. Look at the intimate way in which Revelation 3 20 describes God's indwelling presence among us.

The Lord Jesus says, Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him and eat with him and he with me.

The living God comes into our home. into our life, into our body, he dines with us.

[35 : 00] You get that in no other religion. God comes to God. God is God. And the implication of this is that we can't box God in.

We can't set him aside somewhere in a neat little box where he doesn't disturb our lives. God God is God.

This is Stephen's main charge against his fellow Jews. The problem is not the temple itself. The problem is the way they use the temple to box God in, to try to contain him and control him.

In a similar way, people nowadays reduce God to amulets and pendants and talismans, as if we can put God in our pockets and carry him around like a good luck charm.

We reduce God to rituals and formulas and legal requirements as if we can control him and manipulate him to do what we want him to do.

[36 : 07] As one of the prayers we sometimes use for a confession of sin says, we often worship not your true self, but who we wish you to be. We too often ask you to bless what we do, rather than seeking to do what you bless.

Forgive us for seeking concessions when we should be seeking guidance. Forgive us when our worship shapes you into what we want, instead of shaping us into what you want.

In what ways have you compartmentalized God in your life? Sunday worship is God's time, but the rest of the week is mine.

Is that your attitude? No, every hour of your life you are alive to glorify God. A tithe of my income belongs to God, but the rest of the paycheck is mine.

Is that your attitude? No, every dollar in your bank account is a gift from God that you might glorify God with it.

[37 : 24] Do you behave yourself, wear nice clothes and abstain from profanity and put on a smile during a worship service only to live in a way that is completely contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ the rest of the week?

God cannot be contained. He cannot be boxed in and set aside so that our life and worship is compartmentalized.

Our entire life is supposed to be a living sacrifice, a spiritual worship to God because our bodies themselves are the temple of the living God.

That's Stephen's charge, his defense. The Sanhedrin's second charge against Stephen was that he spoke against the law of Moses, that he told them not to follow Moses' customs, the customs handed down to them by Moses.

And Stephen answers this charge by demonstrating that Jesus is the new and greater Moses, who instead of merely giving the law engraved in stone, who now engraves the very law of God onto our hearts so that we can actually obey him.

[38 : 42] Even before Moses, God had ordained that he would deliver his people from the upcoming famine by making Joseph a ruler over them. So this is part of the history that Stephen recounts.

And he revealed this to Joseph in a dream that he would be a ruler over God's people, that he would be used by him to rescue them. But Joseph's brothers, the patriarchs, were jealous of Joseph.

They rejected him and sold him into slavery in Egypt. Much like the Jewish leaders, who are filled with jealousy, as it says in Acts chapter 5, verse 17, and Acts chapter 13, verse 45, and in Acts chapter 17, verse 5, there's a recurring theme.

He's setting up a pattern that the Jews that are persecuting Christians actually fit the pattern of those who reject God's prophets and his messengers time and time again out of jealousy.

And not only Joseph, but Moses, the lawgiver himself, was rejected by the Israelites. Chapter 7, verse 22, described Moses as mighty in his words and deeds.

[39 : 53] That's a phrase that's not actually found in the book of Exodus, but it's a phrase that's actually found later in Acts chapter, or in Luke chapter 24, verse 19, where Jesus is described as mighty in deed and word.

So, immediately, Luke is establishing a connection between Moses and Jesus when he describes Moses this way. And then, he further recounts in verses 23-25 that when Moses was 40 years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, and when he tried to make peace among them by trying to stop them from fighting against each other, once again, the Jews rejected Moses, retorted to him, who made you ruler and a judge over us?

Repeatedly, Moses is rejected. The people don't understand that God is making him, using him to rescue them from their slavery in Egypt. Likewise, the Jews, in Stephen's day, it says, acted in ignorance in chapter 3, verse 17, in crucifying Jesus.

They did not understand. And Stephen says in verse 35-38 that this Moses whom they rejected as their ruler and judge, God himself has made both ruler and redeemer.

He uses Moses to perform signs and wonders. He uses Moses to speak God's living oracles. And this, once again, establishes the parallels to Jesus.

[41 : 27] Like Moses who performed signs and wonders, Jesus is described as attested to God by mighty works and wonders and signs in Acts chapter 2, verse 22. Like Moses was rejected by his fellow Jews from being ruler and judge, but nonetheless appointed ruler and judge and redeemer, Jesus is rejected, but then God appoints him, it says in Acts chapter 5, verse 31, leader and savior to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.

In short, Jesus is the prophet like Moses that Moses himself had prophesied that God would raise up in Deuteronomy chapter 18, verse 15.

So it's no surprise then that the Jews in Stephen's day reject Jesus the same way their forefathers rejected Moses. verses 39 to 40 and following Stephen talks about how the Jews continually turned back in their hearts toward Egypt, made an idol, a golden calf, and worshipped other gods.

He quotes from Amos 5, 25 to 27 there. And having observed this pattern in Israel's history of rejecting God's bookpersons, Stephen challenges the Jews in verses 51 to 53.

He says, You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit and as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?

[43 : 04] And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the righteous one, whom you have now betrayed and murdered. As he did earlier, Stephen is now again distancing himself from his fellow Jews.

Previously, he spoke of our fathers, but now he says, Your fathers did. He's trying to make the point that he's trying to tell them what separates Stephen, what separates him from the rest of the Jews. It's his submission to, his listening to Jesus as God's chosen Messiah, unlike his fellow Jews who reject him.

The charge of being a stiff-necked people, of course, was the charge that the Old Testament uses over and over again to refer to God's people and their rejection of him. And so it's a stinging charge. And even though the Jews took pride in the fact that God gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision, he now calls these proud descendants of Abraham uncircumcised in hearts and ears. [44 : 11] once again, Moses himself had prophesied in Deuteronomy 30 that one day God would circumcise our hearts so that we can actually obey him.

Prophet Ezekiel in chapter 36 also said that God would give us a new heart and a new spirit and cause us to walk in his statutes. This promise is fulfilled ultimately by the person and work of Jesus Christ.

As it says in Romans 2 28-29, what matters is not physical circumcision, but the circumcision of the heart. And that circumcision of the heart is performed not by human hands, but it says by the spirit in Romans 2-29.

it's when we have the obedience of faith to Jesus Christ, when we accept him as our Lord and Savior, as the Messiah sent by God for our redemption, to be our ruler and king, that's when we are indwelt by the spirit of God.

So according to Stephen, it's not him who has rejected the law of Moses. Moses. It's his Jewish accusers who have rejected Moses, because they have rejected the prophet like Moses that Moses himself prophesied of.

[45 : 45] These Jews sought to justify themselves by keeping the letter of the law when God himself had ordained that we should be justified by faith in Jesus Christ. These Jews put their confidence in their own flesh, in the trappings, the external trappings of religion, rather than in the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit.

Do you put your confidence in the external religious trappings? Do you put your confidence in your religious heritage, your pedigree, your father as a pastor or a seminary professor, that your family has been Christians for many generations?

Many Jews of Stephen's day could say the same thing, and yet they were uncircumcised in hearts and ears. Do you put your confidence in your own moral or religious observance, that you go to church every week, that you read the Bible and pray regularly, that you subscribe to the right theology, or that you're part of the right denomination, that you have not committed any blatant sins recently, or that you support the right social and political causes, or that you're an upstanding citizen, or that you donate money to charity.

Many Jews of Stephen's day could say the same thing, and yet they were uncircumcised in hearts and ears. The only way to have right standing with God, the only way to be saved is to believe in the name of Jesus, the righteous one.

Instead of resisting the Holy Spirit, we are to yield to the Holy Spirit by repenting of our sins and trusting in Jesus Christ alone for our salvation. I want to plead with those of you who are living with guilt that hasn't been dealt with, or with shame in your own identities.

[47 : 49] stop trying to save yourself. Stop trying to atone for your own sins. Stop putting your confidence in your own flesh, in your own qualifications, as Stephen's Jewish contemporaries did.

It's not our own labors. It's not our own righteousness. It's not our own piety or devotion that atones for our sins. Only those who come naked to the cross, can be clothed with the righteousness of Jesus.

Only those who come empty handed to the cross of Jesus can receive God's mercy and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Jesus alone saves us.

Unfortunately, Stephen's Jewish audience didn't heed this warning, and instead, we are told in verses 54 to 58 that they were enraged, they ground their teeth at him. And after hearing of

Stephen's vision of the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, verse 57 says, they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Covering their ears, a gesture of righteousness, self-righteousness, saying that I can't bear to hear the blasphemous words that are coming out of Stephen's mouth. But all it does is to confirm what Stephen said earlier, that they are uncircumcised in their ears.

[49 : 20] They are deaf to the truth of Jesus. They throw Stephen out of the city and stone him to death. It's a brutal way to die, a punishment reserved for the most heinous of sins in the Old Testament, sins that threaten the very survival of the Jewish faith community from which the Messiah had to be born.

sins like blasphemy. When stoning someone to death, they lower you to a pit or to a valley outside the city and then starting with the witnesses of the trial themselves, they throw stones at you. And they don't pelt you with these little pebbles. They crush you by hurling large stones at you. And since this happened during the trial before the Sanhedrin, it seems the Sanhedrin sanctioned it. However, we know from John chapter 18 that the Jews did not have the right under Roman rule to execute people. They did not have the right to meet a capital punishment. So this is not an official killing. It's not an execution. This is a lynching. Unauthorized lynching. that's how the first martyr of the faith died.

[50 : 45] But there are several details that suggest a great reversal of what's happening. In the Mishnah, the official commentary of the rabbis, of the Jewish rabbis, it details the steps that you're supposed to take when you're stoning someone to death.

death. And it specifies that the person that is being stoned is supposed to be stripped of his clothing. But interestingly, in verse 58, it's not Stephen, but the witnesses, the false witnesses who testified against him, who are stripped of their clothing.

They take their garments off and lay them at the feet of a young man named Saul. The Mishnah also specifies that the person that's being stoned to death is supposed to confess at the time of his stoning and say, may my death atone for all my sins.

But instead, Stephen prays in verse 60, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. Stephen does not confess his sin, but the sins of his accusers and persecutors, and he pleads for God's mercy on their behalf.

And of course, in doing this, he's following in the footsteps of his master, Jesus, who himself was charged with the same charge that Stephen is being charged of, who himself had false accusers, false witnesses brought against him, who himself was unjustly tried and executed, and who himself cried out, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit, who himself prayed for his executioners, saying, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

[52 : 24] Luke intentionally presents Stephen's martyrdom in the pattern of Jesus' death, because he wants to teach us that this is not an isolated incident. This is a pattern that every Christian is called to follow.

We should not be surprised when, as a church, we face determined and organized opposition and persecution. We should not be surprised when people launch smear campaigns against us, or drag us to court, sue us for our allegiance to Christ.

But when we suffer in this way, we must not lose hope. And there's a wonderful hope here in verses 55 to 56. We are told that Stephen sees Jesus at the right hand of God, which is a fulfillment of Luke chapter 22, verse 69, that Jesus himself prophesied when he was standing on trial before the Sanhedrin.

He said that you will see the Son of Man at the right hand of God. So that's been fulfilled. So Jesus has been vindicated. He has been raised from the dead, ascended to the heaven. Now he's seated at the right hand of the Father.

But that's not the only thing. There's something curious here. He says that the Son of Man is standing at the right hand of God. This is a curious detail because wherever Scripture mentions Jesus' session, ascension, his ascension and being ascended at the right hand of God, he's being seated at the right hand of God, it always specifies that he is seated.

[54 : 08] It implies completion, that it's finished. Jesus is sitting at the right hand of God. But uniquely in this verse, it says that Jesus is standing at the right hand of God.

Why is he standing? Isaiah chapter 3, verse 13 says that when the Lord judges the nations, he stands.

When God is about to issue his verdict, he stands. So then, this is likely connected to what Jesus said in Luke 12, verse 8.

I think we have that on the screen for you guys to look at everyone who acknowledges me before men. The Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God. While Stephen is being condemned by the human court, Jesus stands to vindicate him.

While the Sanhedrin declares Stephen guilty of blasphemy, Jesus declares him not guilty and commends him for bearing faithful witness to him.

[55 : 18] by every earthly appearance, it's Stephen who is on trial. And it's Stephen who is the loser. In the heavenly court, it's not Stephen who is on trial, but his persecutors who are on trial.

And he is, Stephen himself is victorious. He is vindicated. And we must remember this heavenly reality when we are persecuted for bearing witness to Jesus on earth.

Even when all men reject us and forsake us, Jesus, our Lord, will stand for us. For all of those who are faithful to him till the end.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, Lord, we do not desire the applause of men.

Lord, we do not want to make a name for ourselves here on earth. but Lord, from our heart of hearts, from the depth of our innermost being, we desire the commendation of our Lord, our King Jesus, standing up to vindicate us, to receive us into his kingdom, and to say to us, well done, my good and faithful servant.

[57 : 17] God, we cannot bear faithful witness to you and acknowledge you before men without your help. So, Lord, fill us with your Holy Spirit.

embolden us, empower us. Let us not, let us be men and women who do not love their lives even unto death.

And may Jesus be exalted in our lives. In his precious name we pray.

Amen. Amen.