

Dangerously Close



Acts 7:17–60

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It was 20 years ago that I was sitting in a church at a Bible conference in Marion, Kentucky. The preacher got up and started out by saying, “God called me into ministry, I started preaching, grew a church, and then God saved me.” And I remember looking up and thinking what? Like it seemed like the order of that was a little off, right? Usually you get saved, then get called to ministry, then start preaching, then grow church. But that was not his order. So at that moment, I could feel the Lord began to do something in my spirit, and I did not quite know what He was doing until the next guy got up. The next guy got up and basically had the same testimony. “God called me to ministry, I started preaching, grew a church, and then God saved me.” And then he talked about how radically different his life and ministry was after that point.

For me listening to that, it was the first I have ever heard of anyone who thought they were Christian, but was not a Christian, much less, a pastor of a church who thought he was a Christian, but actually did not know the

Lord. It just startled me and I began to feel this overwhelming conviction, and I knew at that moment what the Lord was calling me to do, but I did not want to do it. The Lord was calling me to get baptized the next day. This was Saturday, October 30th, so the next day was Sunday and I am supposed to get baptized – I know the Lord is absolutely telling me to do that. There is a big problem though. Sunday night, October 31st, I was supposed to preach my first sermon at Hardin Baptist Church. I had been called into ministry. I was getting ready to give my first sermon, but here I was on the day before knowing that God wanted me to get baptized during that service. It is kind of an awkward altar call when you preach a sermon and you give an altar call, and you are the one who needs to come forward. That is just a funny altar call.

I sat there at that Bible conference, gripping the pew thinking...*No God, I can't do that, I cannot get baptized tomorrow. There is no way...* I gripped it hard and I could almost feel God just pushing my chest, and I thought I was going to die! And then I said, "Ok God, I surrender, I am going to get baptized tomorrow." Immediately, I felt release, joy, and peace. And then uh-oh, what I do tomorrow, right? I have to call my dad and tell him, I have to tell our church. What I realized in that moment is that I didn't have the right testimony. You see, I had a testimony when I was six. I came to Christ, said a prayer, got baptized, and then I lived sort of a nominal Christian life. Then when I got to college, I progressed in my faith. But that really wasn't true. As a freshman in college, nine months previous to the day that I sat in that church, God had saved me, and I needed to admit that. I needed to tell the church that I got saved nine months ago and now I needed to be baptized. See, I shared the problem that those other guys had. I had grown up so close to the things of God that I was actually far away. I grew up with Vacation Bible School, church camp, a dad who preached the gospel faithfully, and Sunday school teachers who shared the gospel faithfully with me. I grew up so close to the things of God, yet in reality, I was far away.

So what we are going to look at this morning is the reality that we can actually be dangerously close to the things of God. We are going to see Stephen preach a sermon to the synagogue leaders. They are the ones

who had the law, had the customs, and had the rituals, had the temple, and had the sacrifices. They were so close to the things of God, they were right up against them, yet as Stephen is going to show, they were so far away that they actually did not know God. And I think maybe for some of us even in this room, we are so close to the things of God – you might have grown up around the gospel – yet by being so close, it is kind of dangerous, it is a little bit scary, because being close sometimes means you are the ones who are actually the farthest away.

We are going to see what Stephen does in this sermon, how he addressed these synagogue leaders, and why he is giving this sermon. We are in Chapter 7, but in Chapter 6, something happened: Stephen, this deacon, is sharing the gospel and it causes a controversy. So the synagogue leaders accused Stephen of a couple of things. It is important that you know this before we get into the text. The leaders accuse Stephen and the Christians of being against the Holy Place, which is the temple; against Moses, the Jew's hero; and against the law, which is what they follow to get to God. They are changing the customs, they are changing the traditions, and the synagogue leaders do not like it, so they bring Stephen to trial and give him this indictment that he is blasphemous, against God and the law. This is punishable by death.

Then we get to Acts chapter 7 where Steven has to get up and give a defense. The council says – What do you have to say about all this? So Stephen starts in the Old Testament and he preaches a sermon. And what he does in this sermon is shows that the Christians are not the ones against Moses, but actually, the synagogue leaders are, because what we are going to see is Moses, his life and his words, were always pointing to Jesus, that Moses was actually a type of Jesus, and he spoke about Jesus. So if you do not side with Jesus, you are not siding with Moses. In this sermon, Stephen is going to show that God is not bound to a temple, Jesus actually fulfilled the law, and we are the people that follow Jesus in agreement with Moses, not against Moses. So let's see how he does this throughout this sermon as we ask the question of ourselves, are we so close to the things of God that actually we are far away from God? That is

where the synagogue leaders are. They are so close that they don't know they are actually far away.

We are going to read verse 37 because I am going to make a lot of connections between Moses and Jesus, and I do not want you to think I am just making this up. This is Stephens' point, although he does not get to until later in his sermon, but I am going to show you his main point here – what he is trying to do with Moses. Stephen is trying to get these people to see that Moses actually told the Israelites that there is a prophet coming, and that prophet, as we are going to see, is the Lord Jesus.

Scripture

"This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.'"

We started this sermon last week and we dealt with Abraham, then we dealt with Joseph. Now, in verse 17 Stephen is going to switch to Moses. He is going to tell about Moses' life in these forty year chunks – like his birth, then we are going to see the wilderness, and then we are going to see his rescue of the Israelites from Egypt. We are first going to go to his birth, and what we are going to see in this little section that Stephen is going to remind these synagogue leaders that Moses had a miraculous birth, and it was a birth that is associated with the promise to Abraham.

Verses 17–22:

But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt 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.

Notice what Steven is trying to. Do you remember the accusation that Stephen and the Christians are against Moses? Stephen is going to tell the

story of Moses and he is going to try to connect the dots between Moses and Jesus. Simon Kistemaker, a New Testament scholar, says that he is linking the two, that Moses a type of Christ. Notice how he does this in this first way. Verse 17 says, "But as the time of the promise drew near..." So we are given this idea of a promise. Now what is the promise? It is the promise to Abraham. What was the promise? That he will make him into a great nation and that from him all the nations of the earth will be blessed. It is this promise that is taking place through Abraham. So now, we see at the time this promise is coming. And then if you notice just the link between the promise and Moses in verse 20, "At this time Moses was born." So at the time of the promise, there is another time Moses was born. I am just trying to connect Moses to the promise of Abraham; that the promise of Abraham comes through a baby that is born.

Now what is the situation that brings Moses' birth? Well the promise is growing, right? The people of the Israelites are growing; they are multiplying. God's promises are growing, and all of a sudden, the king of Egypt does not like it. He does not know Joseph, he does not know these people, and he decides to enslave them. This is the whole story of the Exodus. I encourage you to read Exodus this week as we are going to cover a lot of what happens in Exodus, but the Pharaoh decides to enslave the people of Israel. And one of the first things he does is he says – *Hey we need to start killing these people* – so they start killing all of the male children because they want to wipe out these Israelites, which will actually wipe out the promise of God though Pharaoh doesn't even know that he is doing that bigger mission that the enemy would want, and that is the promise of God to be squashed. But in the midst of Pharaoh killing all of the boys who are Hebrews at this time, there is a baby who is born. And that baby who is born has a miraculous birth. How is it miraculous? He doesn't die; he lives. And how does he live? He is hidden. You remember the little basket, put him in the river, you have seen the story, you probably acted the story out as a kid. But what is so amazing about this miraculous story is that King Pharaoh who wants all the little boys to be killed – his daughter sees Moses and adopts him as her own. Stephen is reminding them of the great miracle that God did in keeping Moses alive. The birth of Moses was a miracle. How is it a miracle? The daughter of

Pharaoh adopted him into the Egyptian kingdom so that one day he would be the rescuer, so he is bringing about this miracle birth.

Now, if Stephen is going to say that Moses' life is connected to Jesus, how does Jesus relate to this miraculous birth? The synagogue leaders would have at least heard that Jesus had a miraculous birth. What was the story of Mary? She was a virgin. How much more miraculous does it get than a virgin giving birth to a son? So the promise of Abraham is connected to a miraculous birth, Moses, but the greater promise is by another miraculous birth, who is Jesus Christ.

See some of the irony here. Stephen reminds us that it was the king of Egypt that wanted to kill the one who would rescue, Moses. But during the synagogue leaders' time, it wasn't the king of Egypt that wanted to kill the Hebrews; it was the king of Israel that wanted to kill the Hebrew babies. The synagogue leaders would have thought *our people have always been right, our people always been good, our forefathers have always been good*, but Stephen was saying right now, currently, your King Herod is as wicked as the Pharaoh that God delivered you from. When Jesus came, their top leader was acting as Pharaoh did, except this top leader of Israel wanted to kill the Rescuer, the Promised One. But guess what...another miracle happens, God kept Jesus safe. It is just ironic that Moses, who was going to be the rescuer was born in Egypt, and Jesus who was born in Israel (in Bethlehem), had to flee to Egypt to find safety and security from God's own people. Do you see how ironic that is? He is telling the synagogue leaders that they carry on about the forefathers, but the forefathers tried to kill Moses; and they tried to kill Jesus and Jesus had to flee to a foreign territory just to find safety. In other words, their back story is a little bit more messed up than they think, and what they need to know is who Christ is.

So we see this miraculous birth that Stephen starts with, that Moses was born, and it was a miracle that he survived. He was favored in God's sight. God saw him, and the same thing happened with Jesus. Another miracle baby was born, the Rescuer who is God in the flesh.

What else does Stephen try to tell us about the Moses and Jesus' connection?

Verses 23–29:

When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. 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.

We had that miraculous birth of Moses, but then we have the mission of Moses, and we are going to see that the people of Israel misunderstood Moses. Now Moses is the synagogue leaders' hero, right? They are all saying *we love Moses, we champion Moses*, and what Stephen is going to say is *yes, but your fathers misunderstood Moses*, they actually missed Moses when he showed up. Moses, though he is living in the Egyptian palace, knows he is one of the Hebrews, he knows he is one of God's people. He sees the afflictions of his people so he goes out and intervenes. He kills an Egyptian who is causing affliction to the Hebrews. He tries to rescue. He tries to be a Savior. What Stephen says is Moses was thinking...*they are going to know that I am God's rescue. They are going to know salvation is coming from my hand when I do this deed, when I come to them...* But what happened? He was misunderstood. Moses came to rescue Israel, and Israel misunderstood Moses, and they accuse him – *You are not the guy. Who made you judge? Who made you ruler? Why are you here? We do not need you* – They misunderstood him.

Can you think of a link to another guy who came to Israel to redeem them, who they completely misunderstood? The Lord Jesus. The exact same thing happened when He came to Israel. The entire gospels tell us the

religious leaders, the Pharisees, the scribes, the synagogue leaders misunderstand who Jesus is – *Who are you? Who gives you the right to heal on this Sabbath? Who gives you the right to say, it is my temple? Who are you, why are you doing these things?* – They completely misunderstand who Jesus is.

Do you see the connection Stephen is trying to make? The synagogue leaders accused him of being against Moses, but Stephen is saying just back up for a moment. When Moses first showed up, our forefathers completely misunderstood him. He was God's salvation, yet they misunderstood and cast him aside, and guess what just happened. Jesus came as our salvation. The very hand of God came to us, and you have misunderstood Him just like your fathers misunderstood Moses. Stephen is trying to link the two. He is trying to tell both stories and show how their forefather's rejection has also become their rejection, and if you reject Moses, you are actually rejecting the Lord Jesus.

Next, we are going to see that Moses then goes into a wilderness for forty years, which sounds a little familiar about the story of Jesus, right? We are going to see this connection as Moses has to leave. They misunderstood him, they cast him out, and he flees to the wilderness. Now this is kind of key because it is not in the Promised Land, it is not in the temple. Remember, these people think God only dwells in the temple and that only Israel is a holy land, but what we are going to see, as John Stott says, is that here is holy ground outside of the Holy Land. We are going to see that come true in this encounter that God has with Moses in the wilderness.

Verses 30 – 34:

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.'

So the Israelites misunderstand Moses, so Moses flees to the wilderness, and guess who shows up in the wilderness? God. You can read this again in the story of Exodus. It is that story that the synagogue leaders would have told their kids over and over again. Everyone in Israel would have told their kids about the time when God showed up to Moses in the wilderness from the burning bush and told Moses to take off his shoes. Why is he supposed to take off his shoes? It is because the place where he is standing, that ground, is actually holy.

Now the question is where is this ground? It is not in the Holy Land, it is not in the temple. You see, their view is that God is in the temple God is in the Holy Land, God is with Israel – *All the nations, well they can just do what they want to do, but God is with us, God is for us, God is only in us and we are that holy place* – Stephen is saying notice where God showed up to Moses in the beginning of the story. It was not in the Holy Land, it was in the wilderness, and that ground is holy too. Why is it holy? It is because everywhere God is, that place is holy. And God is everywhere all of the time. So the whole earth, we are going to see, is full of His glory and His holiness. See, the synagogue leaders thought God dwells in a box – in the temple, only, and Stephen is trying to show that God has been at work long before the temple. And now that the temple is obsolete, God is still at work long past it. We are going to see this theme going over and over again, as we run through these passages.

Now, can you think of another person who also spent time in the wilderness in that 'forty' period, not forty years but forty days? It is exactly what happened with the Lord Jesus when the Spirit descended upon Him after His baptism. The Spirit led Him out into the wilderness for forty days. It is that connection between Moses as a type and Jesus as the fulfillment, Jesus as the one that Moses in the Exodus always pointed to. But there is a difference. Moses went to the wilderness fleeing God's mission, fleeing God's purposes, and God brought him back. Jesus went into the wilderness to embrace God's mission, to prepare for God's mission, and in both wildernesses outside of the Promised Land, God was there with His

servant, so we see that link again. Stephen is showing the synagogue leaders that he is not the one against Moses. They are, because Moses is with Jesus, and if they are not with Jesus, they are not with Moses. We are going to see Stephen continue this theme.

Verses 35 and 36:

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.

Not only did they misunderstand Moses, they actually rejected Moses. So again, we see another connection. What happened when Moses showed up? Moses was rejected. He came to redeem, he came to save, and what was the people's response? How did Israel respond? We do not want you. We reject you. The same thing happened with Jesus when He came. It was not just a misunderstanding; it was a rejection of God's hand of salvation. Yet God, through His Providence, through His sovereignty uses Moses to deliver the people out of bondage, out of slavery. How does He do it? With mighty signs and mighty works. He does it with these mighty acts. Do you remember the ten plagues? We remember those. God showed up through Moses, did these mighty acts against Pharaoh, and eventually delivered His people from bondage through these mighty acts. Though Moses was rejected, God used him to still deliver the people.

How does that mirror the story of Jesus? Jesus came into the gospels doing what mighty works and mighty deeds. He is raising people from the dead, He is walking on water, and He is multiplying fishes and loaves. He is doing mighty works for Israel to see. Stephen is showing that just like Moses came to rescue them through mighty works, Jesus is also coming with mighty works to show who He is. And what was that last mighty work that Moses was able to do through God? It was the Passover. Do you remember that last mighty act? Take a lamb, kill it, put the blood on the door post and God would pass over them. He would kill the Egyptians and the Israelites would be able to go free, that last mighty act that redeemed their

forefathers. So these synagogue leaders are listening to the sermon, they are remembering those mighty works, they are remembering that Passover. A lamb was slain so that their forefathers could go free. Who does that point to? Jesus, the One who is that Passover Lamb, the One who was slain so that Israel and also all of the nations could go free. You see, Stephen was trying to get the synagogue leaders to see that their fathers rejected Moses but Moses was God's rescuer. And now, they also are rejecting Jesus but Jesus is God's Rescuer. Just look at the life of Moses and see how it lines up – how Moses' life was pointing to the life, work, and the cross of Jesus Christ. They were rescued by Moses. We are rescued through Jesus Christ. And Stephen continues to build that point. We see mighty works of the plagues – we see the mighty work of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to redeem us from our sins, and then if they have not got the point, if they have not made the connections, he draws it out for them.

Verse 37:

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 Moses. Have you noticed he said 'this Moses' a lot? See, they think they know Moses, but they do not know the real Moses, because the real Moses is not against Christ. The real Moses is with Christ. Stephen is trying to tell them this is the real Moses. Notice what this Moses said, "God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers."

Do you know what Moses said after that? Stephen leaves it off, and I think he leaves it off intentionally. If you go to Deuteronomy where Moses actually spoke this, here is what he said, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers,—it is to him you shall listen —" You should listen to him; you should do what he says! As Stephen is quoting that, they probably would have finished that quote in their minds. So, what is Stephen trying to say? – *Are you listening to that prophet? We have that prophet. His name is Jesus. Are you listening to the prophet Moses told you to listen to?* – The obvious answer

is no. The synagogue leaders are not listening to the prophet that Moses spoke about.

Verse 38:

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 to us.

Now virtually every commentator that I looked at this week drew upon that word congregation. The word, congregation, in the Greek is the word, ***Ecclesia***, which we know is the word we get for 'church.' Why does Stephen, in his speech, use that word that the New Testament uses to talk about Jesus' church and apply it to Moses and the people in the wilderness? He is trying to draw parallels between Moses' people and Jesus' people. The people who are following Jesus now are those people from old who have now become new. Those people who had faith in the Lord and who correctly followed Moses are the ones who are now the church. The church is not some deviation from the Old Testament story; it is the fulfillment of it. There is a new congregation now that is led by the Lord Jesus Christ, and He is not only with us, He is the head of it! Stephen is trying to say that Moses had a church in the wilderness, and Jesus has a church that is being built right now. He is asking are you with the church, or are you outside of the very people of God?

Notice what happened to Moses who is with this congregation at the end of verse 38, "He received living oracles to give to us." Moses, he was not just the rescuer and redeemer, he is also the revealer of God to the people. Moses went up on the mountain. He received God's Word and he brought it down to the people. God wrote His word on tablets and Moses brought it down to the people. So God has said that Moses is not only redeemer, he is also the revealer of God to the people. He revealed what God said and who God is. These are living oracles; this is the law. But remember that their thought is he is against the law.

I think Stephen is trying to draw just a little bit of a parallel of when Moses went up on a mountain and brought down God's word to us. Well, who is Jesus? Jesus is God who came from Heaven to dwell among us. Like Moses

went up, got some words from God, and brought them down. Jesus is God who came down to live among us. Do you see how much greater Jesus is than Moses? Moses is the revealer of God, Jesus perfectly revealed God as we see in the New Testament when He said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." In other words, if you have looked in my face you have seen God. That is who Jesus is! Yet these synagogue leaders have missed that. They have missed the revelation of God that came through Jesus Christ.

Next, we are going to get to some of the problems. And the problems are because the forefathers rebelled. The synagogue leaders are no different. And we today, in 2021, we are no different than they were. We share a common problem. The common problem is we have hearts that love the world, and we have hands that love our own work. That is the common problem that threads us all together.

Verses 39–42:

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.

So Moses brought down God's word, the word they are accusing Stephen to be against, and their forefathers didn't obey it! Then Stephen begins to talk about the rebellion. What was really going on? Why did Israel constantly reject Moses? Why did they reject the word? Why did they not obey the Lord? Well, the problem is they had hearts that actually loved Egypt more than they loved the Kingdom of God. They had hearts that wanted the world more than they wanted God. So while Moses was up on the mountain getting the law of God, they got his brother, Aaron, to make a god for them to make sacrifices and offerings to, that they could worship. And, it says they did this so they could rejoice in the works of their hands, so they could be happy in what they made, in what they did, in what they produced, in what they contributed. They wanted to say look at what we

did, look at how good we are; look at this thing that we made and that we did.

I think what Stephen is trying to do is to expose a common link between these synagogue leaders and their forefathers. Their forefathers rejoiced in the work of their hands, and that was also the synagogue leaders. They love the work of their hands, they love the customs, they love the festivals, they love the temples, they love the sacrifice, they love the prayers, they love the pennants, and they love the things that they had to do to feel like they were ok with God. They wanted the work of their hands. They wanted to have a religion that says – I have done these things, so therefore, God must do things for me. I have been good so now God is going to show love to me. –

I think we see that this is not just a common thread between their forefathers and the synagogue leaders, but also us. We, too, often want to rejoice in the work of our hands. We want to have a part in it, right? When we come to church, we know the gospel is only about faith in Christ and His finished work, but we want to work, we want to do, we want to have a part in it. We want to know that our church membership, our Bible reading, our prayers, our tithes, somehow gives us brownie points with God and somehow makes us better than the person who does not give. We want some works, we want to say – Look, God...look what I did. Look how good I am. Now give me what I deserve. – As people, apart from the Spirit we do not love the gospel. We love the work of our hands. We want to do something to make ourselves right with God.

Stephen and the Christians are trying to tell these synagogue leaders and all of their Jewish brothers and sisters that the works of their hands do not work, and what they need to do is to repent and trust in other hands, trust in the hands and work of Jesus Christ. They had the law, but they can't keep it. They have the temple, but they can't keep it. They have these festivals, but they don't keep them. The work of their hands doesn't work. What they need is the finished work of Christ. They need the gospel. But as people who are religious, we do not like that, because we don't like to be a charity case. We do not like somebody to give us something. We want to earn it, we want to buy it, we want to feel proud about it, and the

gospel cuts through all of that. It is the “by grace you have been saved through faith...so that no one may boast.” That is what the gospel is! We cannot have any pride in the works of our hands and also have Jesus. The two do not go together. You have to believe your hands are useless and want Jesus’ hands on your behalf – His death, burial, resurrection for you on the cross.

Verses 42–43:

But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of Heaven, 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 Rephan, the images that you made to worship; and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.’

Do you know that “gave them over” language? Paul uses that in Romans Chapter 1, not just to talk about the Jews, but talk about everyone, the whole world. Those who want the works of their hand – God gives it to them and says go for it. In other words, if you want your own gods, if you want to work hard to try to earn your own salvation, I am just going to let you have it because do you know what God knows? It is not going to lead to happiness, joy, and the fruits of the Spirit. It is going to lead to despair, guilt, and shame. It is going to leave you empty rather than full. You will go into exile trying to save yourself, so God gave them over.

This sounds just like Romans Chapter 1 where God gave humanity over to love what we want and do what we want. God is giving us over to worship the gods that we want to worship. Why? It is an act of grace because he knows those gods will not lead us to satisfaction, they will lead us to emptiness, and in our emptiness we might just turn back to Him. Some of us are so close, we sometimes you have to go far away to realize we need the Lord. So in the text, God was giving them over to a disordered worship, and the same thing can happen with us. We do not worship the one true God; we worship gods we make up. We can make Christianity into a god and do the Christian things, follow the Christian ways, and we have a good religion, but we do not have the God of Christianity. We do not have Christ.

That was the synagogue leaders. They had made Judaism to be their worship, not the God of Judaism. They didn't even know when He left the building. They didn't even know when He showed up. They thought it was a stranger and they tried to kill Him. That is how close they were, but yet how far away they really were and the same can be true for us.

Verses 44–48:

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 a house [temple] for him. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet [Isaiah] says, 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?'

Stephen delivers the final blow to their thought about the temple. Do you see their problem? Stephen is not saying the temple is a bad thing. The temple was part of God's plan because God wanted to dwell in a place with His people, so that they could come and they would be centralized, so he could bring about the Messiah. The temple was always pointing to Jesus, God was never confined to a temple, to a box, and that is what these synagogue leaders are thinking... *Our God lives in a temple...* Stephen is saying no, the whole earth is His! He made everything. He does not just dwell in a temple; He dwells in the whole earth. God is everywhere, always. And now, that temple has a big tear in the veil. God is not there anymore. They had their whole worship centered on a temple, yet the temple was always pointing to Jesus. Stephen is saying Jesus is here and now the temple is obsolete, so come to Jesus and become His temple, His people where His presence will dwell.

Now, Stephen is going to give the punchline. If they have not put together that he is not just talking about the forefathers, he is talking about them, now he is going to make it very clear.

Verses 51–52:

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 now betrayed and murdered...

How would you like those words spoken to you? You always resist the Holy Spirit. Always resisting, that was their forefathers, "As your fathers did, so do you." It says all the prophets talked about the Righteous One. Who is the Righteous One? The Righteous One is Jesus. Who did Moses talk about and forecast? Jesus. They killed all the prophets that spoke about the Righteous One who they have now betrayed and murdered. So in case they missed all the connections, now they finally get what Stephen is clearly saying – Your forefathers missed the whole story. The whole story was about Jesus. And they killed everyone who spoke about the coming of Jesus. And now, just like your forefathers, you killed the Righteous One. You killed Jesus, the very one who came to save. –

Verse 53:

...you received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.

So, not only did they kill Jesus, but the other question is what about the law? Not only did they reject Moses because they reject Jesus, they also do not obey the law. They told Stephen that they love the law and he is against it. They say – you are against the customs, you are against the temple, you are against the law, and you are against Moses – But Stephen is saying – no, I am not against any of those things. The fulfillment of all those things has come! He is the Righteous One, and you are the ones who are holding the law, thinking you are righteous, but do you notice the law says the Righteous One? There is only one who is Righteous, there is only one who actually fulfilled the law, His name is Jesus, and you just killed Him. – They missed the whole story. They were so close to the things of God. They were inside the synagogues, inside the temple, hearing the stories. They were so close to the things of God yet missing the whole thing, and when Gods redeemer comes, they kill Him.

Verses 54–60:

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. 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.

As you can imagine, Stephen's sermon did not go well with them. They did not like his message and we see Stephen's end. So here are a people who should have repented after the sermon, but instead they buckle down and resist. Those who already resisted the Spirit are now resisting it as well. They should have been like – *Oh, we missed it! All of this is about Jesus and we just killed Him! But we can have grace and mercy because Christ died for me as well, and I can repent and believe* – But instead of repenting, they resist, and they go and drag Stephen out. They are getting ready to stone him, and they get so angry because Stephen gets a vision of Heaven. He sees the glory of God and he sees his Savior. He sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

Why is Jesus standing? The scholars kind of go crazy about this because we see in Hebrews, we see in Paul, this theology of Jesus being seated at the right hand of God. The theology is that our salvation is finished. When Jesus ascended, He sat down. There is no more work to be done. He is not a priest that has to keep giving sacrifices for our sins. He was the finished sacrifice once and for all. He is done. Salvation is accomplished. But now, when Stephen looks up he sees Jesus, not sitting down, but standing up. So why is Jesus standing? Well it is definitely not because something else needs to take place in our salvation. Our salvation is completely secure. I think what we see, that several have pointed out in various commentaries, is that perhaps Jesus is standing to join in, to look at, to come to the aid of

His servant, Stephen. Here Stephen is professing Jesus before these men, and here is Jesus standing before His Father professing that this is His servant. Stephen is standing with Jesus, and Jesus is standing with him. Jesus is joining in, and Stephen is represented. Jesus is there in his suffering, He is not apathetic, He is not just taking a backseat. No, He is engaged in this moment. How good does that make us feel, that Jesus engages when we suffer? His heart is drawn to us. In our suffering, He sees and He knows what we are going through. He is seated, in the sense of our salvation, but He is standing and active in our ongoing sanctification and security. He is there for us. He is not going to let us go, He is not going to let anything happen to us. Jesus knows Stephen is going to lose his life, but in the moment that he loses his life, Jesus is going to welcome him into the Kingdom forever.

Stephen even prays just like Jesus – Receive my spirit and forgive these guys. That is what Jesus prayed. Their forefathers killed the prophets they killed Jesus, and now these synagogue leaders are killing the one who is standing with Jesus and praying like Jesus. They are not repenting, they are resisting. But what we are going to see is that even as Stephen loses his life, it does not stop the church. It actually propels it. It takes the gospel to the nations.

So what do we do with this? How do we at Hardin Baptist Church do this? I get that the synagogue leaders were too close to God to get what is happening in the gospel, and they messed up. But what do we, at Hardin Baptist Church in 2021, do with a message like this? I will give you at least two responses.

1. We need to see and lean into the courage of Stephen.

Stephen was courageous. He said things that needed to be said, even though it would cost him greatly. And we live in a time, in a moment, where we at times are going to be called to say things that might cost us greatly. It might cost us a friendship, it might cost us a job, it might cost us some security, it might cost us some skin, or it might cost us our lives. I am not talking about you saying things that get you into trouble. You can say dumb stuff that is not according to God's will, and you will get a lot of

shame for it. I am not talking about those things. I am saying that when you need to speak up for the gospel, when you need to speak up for Christ in a situation that you might have a little skin in the game, I want you to think back to Stephen, who had the courage to boldly proclaim the gospel in the face of opposition. We need to be able to lean in to that same kind of courage, noticing that when we stand for Christ, He is standing with us. That is good news.

2. Are you perhaps too close to the things of God that you are actually really far away?

You have been to church your whole life, you have been to every VBS, you have been to kids camp, middle school camp, you went on all the mission trips, you are raising your kids in the Bible, and you are doing all the churchy stuff. But somehow, you are so close to God that you have actually missed God and you are like these synagogue leaders. They are doing everything right, yet they are missing the one thing, and that is Jesus.

How do you evaluate that, how do you know? First, I think you look at your heart and you look at your hands. The problem with the people of Israel was their hearts actually loved Egypt. Their hearts actually love the world. So when it comes to your heart, that inner being that nobody knows, that nobody sees, and those secret things only you know about, what do you really love most? Do you really love the world and you most? Or, do you love Christ and His Kingdom most? Really ask yourself that question. Where is my number one love? Is it Christ and His Kingdom? Or, is it me and this world – my comfort and what I want? Does my heart really love Jesus, or do I love Egypt?

Secondly, look at your hands. What are you boasting in? What are you rejoicing in? The people of Israel they boasted in the works of their hands. They rejoiced that they could build gods, and they could work for God, that they could do well, they could keep the law, they could keep the temple clean, and they could bring their sacrifices. They rejoiced in the work of their hands so they were not able to see that they needed the work of another man's hands, and that is the God-man Jesus Christ.

What about you? When comes to Christianity, we can make Christianity into a 'rejoicing in our hands' kind of a movement. We are reading, we are praying, we are going to church, we have got our kids; we are doing the checklist. We are doing the right things so we feel very proud because we are good people, and those who are outside are not, so there is this separation. We are the ones God loves, and they are the ones that God doesn't love because we have deserved it. We have earned it. We feel very boastful and prideful because look how good we are. That is the boast of your hands.

See, the gospel cuts through all of that. The gospel says the work of your hands deserves death because you have sinned against God. But the good news is the work of Jesus' hands is perfect, holy, and righteous. His work on the cross, His death, burial, and resurrection is all the work you need to be made right with God. That is what the gospel is – you saying I don't want the work of my hands; I want the work of His hands. I want the finished work of Him on the cross, crucified and raised again on the third day for me. I want that. I am abandoning whatever I have. Whatever is good is all rubbish now, as Paul says, and I just want Christ. I want to know Him. I want to follow Him. –

See, some of us have been so close for so long that we just got used to doing, and it just feels good. But some of us who are close are actually far away. We need a wakeup call like the synagogue leaders got. We need a wakeup call like me when I heard a guy say he was called into ministry, he was preaching, he grew a church, and then he got saved. It was then that I realized my true story. My whole life I was so close to God that I was actually far away. That may be you right now. You are so close to God that you are actually far away. You have a heart that loves the world and you have hands that love to work, and both of those are keeping you from Jesus. What you need is a heart that loves Him, and hands that are surrendered to His work on the cross.