



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Acts 6:1–15

“The Paul Before Paul”

TRANSCRIPT

So now let’s turn to Acts chapter 6 and we’re going to read verse 1 through verse 15, which is the entire 6th chapter of the Acts of our Lord, through the Holy Spirit and the Apostles.

And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations. Of course, the “Grecians” is a term that refers to the Hellenistic Jewish Christians; that is, Jewish Christians who lived outside of the land of Palestine. And it would be natural, of course, that those who lived in the land might have some feelings concerning those who, while Jewish Christians, lived outside the land. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them and said,

“It is not reason [or, it is not good] that we should leave the Word of God and serve tables. Wherefore brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report [that is, testified to by others], full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the Word.” And the saying pleased the whole multitude and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost; and Philip; and Prochorus; and Nicanor; and Timon; and Parmenas; and Nicolas, a proselyte of Antioch—whom they set before the apostles. And when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them. And the

Word of God increased and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly. And a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.

That’s a very interesting statement: “A great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.” One might in reading this ask oneself the question, why the priests? What was it that caused them to be responsive at this time? Let’s say a speculative Word about it during the message.

And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people. Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen.

Since Jewish people who lived outside of the land of Palestine were individuals who—if they had lived there for a number of generations—might find it difficult to understand Aramaic or Mishnaic Hebrew, or whatever was spoken in the land at that time. They had their synagogues too where Greek was spoken. We’re not sure how many synagogues in Jerusalem there were for Hellenistic Jews. This particular verse has been interpreted by some interpreters as suggesting there were five synagogues in Jerusalem for Hellenistic Jews. Probably—if you’ll look at the text more carefully—probably, two are referred to: the synagogue of the Libertines and Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and then another synagogue of them of Cilicia and of Asia. But at any rate, Stephen, being a Hellenistic Jew but a Christian also, attended the synagogue and engaged in arguments—discussions over the Word of God. Those are good things.

And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake. Then they suborned men, which said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.”

Now, of course, Stephen didn't speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God, but they misunderstood what he was saying. And incidentally, they misunderstood things our Lord said. So we should never expect that we would not be misunderstood by some when we teach the Word of God. So when people respond at times very negatively and misunderstand what we try to say, we should expect that. There will be some who will not understand and will think that we have said something that we have not said. It's an experience that all who preach the gospel have, including our Lord, and so it's not surprising that Stephen had this experience.

And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes and came upon him; and caught him; and brought him to the council; and set up false witnesses which said, “This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous Words against this holy place and the law.”

So they were accusing him of saying things which he didn't say. Just like a person may say if you believe in the sovereignty of God, then God's the author of sin as far as you are concerned. Now you, of course, would not say that, but nevertheless, they misunderstand. And so here, they misunderstood Stephen.

For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us. And all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.

In other Words, God vindicated his servant and though they misunderstood him and took him wrong, God vindicated his servant. And so we can always expect if we teach the Word of God—in sincerity, truthfully—men may misunderstand. Men may rebel. Men may fight. Men may martyr the preachers and believers in the Word of God, but God will vindicate them and vindicate His Word. So we really have nothing to fear, do we? And Stephen had a short life, but men have had

literally hundreds and hundreds of years, admiring the testimony of this remarkable first great martyr of the Christian church. O, to have the spirit of a Stephen in our day.

Let's bow together in a moment of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee for Thy Word and we thank Thee for this marvelous servant of Thine, Stephen: a deacon, an evangelist, a faithful man who had a tremendous influence upon the Apostle Paul and whose ministry continued in the great apostles and continues to this very day in Believers Chapel. We thank Thee and praise Thee for the privilege of studying the life and ministry of Stephen and, Lord, we do pray, give us something of the disposition of this faithful man. We thank Thee and praise Thee for the preaching of the gospel today, and wherever it goes forth, Lord, we ask Thy blessing upon it. Bless the whole church today.

We especially ask Thy blessing upon those mentioned in our Calendar of Concern, those in whom we have special interest. We pray that Thou wilt meet the needs that are mentioned in that concern, as it should please Thee. We give Thee thanks for them and we give Thee thanks for the privilege of prayer. And, Lord, Thou knowest their needs; we ask that out of Thy great and mighty power and mercy, minister to them. Bless the ministry of the Word of God today, and bless the ministry of the Chapel. We are grateful to Thee for the way in which Thou hast used the tapes.

We thank Thee for the testimony of this man from Ireland, who has entered into the new life, through the preaching of Bill and the ministry of those in the tape room who have been sending out the tapes sacrificially. We know, Lord, that Thou will reward faithful service. Now, we commit this meeting to Thee and we ask Thy blessing upon us.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

[Message] This morning we are turning to the 6th chapter of the book of the Acts, and the subject is “The Paul before Paul.” As you read through the book of the Acts, you'll notice that there is a new epoch in the evangelization of the nations here. And it will lead us on to chapter 11 in verse

26; that is, from the Hebrew Christian disciples of the city of Jerusalem, to the Greek Christians in Antioch. But in between, we have Stephen, a Hellenistic Jewish Christian, whose ministry is set out here in the 6th and 7th chapters of the book of the Acts. This is the first step in the recognition of the Hellenistic element in the church, and especially, it is the emergence of Stephen as an important character. Stephen’s name is the Greek Word for crown, *stephanos*. Beyond this and beyond the fact that he was evidently a Hellenistic Jewish Christ, we know little about him.

We do know, however, something about his doctrinal views. He had apparently taken very seriously some of the things that the Lord Jesus had said, and very seriously some of the things that had happened when Jesus was crucified.

The Lord Jesus had talked about the destruction of His body and that in three days He would raise it up. The apostles did not understand that, but later on they came to understand that our Lord was speaking about the fact that He would one day be put to death and in three days He would rise from the dead. And, out of the experience of the death and resurrection of our Lord, there would arise a new body—the church of Jesus Christ.

And evidently, Stephen came to understand this. He understood that as a result of the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord, things had changed. And there also, he had remembered evidently that when our Lord died on Calvary’s cross, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from top to bottom, signifying the doing away with the Mosaic cultus (the Levitical cultus) and that no longer were sacrifices to be offered. Things had changed remarkably.

People were no longer to worship in the temple in Jerusalem, but as John says so plainly, giving the Words of our Lord, “We worship God in spirit and in truth now.”

Stephen, evidently, had studied and had come to an understanding of these things and he was setting them forth. But he was misunderstood. And when he talked about the doing away of the Mosaic Law, the Hellenistic Jews took that as an attack on Moses. When he said that worship was no longer to be located in a physical temple in Jerusalem but that the Lord Jesus had formed a temple made of the people of God (with Himself as the chief cornerstone), they misunderstood that too.

And so, they were saying things about Stephen that were not true because they did not understand the things that he was saying. He was saying, simply, the Law is abrogated. We now worship in spirit and in truth. There is an equality between Jew and Gentile, in the approach to God. The Jew no longer had the priority that he had in Old Testament times and the Gentiles did not have to become Jews in order to enter into the relationship with the Lord God that was proper. But they misunderstood and, of course, it got Stephen into quite a bit of trouble.

Actually, the things that Stephen talks about are the things that the Apostle Paul later will develop in his epistles. In one sense, Gamaliel is not the teacher of Paul but Stephen is the teacher of Paul. Now, we know that because Paul had a relationship with Stephen that's set out plainly in the Word of God. In the very next chapter, after Stephen has preached his sermon and they are going to stone him to death, we read in the 58th verse of chapter 7, “They cast him out of the city and they stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.”

Now, since the Apostle himself was also from Tarsus and thus was an individual who might well attend the Hellenistic Jews' synagogues also, it's entirely possible—I think rather probable—that the Apostle Paul had been in the synagogue, when Stephen set forth his position. And, it's entirely possible that the Apostle Paul had argued with him because he was well taught in Judaism.

As a matter of fact, in his Galatians' epistle remember he said, “He had advanced beyond his contemporaries in Judaism.” So, he would have been called forward as a champion to defend the Judaistic viewpoint in debates with Stephen. But Stephen won those debates and the chances are that the Apostle Paul began to study the Scriptures in a new way, when he saw how Stephen used the Word of God and refuted him in the arguments.

Now, that's not specifically stated. We only know that Stephen and Paul did have that relationship. And we do know that Stephen attended these Hellenistic Jewish synagogues. And we know that since the Apostle was from Tarsus that he probably was in those synagogues from time to time, too.

So, Stephen is a remarkable character and he is the link between the ministry that is gathering around Peter and the ministry in the latter part of this book that will gather around the Apostle Paul.

There is another thing that comes to our mind when we think about Stephen and it is this: there's no necessary connection between length of service and greatness of work. Stephen only lived, so far as we know, a relatively short time, and certainly a relatively short time as a Christian. And yet, we still remember him and he has been remembered down through the centuries as a great Christian worker. It's not necessary for us to serve forty or fifty years in order to gain some recognition before the Lord, if we are faithful. And Stephen only served a short time, but he served faithfully and serving faithfully, one sees the greatness of the man and the greatness of his work, under God. For Stephen would be the first to point out that it was the power of God's grace that enabled him to do what he did in his short time here.

When we look at the history of the Christian church, we see many people just like Stephen. Martyn of Yale, a magnificent testimony of a young man who, shortly after he graduated from the university, went out to the mission field and died on the mission field as a young man; but whose dedication to the service of the Lord Jesus Christ caught the imagination and interest of the Christian church.

Henry Martyn, who went out to Persia and as a young man died after a very fruitful, brief ministry for our Lord. And due to some of the things that he did (particularly the translation of the Bible into the languages of the people of the Far East), Henry Martyn will always be remembered. And yet, he died young.

Or Robert Murray McCheyne, of the land of Scotland, a man who died at about the age of thirty, but of whom people who are evangelical Christians in Scotland still speak today.

Or, if you turn to the Bible, of course, one of the outstanding characters is Able, in the 4th chapter of the book of Genesis, who lived a very short time before Cain slew him. But he left his

name upon the page of Holy Scripture because he was faithful in bringing the offering that God desired, the offering of the animal sacrifice.

And so, down through the years, Abel has been speaking by that faithful act. Faithfulness is the thing that God desires of his saints. It’s not time of service necessarily, it’s faithfulness. And these men were faithful. And Stephen was faithful and so, he’s honored as the first great church martyr.

Well, the chapter begins with an incident that doesn’t seem to be too important—the appointment of the seven—and yet, there are some interesting things about it. In fact, most students of the Word of God, believe that probably we have here at least the beginning of the office of deacon in the Christian church. The term deacon itself is not used, but the root from which the term deacon is derived is found three times in the passage. And the service that the seven were to perform is the kind of service that a deacon would perform. And so, generally speaking, the Christian church has believed that the office of deacon had its beginnings here. Some think that all these men were, were simply men appointed to give out alms. That may be true. But it does seem that perhaps there is more to it than that.

There is, of course, some very, very significant good that arises out of the experience here and I rather like to think of this as the way in which things in the church ought to arise. You’ll notice the apostles did not anticipate what might have been the need. In fact, if they had anticipated what might have been the need, then the people would not have understood, really, the necessity of these seven men. And so, they waited until the experiences of the Christian church demanded this, and then there was acceptance of what they determined to do. That’s not a bad principle. The appointment arose out of the need that came in the local church.

Well, there was a murmuring. And it was natural that this should take place because, remember, in the early church in Jerusalem, which was largely a Jewish church—never forget that—largely a Jewish church. God, of course, is fulfilling the Abrahamic promises to the ethnic seed, through the coming of our Lord, and through His sacrifice and through His resurrection, and through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

But there were two kinds of Jews and two kinds of Jewish Christians. There were those who were converted in the land of Palestine—Palestinian Jewish Christians—and then there were Jewish Christians who came from places outside of Palestine. They were in the—what was called the Dispersion. And they, too, had become believers. But they spoke Greek primarily, and not Hebrew primarily, or Aramaic. And so, there was a definite wall between them and it was natural that they should have some feelings with regard to one another. Those who were in the land naturally felt themselves a bit superior to those who lived outside of the land. And perhaps, they who lived outside the land, with their worldly attitude may have thought that they were somewhat superior to those who had stayed in the land.

But you can see how a murmuring might arise among them and, particularly if the widows of one party were neglected a bit in the daily help that was given by the church to them. And that was the cause of the difficulty. And, as a result of this, there arose a murmuring of the Grecian Jewish Christians against the Palestinian Jewish Christians, claiming that their widows were neglected in the daily service.

And so the apostles, recognizing the difficulty, hearing about it no doubt and being called upon by people to do something about it, they called a multitude of the disciples together.

Incidentally, you’ll notice “disciples” here is a term that refers simply to believers. They called them together and they said, “It’s not good that we should leave the Word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.” And, “...We will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the Word.”

Now, there are several striking things about that. In the first place, the apostles say, “It’s not good that we should leave the Word of God, and serve tables.” Now, there are a couple of things that I want you to notice. First of all, you can see that there’s nothing wrong with preaching full-time. The Apostles were saying, we do not want to spend our time in the ministration; we feel our responsibility is to pray and to minister the Word of God.

The second thing is very simple to see too, because they say, in effect, the care of the soul is more important than the care of the body. Now, that runs contrary to the feelings of a lot of people, even in the Christian church. We are often told that it is more important (really because the gospel is not preached by individuals who profess our Lord) to take care of the body. And, often it is something like this: Let’s put taking care of the body first, then they will listen to us if we talk to them about the soul. Well, there’s a measure of truth in that if it were true that people who put care of the body first really followed it up with the preaching of the gospel. But almost always, individuals who say that are individuals who have toned down the preaching of the gospel and often do not preach the gospel and, in fact, deny the gospel of the New Testament.

Now, our Lord does not, of course, say that it’s not right to take care of the poor. Our Lord was an individual who gave himself to the healing and the ministry to the poor, and God blessed it. But what he is saying is that in priorities, the care of the soul is more important than the care of the spirit. And, even if we should neglect entirely the body, but be the instrumentality of bringing a soul to the possession of eternal life, we should do for them the greatest thing that one could possibly do for them.

So, the care of the soul is more important than the care of the body. Our Lord did not preach a social gospel. Now He preached the gospel with social implications, but He did not preach a social gospel. One thinks of an illustration of this from John chapter 12, when in the house in Bethany, Mary of Bethany went into the back of the house, brought out her very precious pound of ointment of spikenard—very precious, very costly—took that bottle of perfume and broke it and poured it out over our Lord. One can figure out the value of it, and it comes to about an annual wage of a worker, in the land of Palestine. It was expensive perfume.

Judas prevailed upon the other apostles to object and, in fact, they were indignant, the accounts say. And Judas was their spokesman and so he says, “Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence and given to the poor?” Now Judas, of course, was a person who was stealing from the property of the apostles. He was the one who carried the treasury, the bag, the purse. One

sees this in many of the grandiose political schemes that we see today, advanced by our politicians. Give this, give that, give the other thing; and in the process of the giving, many people put their hands in the till and get rich. And the poor actually get very little of what the people have supposedly given them. That always happens for human nature is just the same.

But the Lord Jesus, in replying, says something very significant. He said, in the first place, leave Mary alone. She has understood something you don't understand. She understands that I'm going to die. And she has been keeping this against the day of my burying, to anoint Him.

In other Words, she had understood that He was the Messiah. And then Jesus adds, “The poor always you have with you, but Me [emphatic in the Greek text], but Me ye have not always.” In other Words, I am more important than the perfume.

Now, our Lord is speaking truthfully. He's not speaking in a boasting way. He's speaking truthfully. He was the Messianic King. And to minister to Him is more important than to minister to the poor. In other Words, there is a priority that we need to recognize.

And so, the apostles recognize some of that and so they say to the church; select some men, let them take care of this important ministry of caring for the widows, but we're going to give ourselves to the ministry of the Word of God and to prayer.

Now, I like that very much because you see, when they say they are going to give ourselves to the ministry of the Word of God and prayer, they are saying in effect, that we must give ourselves to that which is really important. And they are saying also this: That no matter how much work you do in the preaching of the Word of God, no matter how much work you do in the testifying to the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, if you do not accompany that with earnest, fervent supplication to God, you are throwing away your labor. We must give ourselves to the ministry of the Word of God and prayer. Plowing, sowing, watering—all of those things are helpful for the producing of a crop, but it is God who gives the increase. So, Paul later tells the church at Corinth. And the various ministers of the Word of God—like Apollos, and like Paul, and others—they do some of these things. They plant the seed. They do the plowing. They do some of the watering, but it is God who

really blesses the Word. And if we do not give ourselves to prayer, we’re not going to see fruitful issue of the preaching of the Word.

That means that you and I, who hear the Word of God taught in our Sunday school and in our services, if we do not give ourselves to prayer that God will bless the ministry of the Word of God (no matter how much those of us who do the preaching preach), we shall have ineffectual results. We’re going to give ourselves to the ministry of the Word of God and prayer. And so, in response to that, the church saw that that was a good idea. And, they chose seven men. Stephen is at the beginning of the list. He’s a servant, and they chose these servants. And I think, probably, we have here the beginning of the office of deacon.

The deacons were men who gave themselves to the ministry of the Word of God, under the elders’ direction. The one—the two things about the deacons that are omitted—and the two things that distinguish an elder from a deacon were these: both of these groups of men should be spiritual men, concerned men, but it is never said with reference to the deacons in the chapter in 1 Timothy chapter 3 where Paul speaks about deacons, that deacons have governing or supervisory responsibilities. And it is never said that they have teaching responsibilities. Those responsibilities belong to the elders and to the gifted men of the church.

So, it would seem that the deacons are assistants or deputies of the elders; they handle the property, they handle the services, do the ushering, take care of the nursery. But, there is one other thing that we should not forget and that is that deacons, though they hold the office of deacon or servant in the church, they also may preach the Word of God if they have a spiritual gift. For example, we read later that Philip is an evangelist and he preaches the Word. But he was one of the deacons. And, if anybody preached the Word effectively, it was Stephen who will preach in just a moment—obviously, an evangelist too.

So, a deacon may have a spiritual gift of utterance; but, nevertheless, his service as a deacon is a service under the elders. All of us have a spiritual gift; some of us have spiritual gifts of utterance. Some may be elders and some of them may be deacons, and some may be neither elder nor deacon.

Spiritual office is to be distinguished from spiritual gifts. And so, Stephen and Philip had the office of deacon, but they also had the spiritual gift of evangelist.

They chose Stephen. They chose the seven. They laid their hands upon them and in effect, they were told to carry on their work in the midst of the believers there in the city of Jerusalem. You'll notice, they do not communicate any new powers to them. These were men who were filled with faith and the Holy Ghost. They were men who already had been brought into relationship by God to Himself, in such a way that they were submissive to Him. What happened was that simply the elders identified themselves with these men, recognizing them as doing the service of a deacon in the church.

In fact, so far as I can tell, the church did this under the direction of the Apostles. Let me point out one thing to you that sometimes has been overlooked. The church selected the men, but they selected the men under the direction of the elders. In other Words, the elders delegated them the responsibility of selecting the seven. There was no voting in the church; no voting on the elders; no voting on the deacons. There was no voting in the Apostolic church. The church was under the supervision of elders. And here, when they were selected by the church under the authority of the elders, it is the elders who finally recognize these men and thus, they are authoritatively serving in the church.

Unfortunately, we live in a society in which so many things are done contrary to the practices of the early church, that it's very difficult for us in our minds to go back to the situation that existed then. There is no indication whatsoever of any voting, in the New Testament church. In fact, there was no indication whatsoever of anyone having the office of pastor in the local church. The gift of pastor-teacher, like the gift of evangelist, and the gift of teaching or the gift of exhortation, these utterance gifts existed. But they did not carry with them any requirement of office.

I challenge you, if you think this is strange, I ask you to do one thing before you think it's strange: read the New Testament. Just read through it carefully, looking for those things. You will

find the apostle never addresses a letter to anyone as “the pastor” of a church. It doesn’t exist. It doesn’t exist.

So, I challenge you: prove me wrong. Read the New Testament and see what you find. I have no doubt if you study the New Testament, you’ll finally come and you’ll say, I think you’re basically right. Oh, you may have a little thing to pick with me here or there, because some things you have to speculate about. But that thing is something we don’t have to speculate about. It’s plainly set out in the Word of God. But often people have the idea that because it’s been done this way by the churches, it must be done.

Do you know that there are literally hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of churches, all over the Western World that do not vote and do not have anyone who is the pastor of a church? Do you know that? There are not too many in Dallas. But they exist all over the world. We are so provincial. So, study the Scriptures. We won’t fight over this—at least, I won’t fight—but I contend though, I think it’s true. And I think that’s true.

That’s why the elders in Believers Chapel have sought to give oversight in the assembly as they have.

Now, in verse 7, as a result of this decision, things begin to happen in that church again. And we read: “And the Word of God increased; and the number of disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.”

Oh, I wish I could talk about this. I said I was going to say something about it so I better just say something about it. How is it, do you think, that the priests are especially singled out for faith? Let me suggest this. In the Old Testament, in the Levitical prescriptions, two chapters are devoted to the way in which Israel should take care of the lepers. Now remember, when the preaching of the gospel is to take place, Isaiah said, lepers are going to be healed. And then, our Lord Jesus, when He comes on the scene, lepers are healed by Him. It was a Messianic sign; that is, that He was the Messiah. He was fulfilling what Isaiah set out in the Old Testament.

Now, it was said in the Old Testament that a certain prescribed ritual was to take place, when a leper was cleansed. He was to bring a certain kind of offering; I cannot go into detail. The only thing unusual about it, if you want to look at it in chapter 14 of the book of Leviticus, it had to do with two birds. He had to bring this prescribed ritual and there was a prescribed ritual for which the priest was to go; and then, the priest was to pronounce the individual clean who had been cleansed of leprosy. Now, I can just imagine. [Now, remember, there is one other point I need to mention. For fifteen hundred years before the time of our Lord, no leper, so far as the record is concerned, had been healed in Israel. Naaman had been healed, but he was Assyrian. Miriam, back in the earliest days, had leprosy. No other person had been healed.] Now, here, the apostles come on the scene, our Lord comes on the scene, and the lepers are being healed. And so, what do they do? Well, they go to the priests and they say, “We’ve been healed. Isn’t there something in the Law about a ceremony we are to carry out?” And the priests say, the professors in our theological seminary didn’t tell us anything about that. They didn’t know what to do. So, they had to do what a young preacher has to do when somebody comes and says, “Will you marry us next Wednesday?” And he’s never married anybody before. He rushes off and asks an older preacher, “What in the world shall I do? What kind of ceremony can I give?” And he is feverishly preparing for his marriage ceremony, which he’s never carried out.

So these priests—and in the course of these people who are streaming to the priests—they discover this in the Old Testament. They discover also that the Messiah was said to be one who would heal of leprosy. And, during the course of these lepers coming to the priests, many of those priests are brought to the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. They recognize that this is really the Messianic ministry, and so a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.

Now that’s my speculation, with regard to that little line in verse 7. It’s speculation. When we get to heaven, you may find it happened a little bit differently. But if it happened just like that, you can say, “Dr. Johnson was right again...” [Laughter] “Just like he was about pastors and churches.”

Well, now, the last part of the chapter—I hope you don’t take me too seriously—now, the last part of the chapter is an account of Stephen and his controversy in the synagogues which he attended. And, as we’ve been talking about, Stephen went into those Hellenistic Jewish synagogues and when the question of the Messianic ministry came up, he took the Old Testament, and he pointed out from the Old Testament that the Lord Jesus was the fulfillment of the Law. And that when our Lord was crucified on the cross and when He was raised from the dead and the veil of the temple was rent in twain from top to bottom, that signified that the Mosaic Law was done away with. And furthermore, since He had ascended to the right hand of the Father, and the Holy Spirit has been given and individuals have been baptized by the Holy Spirit into the one body—the one temple of God, the church of Believers—there is no longer worship on the earth, but worship in spirit and in truth.

Now, I can understand why they said of him, not understanding the truth yet, “We heard him speak blasphemous Words against Moses (that is, the Law) and against God (that is, the place of the temple).” In verse 13, “This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous Words against this holy place [the temple] and the Law.”

So, Stephen had entered into an understanding of the place of the Law in the ministry of the Word of God. And, if Stephen were here, he would simply say, “By God the Holy Spirit, I came to understand that the Law had been done away with; and now God was forming a body of individuals who were the temple of God, who worshiped Him in spirit and in truth.” In other Words, “I discovered what was the real use of the Law, the real use of the Law was, first of all, to reveal our sin.”

The Jews as well as others—in the Christian church it’s very common—came to think that the Law was given in order that men might be saved by what they do.

Friday night coming home from Chicago, I sat by a Jewish man. I listened to an hour and forty-five minute monologue. Nice man. But he sure loved to talk. I had my Greek and Hebrew Bible with me. I sat down. I had them in my hand.

He said, “What’s that?” He looked at it. He said, “What’s that?”

I said, “It’s the Bible in Hebrew and in Greek.” Well, that evidently impressed him.

He said, “I’m a Jewish man, but I don’t read Hebrew.”

And so, we had a very lengthy talk. It was essentially: we get to heaven by what we do. He said, “Now, I think of heaven and earth like this up here and this down here, and I think of the distance in between as a ladder, measuring our good works.” Now he said, “I know I don’t belong on the top rung of the ladder.” But he said, “I know I don’t belong on the bottom rung, either. I’m somewhere in between.” And he had hope that being somewhere in between, he was going to get to heaven.

Now, you could hardly get a Word in edgewise. There was one real good thing about him. He was going to vote on the right candidate, when the election comes up. [Roaring laughter] Which rather amazed me. But anyway, we dropped that. We didn’t talk politics. He kept talking and finally, somehow or another, I finally managed to get in a Word edgewise.

I said, “By the way, one of your prophets said, ‘All we like have sheep have gone astray. We’ve turned everyone to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.’” And I said, “I don’t think we’re going to get to heaven except through a substitute who bears our penalty and judgment.”

Well, that stopped him for a moment; but he went on talking and near the end of our time when the plane was just about to land, he turned to me and he said, “How do you get to heaven?”

And I said, “Well, you get to heaven by that substitute that Isaiah is speaking about in Isaiah chapter 53, in verse 5.” I said, “You need to read your Old Testament Scriptures, or your Bible.”

And I had a brief Word with him, and as we left, the last Words that he said to me as we parted were, “You mean I’m going to have to get my Bible out and read it?”

I said, “Yes. That’s right. You’re going to have to get your Bible out and read it.”

Well, you see, we have the idea that the Law was given in order that we might be justified by what we do. But the Old Testament Law was given in order that Israel might see her sin and see that

we all cannot measure up. The difficulty is that God does not require that we be on the higher rungs of the ladder. The Word of God commands that we be on the top rung, actually perfect.

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart, with all thy mind, with all thy soul and thy neighbor as thyself, all thy life.”

No one will get to heaven by what they do. The purpose of the Law is to show us that we cannot. There is just one way.

People say, “You mean we don’t have religious freedom?”

Oh yes, we have religious freedom. You have freedom to go to hell, by any religion you want to pick. But there is only one way to get to heaven, and that is through the Lord Jesus Christ. And you have freedom to go that way, as well.

I love that old story of Mr. Ironside, who was preaching in Salt Lake City. It seems to have relevance to us here at Believers Chapel these days. He said—He was much younger then and Dr. Ironside used to preach out on the street corners with the Salvation Army. And he said one time he was preaching in Salt Lake City and there were three hundred Mormons listening to him. And he was preaching the gospel and finally he was interrupted by a surly fellow who came along and said, “Look here, may I ask you a question?”

Dr. Ironside said, “Yes, if you’ll keep it brief, please.”

He said, “I’m an elder in the church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints. I understand you to say from your preaching that we can be saved by grace, apart from human merit. I deny that! And I challenge you to show me a place in the Bible that says that anybody can be saved by grace without works.”

Well, Dr. Ironside is skilled in the use of the Bible. He just opened up the Bible to Romans 4:4 and 5, where it says, “But to him that worketh not but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted to him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh is reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt.”

And then he said he turned to Ephesians 2: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God. Not of works, lest any man should boast.”

“Let me see that,” the Mormon said. And he [Ironside] said, “I handed him the Bible.” And he said, “Let me see that? That’s not in my Bible.”

Ironside said, “I said to him, ‘What kind of Bible do you have? I’m pretty sure it’s there.’ He said, ‘I’ve read my Bible a good many times, but I never saw that.’”

“Well, you just go home tonight,” Dr. Ironside said, “And look it up.”

The man said, “What kind of Bible have you got?”

He said, “Well, this is the Authorized Version.”

The Mormon said, “Oh, that explains it. I’ve got the King James Version.” [Roaring laughter]

Well, Dr. Ironside said, “Perhaps you don’t know that the Authorized Version and the King James Version are the same.”

“Is that so?” he said. “I never knew that. Does yours have the letter to King James on the front of it?” Ironside said yes. “All I’ve got to say is that I’ve never seen that in my Bible and if that’s in the Bible, I’d rather have the book of Mormon, any day.”

And then, Dr. Ironside said, “He ripped out a fearful oath and cursed and damned the Bible.” And Ironside said, “I saw my advantage, so I spoke out at the crowd and I said, ‘Look here, here’s a practical demonstration of the thing I’ve been preaching. Here is an elder in the church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints and he tells us he’s saved by his own works. We’ve just had a sample of his works: cursing and swearing. Now, I come to you as a younger in the church of Jesus Christ of the Former Day Saints, telling you that I am saved by grace alone—without works—and I challenge you to put a detective on my tracks, and if you can find one unholy thing that I’m saying, or one wicked thing that I’m doing, you can proclaim it from the housetops. Grace makes us righteous,” he said.

You see, the purpose of the Law was to bring us to the knowledge of our sin that we might flee to the grace of God through the gospel. And Stephen had come to an understanding of that, that ultimately will be one of the major points of the message of the Apostle Paul.

If you're here this morning and you have never believed in our Lord Jesus Christ, we invite you to acknowledge your sin, that you've broken the law of God, that you cannot possibly love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul. You've already broken the law of God—and your neighbor as yourself. Therefore, there is only one way to heaven left for you, and that's through the sacrifice and through the Son, who made the sacrifice, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Come to Him! Trust in Him! You have freedom to do that: to believe in Him. You have the religious freedom to go to hell any way you like, through any religion you like. But there is only one way to heaven. And Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life; no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”

Follow Christ! Come to God through Him and know you have the forgiveness of sins. May we stand for the benediction?

[Prayer] Father, how grateful we are for men like Stephen, who stood for truth, even though it cost him his life. Enable us to have something of the same spirit and fearlessness, for so often we are cowards when we should speak. Be with us, Lord. If there are some in this audience who have never believed in Christ, give them no rest nor peace until they rest in Him.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.