

Studies in
The Book of Acts
VOLUME FOUR



GLORIOUS CHRISTIANITY

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Glorious Christianity

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LISTEN!



Then said the high priest, Are these things so? And he [Stephen] said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran [Haran].

—Acts 7:1-2

These are the opening remarks of a great sermon, as we may well describe it, or a statement that was made by Stephen, one of the men who had been appointed by the apostles, as we are told in Acts 6, to look after the administration of alms and kindness to the widows in the congregation of the early Christian church in Jerusalem.

Now this is a most important statement. It is a long sermon. It is, indeed, the first account that we have in the book of Acts of an extended sermon. In the previous six chapters there are references to sermons and especially several synopses of sermons delivered by the apostle Peter. And there are statements made by Peter and others when they were on trial in Jerusalem before the great court, the Sanhedrin. But all the previous examples have been abbreviated; they have just been summaries of the essence of what was said by the different speakers. But here we have this sermon reported *in extenso*, as it were, and as it is the first such example in the book of Acts, it is obvious that it is of unusual significance for us.

This statement was made by Stephen in reply to an invitation extended to him by the high priest, who was presiding over the Council. When we are told in the previous chapter that Stephen was chosen as a deacon, he is described in this way: “And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great won-

ders and miracles among the people” (v. 8). But because of that, certain people had risen up against him and had brought false charges against him. So Stephen found himself on trial for his life before the Sanhedrin.

Now it is obvious that if we are to follow Stephen’s sermon, we must be clear as to what he was setting out to do. His purpose was to reply to the charges that had been brought against him. We must therefore be perfectly clear as to what those charges were, and they are summarized for us in Acts 6. He was charged with blasphemy, with being opposed to the law of Moses, and with being opposed to the temple and the temple worship.

But Stephen was also charged with something else. In Acts 6:14 we are told, “For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.” In other words, Stephen was charged, finally, with being a Christian, with being a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ and all that was involved and implied in that.

So Stephen’s statement was delivered by way of reply. The high priest, who was presiding, said, “Are these things so?”

Then Stephen got up, and he began: “Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran.” And on he went, giving a long historical review that runs on until about the end of the fiftieth verse. And then comes the application of the sermon.

But why are we considering this sermon? It is not simply because we are animated by some mere historical or antiquarian interest. The days in which we are living are too desperate and too urgent to allow us to do anything like that. That is interesting, of course, in and of itself, but I can assure you that I am not calling your attention to this sermon for that reason. No; we are looking at Stephen’s words because of the state of the world in which we live and because of the relevance of this message to our condition at this present moment. We are in a world of trouble, a world of confusion, a world of sin and of shame. Nobody would dispute that. And not only is the world in trouble—we are all in trouble individually. We all have problems and difficulties.

It is my contention that only one message can deal with the situation we are facing, and that is the Christian Gospel. It is the business of the church to preach this Gospel; it is good news, and we are called and commissioned to preach it to the world. The Greek word translated “gospel” literally means “good news.” This is the word used throughout the New Testament to describe the Christian message, and the four accounts of the Lord Jesus Christ are themselves called Gospels. At the very birth of our Lord, the angels were heard saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will

toward men” (Luke 2:14). This is the most wonderful and the most amazing good news that has ever come to the human race.

But the tragedy—and we are aware of it—is that even in its trouble and misery, the world refuses and rejects this Gospel. It turns against it, it will have nothing to do with it, and it does so with scorn and derision. The world is reacting to this message and to this blessed person, the Son of God, in the very way that the members of that Council in Jerusalem reacted more than nineteen hundred years ago.

Now I want to try to show you that the reasons for this rejection today are still precisely the same as those indicated and recorded here in Acts. And that is my sole reason for calling your attention to this passage. We all by nature find it much easier to grasp a teaching or a point of view when we see it illustrated in the life of somebody else. Because we always tend to protect ourselves, we can see wrong things in others when we cannot see them in ourselves. So a very good way of looking at what is true of us by nature is to see it depicted in somebody else. When we see it there, then it is possible that it can be applied to ourselves.

The Bible presents many stories to show the truth of this principle. There is a famous story about David, who had committed a terrible sin and could not see that he had done anything wrong at all, though other people could see it. So the prophet Nathan went to him and made up a story depicting the kind of action that David had taken, but in an entirely different context. David as king was filled with righteous indignation and said that a person doing such a thing deserved to be severely punished. Then the prophet looked at him and said, “Thou art the man,” and David saw it (2 Sam. 12:7).

So I simply want to show you that the attitude of these members of the Sanhedrin to the message of Stephen and the apostles is just the same as the attitude of so many men and women at this present time to the only message that really can deal with their problems.

What, then, was the trouble with these members of the Sanhedrin? Let us have a look at them; let us analyze their position. We must do this because we will not be able to understand the point of Stephen’s sermon—why he said what he did—unless we can see exactly what their condition was. I can sum up their position like this: These highly religious people had never really given the Gospel a fair hearing, a fair chance; they were blinded by prejudice. And they were blinded by prejudice because they had a completely false idea as to what constitutes true religion. That was what blinded them, as it had blinded all the Pharisees who had so constantly contended with our Lord about His wonderful message.

This comes out in many ways. I have already reminded you¹ that the Sanhedrin had arrested Stephen and put him on trial, though he had not only done no harm to anybody at all but had been doing great good and had performed miracles that they could not do (Acts 6:8)—and that is why they had arrested him. Then they had trumped up false charges against him and introduced lies (v. 13). They were prepared to go to any lengths in order to charge and convict this man. Notice above all the spirit of bitterness that they displayed, and as we go on, that becomes more and more clear. We read later on in chapter 7, “When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth” (v. 54). This was sheer fury.

People today like to think that objections to the Gospel are always based on some calm, detached, cool, quiet, scientific reasoning. That is never true. Opposition is always a matter of prejudice and of passion, and it shows itself in contempt. We are familiar with all this. People not only reject the Gospel—they are bound to do so with contempt and disdain. They find it insulting that modern, intellectual, scientific, sophisticated men and women should be asked to believe such an old story, an old Gospel. To them, that really is contemptible!

So I hope I have made it clear that there is nothing new about people rejecting the Gospel. If you thought you were doing something new and up-to-date by rejecting it, then I am sorry, but that idea is just based on ignorance. People spurned the Gospel from the beginning, as we see here and as we have seen in the earlier chapters of Acts.

But certain special features are brought out here in Acts 7, and I want to emphasize them. In passing, I do beg of you to read Stephen’s sermon for yourselves in order that you may have the background in your minds as we continue to study it; and as you read it, notice the choice and arrangement of facts. Stephen ordered his sermon as he did because he was dealing with a specific situation. Why were these people prejudiced against the Gospel and so annoyed with it? Why did they arrest this man, and why did they eventually stone him to death?

The first answer is that they were quite satisfied that they were all right as they were; they thought there was nothing wrong with them. They were living good lives. They were religious people who worshiped God. But there is a suggestion in Stephen’s preaching and teaching—as was true of all the apostles—that there was something wrong with them and that they needed to believe in this new person, Jesus of Nazareth, and His message. This was what infuriated them, this suggestion that they needed anything. Why, they were the leaders of the people, they were the religious elite! Of course, there

were some people—tax-collectors and sinners, for example—who were obviously doing wrong, but not these members of the Sanhedrin! Yet here was a teaching that suggested that they were in great need themselves and that only this one person could satisfy their need and give them what they desired. And that was what the Jewish leaders resented.

The same people, of course, had resented our blessed Lord Himself. Read the four Gospels, and read them as if you had never read them in your life before; that is a good thing to do periodically. Here you see the account of the birth in poverty and in humble circumstances of this extraordinary person who grew up to become a carpenter but then suddenly, at the age of thirty, went out and preached in an astounding manner and worked miracles and did good and gathered a great crowd around Him.

But why did the Pharisees and the doctors of the law resent our Lord and deal with Him as they did? He was the essence, the incarnation, of God's love, and yet they argued with Him, they tried to trap Him in His conversation, they conspired against Him and eventually got rid of Him by the cruel death of crucifixion. What made them do it? And the answer is that His preaching condemned them. They saw the implication of it. They who were self-satisfied and thought themselves to be perfect were convicted that there was something wrong about them. So they constantly turned on Him and said things like this: "We be Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man: how sayest thou, Ye shall be made free?" (John 8:33).

There is something almost ludicrous about that question, is there not, but it is true history. On that occasion our Lord had been preaching and had said to those people, "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31-32). Now you would have thought that everybody would be delighted: Here was a message promising freedom. But they were furious. And the reason for their fury was that they saw the implication. When our Lord promised to set them free, the implication was that they were in bondage, and they could not stand that. They resented this suggestion that there was anything wrong with them and that they needed what our Lord alone could give. They hated Him for that. And now they saw the same element in the preaching of Stephen and in the preaching of the apostles.

But, secondly, and this is most interesting, these religious leaders really failed to understand the true meaning of what they claimed to believe. Now I want to make this particularly clear. Here were people with a tradition, a background, and a history. They thought this was all that they needed, and they were very proud of it. But you will see that Stephen convicted them of

a complete failure to understand even what they themselves claimed to believe, even their own story. There is something almost incredible about this, but I am emphasizing it because I am trying to show that, as I see things at any rate, this failure is still perhaps the greatest of the obstacles that stand between many people and believing the Gospel.

Let me show you what I mean. Here were these people—they were Jews and were very proud of their father Abraham and their descent from him. Also they were always talking about “the fathers”—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. As I have reminded you, they said to our Lord, “We be Abraham’s seed.” They said in essence, “It would be all very well if you preached in this way to outsiders, pagans, or people like that, but don’t you realize that we are *the Jews?*”

So their first misunderstanding was that they had a completely wrong view of their history—as Stephen now proceeded to show them. Stephen was doing nothing original. Our Lord, as we have seen, did exactly the same thing. He had said to them in effect, “If you were the true children of Abraham, you would not be treating Me as you are. Abraham rejoiced to see My day. There is something wrong with you; you have misunderstood your relationship to Abraham.”

But even before our Lord, John the Baptist had made the selfsame point. John, clothed with camel’s hair tied with a leather girdle and eating nothing but locusts and wild honey, had been living an abstemious, rigorous life. John was a flaming, blazing prophet in the wilderness. The people had crowded out to listen to him, and among them were the Pharisees. And John turned on them and said, “Who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” And again, because they had this idea that they were Abraham’s seed, John looked at them and said, “Begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, That God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham” (Luke 3:7-8).

These people were relying upon the fact that they were Jews, the lineal, physical descendants of Abraham. This was the very essence of their trouble. They looked at their history in a purely nationalistic and political manner. They said that if you could prove, by tracing your genealogical table, that you were a descendant of Abraham, then you were all right. They thought that was the one thing that mattered, that solved all your problems, that put you right with God and made you a superior person. They had never understood the spiritual character of themselves as a nation. Thus they had missed the significance of the whole of their history.

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans, had to make exactly the

same point. He says, “They are not all Israel, which are of Israel” (9:6). You can belong to this nation physically, but you can be outside it in the real sense, the spiritual sense. And that is exactly the point that we shall find Stephen making; so we must grasp it.

Regarding their second misunderstanding, Stephen pointed out the complete failure of the Jewish leaders to understand even what they claimed to believe. Not only were they wrong about their own history and their understanding of that history, but their attitude regarding the temple and temple worship was equally wrong. Here again they were very proud. They were proud of the temple. It was the place to worship, and they believed that one really could not worship anywhere else. They despised those in every other nation: How could they worship when they did not have the temple? The place to worship was in the temple in Jerusalem, and the Jewish leaders gloried in this.

You will find, as you read the sermon, that Stephen took up the subject of the temple, elaborating and emphasizing it, as he was bound to do, because it was of the very essence of their difficulty, one of the main reasons why they were rejecting the teaching of his blessed Lord and Savior. They had developed a mechanical notion of worship. As long as you went to the temple regularly, as long as you made the prescribed offerings, all was well, and you needed nothing further. So they were living on this and relying upon it. “The temple,” they kept on saying. “The temple of the LORD” (Jer. 7:4). Our blessed Lord Himself had to bring the Jewish leaders up short regarding their attitude to the temple. You will find that he went into that in great detail on one occasion when he was dealing with the Pharisees and arguing with them. This is how he put it:

Woe unto you, ye blind guides, which say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor! Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold? And, whosoever shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever sweareth by the gift that is upon it, he is guilty. Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift?

—Matt. 23:16-19

That was the condition into which these people had degenerated—this external religion, this religion of buildings and of forms, of ceremonies and of ritual, religious habit. They thought this was all that was necessary. And

they had carried it even to the ridiculous extreme of believing that God was confined to the temple, so that you could not worship God anywhere else. That is why Stephen started his sermon by saying, “The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia”—before Abraham had ever come to Canaan.

The Jews really believed that God was confined to the temple, to the church, as it were. They gloried in being God’s people, the only worshipers of God, the only ones with the oracles of God. But their religion had degenerated to the most mechanical of observances, a mere matter of form and ceremony. The Spirit had long since gone right out of it, and it was all reduced to a matter of numbers, a mere performance. That was the second trouble with these members of the Sanhedrin.

Thirdly—and, remember, these are all ways in which the religious leaders had completely misunderstood the true meaning of the very thing in which they gloried—they had completely misunderstood Moses and his teaching, the teaching of the law. The charge that was brought against Stephen was this: “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God. . . . This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law” (Acts 6:11, 13).

Now these Pharisees and scribes, and the Jews in general, listening to their leaders, gloried in the fact that the law had been given to them. They said, “Ours is the law; we are the people of God. Moses was our great leader and lawgiver, and we are the people of the law.” That is why they despised the Gentiles, whom they regarded as “dogs”: God had not given *them* these laws, this teaching on how to live. But God had told the Jews how to live and had given them the law, this living law, and they thought the mere fact that they had the law when nobody else had it automatically put them right with God, and there was nothing further that could be desired.

So here again is an issue that Stephen had to deal with. But once again, he was not teaching anything original. Our Lord had given exactly the same teaching. That is really the burden of the Sermon on the Mount. Our Lord there was facing these Pharisees and scribes, and He was saying to them, “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time . . . but I say unto you” (Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44). What was He doing? He was showing them that they had completely misunderstood the law. For instance, they said, “I have never committed murder,” but our Lord said in essence, “Wait a minute. You say you have never committed murder. Have you ever said in your heart about somebody, ‘You fool!’? If you have, you have committed murder; you have murdered him in your heart.”

Or the Jews said, “We have never committed adultery.” “Wait a minute,” said our Lord. “Have you ever looked on a woman to lust after her? If you have, you have committed adultery in your heart—that is what God is concerned about.”

Our Lord was telling them in effect, “You know nothing at all about the law. You have twisted it, obeying the commandments of men instead of the principle of the law. You have perverted the whole thing. You have put your traditions before the holy commandments of God.” They had reduced it to the level of a moral system; they had never seen its real purpose.

What is the purpose of the law? Is it just that I am able to get up and say, “I’ve never done this, I’ve never done that, I’ve never done the other”? Not at all! The whole purpose of the law is its spirit. The object of the law is to lead men and women to worship God. These are injunctions that show us how to give our entire allegiance to Him.

But these Jews said, “We have kept the law, and because of that, we are right with God and do not need any further preaching. Who is this Jesus? He says we need to believe in Him, but we do not need Him because we have kept the commandments”—their interpretation of the commandments. They had missed the fact that the law was never given in order to save people—that was never its objective. They thought they could save themselves by keeping it, but it was never meant to save. Indeed, it is made quite plain and clear in the Scriptures that no man or woman can ever save himself or herself by keeping the law.

What, then, is the object of the law? The law’s purpose is to show us that we cannot save ourselves. That is why it was given. As Paul puts it, “The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ” (Gal. 3:24). These wretched religious leaders had misunderstood that. They had said, “Here is the system. These are the things we must do, and those are the things we must not do. As long as we do these and don’t do those, we are all right. We have saved ourselves.” But I say again, that is a reversal of the very thing the law was meant to teach. “Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20). “It [the law] was added because of transgressions” (Gal. 3:19). The law was given that we might see the exceeding sinfulness of sin. The law was given to condemn us all and to drive us to Christ for refuge and safety and salvation.

The supreme example of this misunderstanding is none other than Saul of Tarsus, who later became the apostle Paul. As a Pharisee he hated Christ; he blasphemed Him. He did everything he could do to destroy the early Christian church. He says in Philippians 3:6 that as a Pharisee he had been “touching

[concerning] the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.” Perfectly all right! “. . . of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews” (v. 5). Here it is, a typical relying upon nationality, upon physical descent from Abraham, upon keeping the law, upon living a moral life, upon worshiping God in the temple. As a Pharisee, Paul had been an authority on these matters. So there he was, showing this tragic blunder and ignorance of the very essence and meaning of the law on which he was supposed to be an authority.

I have shown you, then, three ways in which the Jews had completely misunderstood their own heritage. They had turned their own religion into something that was the exact opposite of what it was when it was given to them by God through Abraham and through Moses and through those men whose memories they claimed to revere. This is almost incredible, is it not, but it is a fact, and this is what Stephen was dealing with in this sermon. He said in essence, “I will take you on your own ground; let me answer your charges as you bring them against me. You have so misunderstood your own heritage that when it is put to you truly, you cannot understand it, and you are annoyed because you think it is blasphemy.”

So we have seen that the first source of their trouble was that these Jews thought that they were quite all right as they were, and their second failure was that they had completely misunderstood their own religion. Then, thirdly, and as a result, they completely failed to see the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, to see the meaning of His message, to see the truth concerning Him, and to see that He was the Son of God and the Savior of the world. They completely failed to see that He was the fulfillment of their religion and of their law and that He was the end to which everything that had been given to them led and in whom it found its climax and its summation. They were so blinded by their prejudices and their own human thinking that they could not see that this person whom they hated and reviled was the inevitable and the logical outcome of all that they gloried in as the children of Abraham.

Now again, there is nothing original in all this. Our Lord had put it like this to those Pharisees and scribes who were following Him and arguing all the time: “Search the scriptures”—your own Scriptures—“for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me” (John 5:39). But the Pharisees and scribes were so blinded that they could not see this at all. They could not see that He was not a denial of the Scriptures but their fulfillment. He said, “Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled” (Matt. 5:18).

So to sum it up, the trouble with these people was that they were not merely wrong in a detail here or there; their whole outlook and approach was

wrong. That is what Stephen set out to show them. And I am calling your attention to this because the problem is still the same today. The last people, always, to become Christians are the people who think they are already Christians. Our Lord once put it to the Pharisees like this:

A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to day in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not.

—Matt. 21:28-30

And then our Lord applied His parable. He said to the leaders, the Pharisees and scribes, “You refuse to go into the kingdom; it was offered to you first of all, but you will not go in.” Then he said:

Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him.

—vv. 31-32

And this is still the trouble. I say again, the greatest hindrance to becoming a Christian is that we think we are already Christians. We turn away from Christ because we think we are all right, because we think we have put ourselves right with God. As the Jew thought that his nationality put him right, so many people in this country say, “I’ve always been a Christian. I was born in a Christian country.” You have seen the way the Jews relied on their traditions; it is the same now—resting on the history, resting on the background.

What else? “I was always brought up to be religious! I was taken to chapel or church when I was a child.” Just as Paul said, “circumcised the eighth day,” so people today say, “baptized as a child.” Everything that Paul says about himself in Philippians 3:4-6 is echoed by so many people today. People say, “I’ve always been a Christian. I’ve always believed in God. I’ve always said my prayers.” Yes, and they may even have been zealous in their observance of a particular type of worship; they may have been very regular in their attendance at church and may have lived a good life. “Morality? I know many people my age who have done terrible things, but I’ve never done them. I’m all right. I’m a good person. I’m a Christian.”

Is that not the trouble? Such people have never seen the very essence of Christianity. Can you not see that Christendom has done exactly as Judaism did? Judaism turned the message of God, given through Moses, into the very opposite of what it was. And precisely the same is true of Christendom today. Many people have never felt the need of the Lord Jesus Christ; they have never seen their guilt and their emptiness and their woe; they have never seen their need of the death on the cross on Calvary's hill. Why? Because they think they are "all right." Other people may need that sort of thing but not them. Their religion has become something external, something mechanical, something formal. It has never been personal; it has never been living. They have never known any condemnation. And, indeed, when they hear the true Gospel, just like the members of the Sanhedrin, they resent it. They make sarcastic remarks about the blood of Christ and ridicule the necessity of being born again. They say, "Nobody believes anything like that now!"

There are some who go so far as to believe that everybody is all right, whether religious or not, and therefore there is no need of a convicting or disturbing message. Such a view is nothing but a repetition of this whole old trouble with the members of the Sanhedrin. And as I summed it up about them, I can sum it up about the modern man and woman. The main difficulty with people who are not Christians is not a matter of details. Oh, I know they are ready to argue about the details. They say, "My trouble is with miracles. I like the Sermon on the Mount, but I have difficulty on the question of the supernatural and the miraculous." Or they will bring up those old questions about Cain's wife and Jonah and so on. They say, "I'm all right, of course, on the central issues, but not where it concerns these things on the periphery."

But the situation is exactly the opposite of that! Such a person's trouble is that he or she is entirely wrong. It is not a matter of details; it is a matter of one's entire position. This is the tragedy of the modern age, just as it was the tragedy of the Jews in the first century. We have turned the message of Christianity into a kind of institutionalized religion; we have changed it to such an extent that it can scarcely be recognized at all.

So, then, that being the trouble, is there anything that we stand in greater need of than to listen to Stephen? The position today is the very position with which he had to deal. All I am doing now is introducing his message to you, and here is the introduction: "Men, brethren, and fathers." What then? Here is the first word: "Hearken." Hear! Listen! That is how Stephen began, and that is how any preaching of the Gospel must begin.

We must start by listening patiently. “Lend me your ears! I have something to put before you that will not be easy. Listen! Listen for all you are worth. Listen for your very life.”

What may we deduce from this word “hearken”? It shows us that the Gospel is an argument, a statement of a reasoned case. Stephen is on trial. He is addressing his judges, and he presents his case. Read it; study it; read it many times over. Watch the procession of the argument; watch the buildup of the facts of the case; watch the logic in it all.

Now this is Christianity. It is a matter of reason; it is an argumentation. I emphasize this because so many people today fondly imagine that they reject Christianity because they are reasonable people who are not interested in “sob stuff” or emotionalism. “Christianity?” they say. “That’s all right for women and children, all right perhaps for people in the backwoods, but not for ‘modern man’—modern man come of age, with reason, understanding, sophistication and scientific knowledge. Oh,” they say, “I shall not allow you to play on my feelings. I know your Christianity, ‘the opium of the people,’ the drug, the sheer emotionalism.”

Now I want to be quite fair and honest—Christianity has often been misrepresented in that way. But that is not Christianity. If you want to know what Christianity is, you must go back to this book of the Acts of the Apostles. Here, in this first extended report of a sermon delivered under the auspices of the Christian church, is my notion of evangelism. I do not care what anybody else is doing—this is New Testament evangelism. Stephen’s sermon is typical of all the other speeches and sermons in Acts and in the great periods of reformation and revival in the church. It is not emotionalism. It demands the use and exercise of all our best faculties. It demands our concentration and our full attention.

And these people who dismiss and reject Christianity, and the preaching of Christianity, as unintelligent and emotional “sob stuff” that plays on the feelings—what do they themselves do? They probably sit at home looking at their television sets. What do they get there? Lurid drama perhaps, or a western or some “sob stuff” in connection with a love affair. Is that reason? Is that understanding?

Now let me issue a challenge as I start an exposition of this great sermon: Have I been playing on your feelings? Have I just been entertaining you by telling you stories? Let us be honest: Do you find it an intellectual exercise to look at the television or to listen to the radio or to read your newspaper or a novel? Of course not! Some of you may be complaining that I am putting too great a strain on your intellect. All right. That I am prepared to accept. But

it proves my case that this message is something that comes to us and says, “Hearken! Listen! Pull yourself together!” You cannot follow it if you are lounging back in a comfortable chair; you have to sit up. Here is a reasoned case. It is not easy; it is not simple. It demands all your energies and faculties. You need every ounce of intellect you have.

Why? Because this is truth! This is a body of truth, a body of doctrine, a body of great statements of truth—and truth is addressed to the mind. The Bible teaches that man’s greatest gift, in a sense, is his mind. Human beings have minds in a way that no animal has. They are able to follow an argument; they are able to reason; they are able to look at themselves and examine themselves.

So Stephen looked at this great body of men whom he was addressing. He saw their passion; he saw their prejudice; he saw their violence; and he saw that they were too emotional. So very politely he addressed them—“Men, brethren, and fathers.” There was no need to insult anybody: “honour to whom honour” is due (Rom. 13:7). He was a gentleman, and he presented his case.

But Stephen did venture to say this word “hearken” at the very beginning. He said in essence, “Please try to control yourselves. Try to control your passion. Listen up.”

The Council members were already, some of them, beginning to gnash their teeth. He could see the imminent violence, the look in the eye, the curled lip—the modern attitude of sarcasm and derision.

And the appeal to all such people is this: Stop being governed by prejudice and passion! Hold yourselves in. You are going to listen to an argument.

What else? Well, Stephen was suggesting that the Sanhedrin members were going to hear something that was unlike everything else they had ever heard or that the world had to offer, something that was unique. He was going to give them the facts with which they were so familiar and put those facts in the right way. That would be difficult for them and for him because it would cut across all to which they were accustomed. So he pleaded with them to listen, and to listen very carefully.

The message of the Gospel is unlike everything else in the world today. Think of politics, of the arts, of learning or science—anything you like. Here is something that is unique. And we must realize this at the very beginning. We must shut down our prejudices, therefore; we must realize that we are here face-to-face with something we have never really faced before, something that demands the whole of our attention.

But, further, this message cuts across all our prejudices and our precon-

ceived ideas. We must be prepared for this whether we like it or not. This is one of the first steps in becoming a Christian.

And that leads me to my last point. We must be ready for something that will convict us, something that will come to us personally and condemn us. I would be lacking as a preacher if I did not tell you that the message of the Christian Gospel is objectionable to the natural person. I am not surprised when people refuse the Gospel. They cannot do anything else. "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God," says Paul, "for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). Here is something that tells the best people that they are useless and without hope; here is something that comes to the most moral individual and says, "Your morality is 'filthy rags' (Isa. 64:6); it is nothing but dung and refuse." It comes to someone who says, "I've worshiped God ever since I was born" and declares, "You have never been a true worshiper of the living God. You have worshiped a figment of your own imagination; you have been worshiping a tradition. You are a religious person in the same sense as a Jew or a Muslim or a follower of Buddha or of Confucius."

Now this, too, is something that we must realize at the very beginning. You cannot face this Gospel as it is and still feel happy, still feel that you are good and that you are right and that because you seem to be better than other people, that puts you right with God. This is a message that demolishes our whole position and reveals us all as guilty sinners before God.

And, finally, here is something that tells us that there is only one way to a knowledge of God and forgiveness and the hope of everlasting life, and that is to believe in the Son of God, our blessed Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

My friends, we have to leave it at this for now, but let me simply ask you one question: Do you know what you have rejected? Do you know the case for the Gospel? Oh, may God open the eyes of each one of us by nature to our need of salvation and to the fullness of the salvation that God has provided for us freely in His dearly beloved, only begotten Son.

THE GOD OF GLORY



Then said the high priest, Are these things so? And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran [Haran].

—Acts 7:1-2

We have been considering Stephen's opening appeal to the Jewish Sanhedrin. "Hearken," he said. In other words, listen, control yourselves; do not be governed by clichés; do not make statements without knowing what you are saying. Listen to the case; be open-minded; be ready, at any rate, to give this message a chance. And I make this same appeal.

But what must we listen to? What did Stephen tell these people? Well, as we have seen, for fifty verses there is an account of their history. Stephen gave the Council members a lesson, as it were, in history. But this was not because they were ignorant of their history. They knew it and were very proud of it. People generally know their own history.

"So," someone may ask, "why didn't he come to the point? Why go through this long dissertation?"

But the whole point is that though the Sanhedrin knew the facts, they had completely misunderstood and misinterpreted them. Stephen had therefore to take them through these familiar facts in order to show their real meaning and significance. So Stephen's defense was a great lecture, a dissertation, on history. And that is the first thing that the Gospel always does.

Does that surprise you? I wonder. Are you amazed that Stephen's first statement of the Gospel would be, "The God of glory appeared unto our

father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran”? History!

Now this is a most important matter, and that is why I want to emphasize it. It is just at this point that so many people go wrong. They get into trouble about the Christian faith, the Christian message, because they persist in starting with particulars instead of with the whole. There are particulars to the Gospel, yes, but you will never understand them unless you believe the whole. That, I say again, is where so many tragically go astray today, as they have throughout the centuries. You must start with a general look at the whole, and if you do, you will find that you get clarity and understanding about those perplexing parts that have troubled you hitherto.

This is a great principle, of course, and one that governs the intelligent study of any subject. If you start with particulars you will soon get lost. Some of us who have perhaps done a little teaching, not only in this realm but in other realms as well, have often had to make that very point. I remember that when I was studying medicine, I found it advantageous—and I used to recommend the same policy to others—never to start with a really big textbook. You start with a smaller book, an elementary one, more or less a synopsis, and you get a general idea; then you build on that.

Now that is exactly what Stephen did. He did not take up the Council’s particular points and answer them directly and immediately. “Wait a minute,” he said in effect, and back he went and painted on a big canvas, giving these leaders of the Jews a review of the whole of their history, and then he came to his application, to these particular accusations of theirs. His point was that they could only be right about these in the light of the context, of the grand whole. And that is why we must take the same approach now.

Now I am doing this because to me it is a tragedy that anybody should not be a Christian. I do not know how such persons live in a world like this. What do they live on? What are they living for? What hope do they have? I know the other side. I have been there, I have tried it—they have nothing. I am sorry for anybody who is not a Christian, and therefore it is my heart’s desire that in some little way I may be used of God to remove some of these initial difficulties, these big prejudices, that prevent people from seeing the whole. So we must start with this—with history.

This leads me on to say that the Christian message is not just the teaching of ideas. That is the whole fallacy today: People think that Christianity is just a gathering of ideas, a sort of philosophy. They even think, many of them, that is the Gospel, that the Gospel is just the teaching of our Lord and Savior with regard to life and living. They are the people who say, “Oh, yes, I like

the Sermon on the Mount—I think that’s wonderful. If only we could get people to practice those ideas. But, of course, I’m not interested in the virgin birth, or miracles, or the atoning death, or the physical resurrection. I’m not interested in the Holy Spirit.”

But I am here to say—and this is vital, this is the whole point that Stephen was establishing—that though the teaching of our Lord is, of course, very important, the Christian message does not really consist even in the teaching of our Lord Himself. It includes that, but it is much bigger and greater. Indeed, I go so far as to say that the saving element in this Gospel is not in our Lord’s ethical, moral teaching but is very definitely in historical events.

What is this message then? If it is not a mere gathering of ideas or a philosophy of life, what is it? And the astounding fact is that the Bible is primarily a history textbook. I am preaching out of what is called the book of Acts, but a better name would be the book of Facts. This is a book of history, a book that records events, things that have literally taken place. So Stephen went back into history and started by saying that this, that, and the other took place. He was always dealing with events and facts and happenings. He said in essence, “Here it is—listen to this—here is the history.”

Notice how people who were not yet Christians put this perfectly on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. They suddenly heard these disciples, these simple, ordinary, ignorant Jews, speaking in other languages. There were people there who were Parthians, Medes, and Elamites. They had come from Mesopotamia and many other places. And they wanted to know what it all meant. They said, “We do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God” (Acts 2:11). Not the wonderful *teaching* of God, though that was included, but the wonderful “*works*” of God: events, facts, things that had literally happened.

So Stephen began the preaching of the Christian Gospel with a review of history. And it is as important to do this today as it was then. The Old Testament history is a vitally important part of the Gospel, and so is the New Testament history. That is why we are given all those details in the Gospels. People sometimes say, “Well, I’m interested in the teaching of Jesus, but why all these details about Pharisees and scribes, about sailing over the lake and doing this, that, and the other? And why all those details about His death on the cross? Why don’t they just say that He died and leave it at that?”

The whole answer is that it is history, and everything in this history is important. What, for example, is the meaning of the Communion table? There is bread on it and poured-out wine, but what does it mean? Paul says it means this: “For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered

unto you, That the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread” (1 Cor. 11:23). History! Ordinary, if you like—breaking bread, pouring out wine. Yes, but it happened; He did it. This is not an idea. It is concrete fact. It is something that was *done*: “This do in remembrance of me” (v. 24).

So if you have not started with the idea that Christianity is about something that has happened, that events have made this message, then you have not begun to understand it. These events are things that matter; these are the things that save. History! We must have the history of the Old Testament, and we must have the history of the New, and we must understand the relationship between the two.

Now I am elaborating this for a particular reason. The popular idea today is that the Old Testament is no longer of any value whatsoever. There are people who are amazed that Christians still have it in their Bibles, and are still more amazed that they should ever preach from it. “The Old Testament,” they say, “is primitive; it’s of no use at all.” So they dismiss it. Even some in the church are saying that kind of thing.

But this is quite wrong. Here is a preacher filled with the Spirit, here is the first martyr, and what does he do? He reviews Old Testament history; he preaches a sermon on it. And the Old Testament is still a vital part of the gospel message for the simple reason that the God who acted in the Old Testament is the God who acted in the New and the God who is still acting today. There is only one God, and He is “from everlasting to everlasting” (Ps. 90:2). He has the same purpose in the Old Testament as in the New—an increasing purpose, certainly, but it is the same.

What do we have in the Old Testament? We have the prophecy of the Gospel that was to come and the preparation for that Gospel. What is the New Testament? It is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises. As Paul puts it to the Corinthians: “All the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us” (2 Cor. 1:20). So these two are intimately related; you cannot separate them.

And indeed, I go so far as to argue that you cannot understand the New Testament, in and of itself, without the Old Testament background. That is why, as you must have often observed, in the New Testament there are so many quotations from the Old. Our Lord was constantly quoting from the Old Testament, and so was the apostle Paul.

We are told that when Paul arrived in Thessalonica, he went into the synagogue, as his custom was—and what then? He “reasoned with them out of the scriptures, opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and

risen again from the dead” (Acts 17:2-3). What was he doing? He was taking the Old Testament and preaching out of it, reasoning and demonstrating from it the truth concerning our blessed Lord and Savior.

This is how the church came into being. It is essential. As St. Augustine put it so long ago, “The New Testament is latent in the Old Testament; and the Old Testament is patent in the New Testament.” The two belong together. You cannot divide them. It was the Spirit of God alone who led the early church—which was chiefly Gentile, remember—to incorporate the Old Testament Scriptures, the Jewish literature, as it were, into their new documents. It is one: Old Testament, New Testament, one in revealing “the wonderful works of God” (Acts 2:11), the actions of the eternal God. That is the first reason for starting with history.

The second reason is that the Christian faith, the Christian message, is not only interested in the life of today. Christianity is not only interested in this twentieth [or even the twenty-first] century. It is interested in the past; it is interested in the whole of life. Our fatal fallacy, the most stupid, the most silly of all the erroneous ideas that characterize modern men and women, is the idea that one can start from the position that there had never been a world or a human being until twentieth-century people came upon the scene.

That is the tragedy of today. People have an inflated notion of “the twentieth-century man.” But surely twentieth-century men and women are the biggest fools who have ever been on the earth! They boast of their learning, their knowledge, and their achievements and tell us to look at their world. What fools they are! This is all, I say, partly due to the belief that history began with them. Their way of putting it is to say, “We’ve grown up; we’ve come of age; we’re entirely different because of our knowledge.” And so they ignore the whole of past history, and because of that they do not understand the Gospel.

But the Gospel insists upon our facing the whole of history. Here is Stephen making this review of the history of the Jews. You say, “Does that have anything to do with us?” It has a great deal to do with us, not because of Jews as individuals—we should be interested in them and in all other people as individuals, but that is not the point I am making—but because of the fact of the Jew. How do you explain it? You know something about the history of the Jews. You know how they have been persecuted and maltreated throughout the centuries; you know how so-called civilizations, one after another, have tried to put an end to them. But the Jews as a nation persist. How do you explain that? You thought that the problem of Christianity was understanding miracles, did you not? But it is not. Take a great section of his-

tory, and look at this extraordinary race that is still here today in spite of all that has been happening to it. How do you explain that?

As I have said, you need to look at the whole of history, and Christianity does this. Let me put it to you like this: We are a part of what is called western civilization. Where did it come from? What is its origin? During a vacation I read a great, learned book entitled *The Rise of Western Civilization*—the civilization we are so proud of. Western people! The greatest people the world has ever known. We have governed so much of the world, and the world is looking to us.

Look at the United States of America and the important part she is playing in the world. Where did she come from? How do we understand her and all those countries that belong to the West? And there is only one simple answer to all this: You cannot begin to understand Western civilization without the Gospel; it is impossible. You have to go right back to the teaching of the Bible.

Furthermore, you will not understand the modern world and its problems unless you go right back and take in the whole of history. That is why I say you must start there. The first thing that must happen to modern men and women is that they must be knocked off their pedestal. They must realize that they are just common, human clay like all who have ever lived before them, every previous generation. They must realize that they are a part of this whole process of history; and they must start looking at the whole before they concentrate overmuch upon their own importance and their modern problems.

My third reason for emphasizing the historical element is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not merely interested in moral or ethical problems. Of course, it is interested in them, but it is not interested *only* in them. People will persist in thinking that the Bible is just a collection of moral maxims and moral teaching. It is that, but it is infinitely more than that. The Gospel is not confined only to behavior. It is interested in people themselves, apart from their behavior. It is, I say again, primarily a textbook of history. Where did human beings come from? What is the world in which they find themselves? The Gospel is interested in all of that.

So the idea that you shed the Old Testament and only pick out a little bit of the evangelistic message from the New and always keep harping on that is a wrong approach to preaching the Gospel—that is too small a Gospel. The Gospel takes in the cosmos; it takes in everything; it goes right back to creation itself. We are all involved in the time process, are we not, in the future as well as the past, in time coming to an end, in what is going to happen, the

last days. Do you understand time? We all ought to know something about it. We are living in an evil time. Is there to be a future? Is there to be an end to time, or is life in this world endless? The whole of life and living, time and eternity, if there is such a thing—what are they all about? How can we understand all this?

That is the background to the Gospel, and it is as big and as great as that. At the present time people reject the Gospel in the main because they have never put it and themselves into the great context of the whole world, the universe and time; they do not ask all these great and final questions.

Here is the all-important question: What is the meaning of time? What is the meaning of history? There is only one answer, and Stephen—the preacher, the first martyr—gave it at once: “The God of glory”! Here it is; here is the message. “The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran.” I say again, this is always the starting point of the Gospel. I hope I am not shocking anybody when I say that the Gospel does not begin with the phrase, “Come to Jesus.” It ends with that, but it does not start there. The Gospel starts with this—“the God of glory.”

In other words, I am again saying that the Gospel does not start with men and women and their problems and ideas; it does not start with their needs; it does not start with the twentieth century. That is a modern fallacy. Modern man always starts with himself and ends with himself; he circles around himself. He is at the center, and everything revolves around him. He is a megalomaniac. And that is where he fools himself. I am not surprised that is true of people who do not claim to be Christians, but I do find it very difficult to understand how people claiming the name of Christian, even Christian teachers and professors, in order to appeal to “the modern man” are ready to agree with his first postulate, that you must start with people.

I suppose, in many ways, the most influential theologian on the continent of Europe today [1966] is a man by the name of Bultmann. He is called a theologian, but I would not call him that, though that is how he describes himself and how he is described by theologians. And this is what he says: We must substitute anthropology for theology; that is, we must substitute the study of man for the study of God. He says that it is no use going to modern people and talking to them about God because with their scientific background, they do not understand the supernatural. So start with man. Though that is a complete denial of the Gospel, it is a popular teaching in the Christian church today.

There is a movement in the church in America going by the name of “the

death of God,” by which the theological professors mean that the God of the Bible, the God of the theologians of the centuries, the God of the Christian church until these people arrived, is nonexistent. Anthropology instead of theology! Man instead of God! But that is the fallacy of fallacies! The world is as it is because it has forgotten God; that is the whole trouble.

Man’s failure to put God first was the essence of our Lord’s message. One day a clever man, a lawyer, came to Him, trying to trick Him into showing He was in the wrong. Now these lawyers in our Lord’s time were experts on details and minutiae. Our Lord said to them one day, “Ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith” (Matt. 23:23). They were like the modern man, asking catch questions about particular details and failing to see the whole.

So one of them came and said, “Master, which is the great commandment in the law?” (22:36). There were 613 commandments, and they wanted to know our Lord’s opinion as to which should be put first.

And our Lord gave a devastating reply. They never expected it—they would not have asked the question if they had. This is what he said: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (vv. 37-39).

Did you notice the order in which our Lord put these commandments? The modern man says, “How can I love my neighbor? How can I live with the man on the other side of the Iron Curtain or the Bamboo Curtain or a man of a different color? How can I do this?”

Our Lord’s answer is this: Do not start with that; that is commandment number two. Number one is: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God . . .”

You will never be able to love your neighbor as yourself until you know the truth about yourself; and you will never know the truth about yourself until you have seen yourself in the sight of God. You must see both yourself and your neighbor in the sight of God; then you will begin to love him—and not until then.

All the efforts of this century to bring people together are breaking down before our very eyes. In every political party, the advocates of the United Nations and various other organizations are cutting each other’s throats behind the scenes. Left to themselves, men and women will never love one another. They must start with God, “the God of glory” (Acts 7:2), and not with themselves.

What does *glory* mean? It is almost impossible to define it. Glory! It means majesty and greatness; it means wonder and amazement; it means

power. But what it means above everything else is that God is One who is altogether above the world and above humanity. When we look horizontally, we see men and women and their problems. Stop! says the Gospel. Look up! Look up to God; look up into the heavens; look up to the God of glory, this transcendent God who is not only denied by the world but, alas, as I say, is even denied by people in prominent positions in the Christian church. And the church is as she is, and the world is as it is, because the God of glory, the God of transcendence, the everlasting God who is above it all, is being denied and forgotten. That is where history comes in.

When we say, “the God of glory,” we mean that He is above everything. He dwells “in the light which no man can approach unto” (1 Tim. 6:16). “No man hath seen God at any time” (John 1:18). “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). This is all a part of His glory; in Himself He is beyond, above. As Stephen later made so clear, He is not a God confined to any buildings (vv. 48-49). That is the point these early preachers had to emphasize so strongly.

The first preachers said: You think you are worshiping God, but you are worshiping nothing. Your gods are made of gold and silver and wood and stone. They are creatures of your own imagination, projections of your own ideas. They have no being. You have to make them; you have to carry them about and put them on shelves and put them back. They are no gods—they are vanities!

No, no; God is not like that. Paul had to make this point in Athens, of all places, a city that was cluttered with temples and altars to various gods. To the people there Paul said, “God . . . dwelleth not in temples made with hands” (Acts 17:24)! He said that their whole idea was wrong.

And Stephen put it to the Sanhedrin in a very telling phrase. Here were these Council members in Jerusalem, and they were proud of the temple and its worship. “Hearken, listen,” said Stephen. “The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia”—not in any part of Palestine, not only not in Jerusalem, but outside their country, in Mesopotamia—“before he dwelt in Charran.”

The second point is that God is also a God of glory in His purposes. We do not understand them. God said to the prophet, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways” (Isa. 55:8). Oh, the infinite, eternal purposes of God! This is a part of His glory.

So I go on to say this: The God of glory is One who is entirely beyond our mind and reason, entirely beyond human searching. “The God of glory”!

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.*

William Chalmers Smith

Those words are a good attempt to express God's glory, but when you think of the reality, they are inadequate. He is incomprehensible. The apostle Paul makes this point when he writes to people interested in philosophy at Corinth and other places: "The world by wisdom knew not God" (1 Cor. 1:21). And this is the tragedy of modern men and women. They think they are big enough to arrive at God and to understand Him; they think they can encompass the whole glory of God with their little minds. The fools! What else can you call people who try to comprehend the incomprehensible! The world had been trying by its wisdom to find God, but it could not.

In the book of Job we read: "Canst thou by searching find out God?" (11:7). And the answer is eternally, no!

"Well," says someone to me, "are you saying there's no place whatsoever for reason? Is there no use at all for understanding?"

There is; but the first thing we must realize is the limit to reason and to understanding. The apostle Paul puts this point very clearly in the first chapter of Romans—this is a part of the preaching of the Gospel, remember—when he says:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath showed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness.

—vv. 18-24

God gave men up to all the moral mess of that time and throughout the history of the world up to the present time.

All that was expressed by Paul in his address at Lystra, when the people wanted to make a god of him. He said in essence, “You know, I am not a god. There is only one God, and you ought to be believing in Him instead of worshipping Jupiter and Mars and Mercury and all the rest of them and then adding us to your pantheon. No, no,” said Paul, “you do not know about God, but you have no excuse for your ignorance. He has left His marks behind Him—He has given us ‘rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons’ (Acts 14:17). Why do you not see God in nature?”

And as we have seen, Paul made exactly the same point when he was speaking on Mars Hill in Athens. He said in essence, “It is God who has arranged all these things—the nations and ‘the bounds of their habitation’ (Acts 17:26) and the times and the seasons; we are all in His hands. Even some of your own poets had a glimmering of that when they said, ‘For we are also his offspring’” (v. 28).

If people used their reason, they would, through nature and creation, arrive at a belief in a powerful Creator, in a mind behind the universe, in the power of God. But the highest, topmost reach of the philosophers in Athens was “the unknown God” (Acts 17:23). Oh, yes, they had known, they had discovered, that there was someone, some great power, behind all their various gods; but they had not been able to find him. They had sought after him, “if haply they might feel after him, and find him” (v. 27); but they had not succeeded. “The world by wisdom knew not God” (1 Cor. 1:21); so they had to put up an altar with the inscription, “To the unknown God.”

And all your thinking, too, will never get beyond that. Why? Because God is “the God of glory.”

So, then, what is our position? Well, we are led directly to the Gospel. We need the knowledge of God, but do what we will, we cannot arrive at it. Who can scale the heights? Who can come face-to-face with God? No one; it is impossible. Is there no hope for us then? Is there not any message of good news?

There is! The word *gospel* means “good news.” God, the God of glory, has revealed Himself to us, and that is why I became a preacher; that is why there is a Christian message; that is why there is a Gospel; that is why we have something to preach. “[God] hath visited and redeemed his people” (Luke 1:68). He is the God who acts. But He has revealed Himself first.

How has He revealed Himself? First, let me remind you again, He has revealed Himself in creation and nature. Instead of trying to be clever about

miracles, go out and look into the heavens, look at the stars. We read in Psalm 19, “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork” (v. 1). That is what you need to look at! Look up into the heavens and explain them if you can. God has revealed Himself partially through nature and creation.

But not only that—He is a God who has revealed Himself in his actions in history: “The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham” (Acts 7:2). Read the Old Testament history; read about the building of the tabernacle and the temple; read about that innermost sanctum called the Holiest of All, and you will read about the *Shekinah* glory and a place into which men entered with fear. When Moses had finished building the tabernacle, a cloud settled upon it, and Moses dared not enter in. Why? “The glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (Exod. 40:34). That is a revelation of God in a material form. It is a mere representation, but it is a very important one.

Not only that, God also reveals Himself in the words He speaks. There are many examples of this. On one notable occasion, when Moses asked to see God’s glory, God put him on a rock and said, “Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live . . . thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen” (Exod. 33:20, 23). And when God passed by, Moses heard this great word:

The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children’s children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.

—Exod. 34:6-7

God also reveals Himself in providence. The birds of the air and the lilies of the field—all witness to God’s providence. Everything is sustained by God. That is why we have harvest thanksgivings. It is God whom we must thank for it all. If God withdrew the sun and the rain, we would have nothing to eat and would all die of starvation.

Then look at God in prophecy: giving those men the ability to see, in detail, eight hundred years before the time some of the things that would happen when His Son came into the world. Prophecy—what a revelation of the glory of God!

But God has also sometimes given to certain chosen persons an immedi-

ate revelation of Himself and of His glory. Here it is: “The God of glory *appeared* unto our father Abraham.” I shall not elaborate on that now, but he gave Abraham a glimpse of His glory; and after that, Abraham never doubted the being of God.

Do you remember the story of Jacob fleeing from his brother Esau? At last, tired and weary, he had to have some sleep. So he lay on the ground, selected a stone, and put his head on it for a pillow. And then he had the dream or vision of the ladder coming down from heaven, and “the angels of God ascending and descending.” And when he woke up in the morning, he said, “Surely the LORD is in this place!”—the glory of God to Jacob (Gen. 28:11-16).

Do you remember the story of Moses? He had to flee for his life from Egypt, and he became just an ordinary shepherd in the land of Midian. Then one afternoon, not expecting anything to happen, he took the sheep to the back side of a mountain, as he had done so often; but this time was different. Suddenly he was stopped by a flaming bush because “the bush was not consumed.” Moreover, a voice came out of the bush, the voice of God! This was the glory of God, the God of glory revealing Himself unto Moses at the burning bush (Exod. 3).

Isaiah, too, tells us that he was able to write his great prophecy because he received a vision of God. Read the sixth chapter of the book of Isaiah, and you will see that it was a vision of glory, a vision of wonder.

Those are the ways in which God has revealed Himself. But what is the revelation? It is this: He is a personal God! He is the God who said to Moses, “I AM THAT I AM.”

“You tell me,” said Moses to God in effect, “to go to Egypt and to say certain things to my own people and then to Pharaoh; but they will want to know my authority for saying this. They will want to know who sent me with this message.”

And God answered, “Say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you” (Exod. 3:11-14). The God of glory—“I AM.” Not “the ground of the universe” or “the ground of being”; not love as an idea, but a personal God, a living God, a God unlike the gods of the pagans made of wood and stone and silver. Not such vanities! Not the creation of the modern philosophers with all their clever arguments. No, no! A personal God, outside us, above us, there in the unknown. “The God of glory,” the God of holiness, the God of righteousness, the God of justice. That is how He has revealed Himself, and we know nothing about Him apart from His own revelation.

And, finally, He has told us that He is the Judge of all the earth. He has

been revealing this from the very beginning, starting way back in the Garden of Eden. It has been a continuous revelation, going right through the Old Testament and on into the New. Paul was preaching this in Athens.

God has revealed that He will judge the whole world in righteousness, for He made it, and it belongs to Him. He has a right to judge the world. We are all His creatures, and we will all have to stand before Him and give an account of what we have done with the amazing gifts that He has given us. That is God! “The God of glory.”

There is a famous story about Blaise Pascal, that mighty genius who lived more than three hundred years ago, a Frenchman, conceivably the most brilliant mathematician who has ever lived. When he died, a piece of folded paper was found sewn to his shirt. On the paper Pascal had written that God had appeared to him one night, and he wrote: “Glory, glory, glory! The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, not the God of the philosophers.”

Once Pascal had had this glimpse, this vision, the God of the philosophers had become abhorrent to him. Their view of God is insulting; it is arrogant. They know nothing; they are incapable of knowing anything. “The God of glory”—He is the One!

This, then, is the beginning of the preaching of the Gospel. It is about this God who has made the universe and everything that is in it, the God who controls everything, the God who will judge everything. So I put this question to you: Do you begin with that God? Is that the starting point in all your thinking? You will not understand yourself, you will not understand the modern world or modern men and women and all their problems, until you go right back there, to the Creator God, the God of history, “the God of glory.”

Have you met Him? I can test you in this. It is not a matter of opinion. There is an invariable reaction when people meet this God. They stop arguing, and they stop being clever. When Adam and Eve heard God’s voice in the garden, in the cool of the evening, they went to hide behind a tree. They were afraid because the God of glory had come down to speak to them. Again I take you back to that great incident at Bethel: “And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not. And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (Gen. 28:16-17).

Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever felt afraid of the living God? You have argued about Him, you have criticized Him, you have shown your cleverness with respect to Him—but it is all because you do not know Him, “the God of glory.” You know nothing about Him; you are ignorant; you

are blind. When we come anywhere near Him, we feel, “How dreadful is this place!”

Again, remember Moses at the burning bush. At first it was a phenomenon for him to investigate in a scientific manner. Then the voice said, “Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground” (Exod. 3:5). Have you ever felt that? That is the beginning of the Gospel—awe, reverence, fear in the presence of the living God.

Do you remember the story of Job? Poor Job! The book of Job is a long and fascinating book; read it for yourselves, and notice what Job says about God, how he gives his opinion and thinks God is unfair. But then notice the end of the story:

Then Job answered the LORD, and said, Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth. Once have I spoken; but I will not answer: yea, twice; but I will proceed no further.
—Job 40:3-5

Of course not! But why not? Job expounds it himself in chapter 42:

Then Job answered the LORD, and said, I know that thou canst do every thing, and that no thought can be withholden from thee. Who is he that hideth counsel without knowledge? therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not. Hear, I beseech thee, and I will speak: I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me. I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

—vv. 1-6

Have you ever done that? That is what you should say. Have you talked about God as Job did; have you reached the point of putting your hand upon your mouth? Have you repented “in dust and ashes”?

Or read about the reaction of Isaiah when he, too, saw the glory of God: “Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips” (Isa. 6:5).

Who shall dwell with a burning fire? “Who shall ascend into the hill of the LORD? or who shall stand in his holy place?” asks the psalmist in Psalm 24:3. And God answers in Psalm 46:10, “Be still, and know that I am God.”

Or think of John the Evangelist in the book of Revelation. He has a glimpse

of the glory of Christ, and this is what he says: “I fell at his feet as dead” (1:17). Of course he did. “For our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29).

Ah, that is the reaction of people who have had some vague glimpse or understanding of the God of glory: “I am vile; I am unclean; I am undone!” They “repent in dust and ashes.” They feel they are worthy of nothing but damnation and to be hurled out of his sight forever.

But thank God, it does not stop there; there is a further revelation of God. It is the good news of the Gospel. God has revealed Himself in those ways, but, finally, He has revealed Himself in His only begotten Son, Jesus of Nazareth. “And we beheld his glory,” says John, “the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). This Jesus says, “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father” (John 14:9).

“God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts,” says Paul, “to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). Oh, the blessing of this revelation! “The glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”! I am crushed; I am condemned. But here is One who is God Himself, the Son, who says, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). Here is One who says, “The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). He has come to bring us to God, to introduce us to Him. He speaks of God as “Holy Father” (John 17:11). He teaches us to pray, “Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name” (Matt. 6:9).

We are all sinners, and He died for our sins. His blood was shed, and His body was broken, receiving our punishment. He can reconcile us to “the God of glory” and make us His children.

NOTES

1. See Volume 3 of Studies in the Book of Acts: *Victorious Christianity*, published in 2003.
2. This refers to a terrible accident in the Welsh village of Aberfan. Over a hundred children were killed.
3. In England Remembrance Day services are held every year on the Sunday nearest to November 11.
4. See Volumes 1 to 3 of Studies in the Book of Acts: *Authentic Christianity*, *Courageous Christianity*, and *Victorious Christianity*, published by Banner of Truth and Crossway Books.
5. This sermon was preached on December 4, 1966.
6. From the hymn “In the Cross of Christ I Glory.”
7. This sermon was preached on Sunday, December 18, 1966.
8. This sermon was preached on Christmas Day, 1966.
9. This sermon was preached on Sunday, January 8, 1967.
10. This sermon was preached in early 1967.