

No.

36.

"IF YE THEN BE RISEN WITH CHRIST, SEEK THOSE THINGS
WHICH ARE ABOVE, WHERE CHRIST SITTETH ON THE
RIGHT HAND OF GOD." COL. 3. 1.

A C T S V I I .

An Address (revised) at

61 Upton Lane, Forest Gate

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by

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An Address by Mr. P.W.Heward
At 61 Upton Lane, Forest Gate
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OUTLINE:

1. The Attitude of God's Servant.
 2. "The God of Glory"; "The glory of God" (verse 55).
 3. Mesopotamia and Haran; with heart-searching lessons.
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Last time we saw God's servant Stephen, who was opposed, as men of God are always opposed, - opposed particularly by the foreign-born Jewish unbelievers at Jerusalem. These were the ones who were in some respects broader than the others, but it appears on this occasion they took the position of a most pronounced definite Judaism. They showed themselves more intensely Jewish in their stress on the temple than the very Jews of Jerusalem itself. They could not resist the wisdom and the spirit of Stephen and so they told lies against him, and thus brought him in to the privileged position of which Matt. 5 speaks, "Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely for My sake". The people, the elders, and the scribes were all stirred up, and Stephen was brought before the council. It is enough for the disciple that he be as his Lord. Stephen is intensely unpopular. He is caught and hurried to the council. Can you expect justice from the council? Only recently they have killed the Lord of Glory, and they have beaten His apostles. How will Stephen fare in front of them? How will Stephen witness in front of them? What will be THE result? At first when he stands there in front of the council, false witnesses are raised up, and these false witnesses, as those who witnessed against the Lord Jesus, declare that the attack was on the temple. In the days of Christ their charge was, "He said He will destroy the temple, and raise it in three days." NOW their utterance is, "This

man doth not cease speaking words against the holy place, and the law, for we have heard him keeping on saying that Jesus, the Nazarene, THIS ONE, - evidently uttered contemptuously - will take down this place, and will change the customs which Moses gave as a tradition to us". Here is Stephen in the midst of a bitterly hostile crowd, knowing full well what is ahead of him, and, apparently, none of the Lord's people stand at his side. I do not say this is proved, but the silence of Scripture as to the presence of others till the end is very remarkable. On another occasion Paul said, "At my first answer no man stood with me". In this respect the disciple must sometimes be as his Lord, "They all forsook Him, and fled". Ah, but there is a blessed contrast, the Lord Jesus took the wrath of GOD, and there is none of this for Stephen, or for any saint. But how will Stephen fare in the midst of such a crowd? Will he become impatient, or will he retract? Neither. "And all that set in the council, looking stedfastly upon him, (lit. into him), saw his face as it had been the face of an angel". And so he was, in the other sense of the word "messenger", a messenger from God. And they looked stedfastly upon him, and they saw there was something strange; there was something extraordinary about this man's quiet, calm, restful and peaceful attitude. Later on we shall find that Stephen LOOKED UP STEDFASTLY into heaven (verse 55). First they looked on him stedfastly, but he did not so much look on them stedfastly; he looked on the Lord stedfastly. "We all with unveiled face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord are being changed into the same image" - here is the key. We understand Stephen's face now. They looked stedfastly upon him; he was looking stedfastly upon the Lord. It is true that till the last few moments it was only with the ^{eye} of faith, that he saw, but the eye of faith deserves more than an "only" in front of it. It is a precious power to endure as seeing Him Who is invisible. Stephen, there-

fore, is in front of the council, charged with being against the Lord and making manifest what it is to be in harmony with the Lord. His face preaches before his mouth, and all their bitter opposition only gives a background for the display of grace. The high priest, the natural spokesman, as when the Lord was tried, the high priest puts a question, "Are these things so?" More forcibly it is, "BUT the high priest said". He would break the - to him - painful silence which settled down upon the council, as they saw that man in front of them. Those who had attacked him earlier could not answer his words, and now they find a difficulty to answer his face, if I may so put it. That face was an eloquent testimony, and as they looked upon it they felt there was something wrong, - with them. But the high priest would summon his courage, (poor courage) would summon his opposition and would say, "If these things are so", - for I think there is something more than a question in this first verse. The high priest is about to make a further statement, "If these things are so... But he said", - Stephen stops the high priest, and, as far as we know, interruptions of his holy interruption are absolutely silenced, till, at the end, men are cut to the heart, and they gnash on him with their teeth. The Lord causes awhile a wondrous silence to break over the crowd. No man can speak till the testimony is given. The Lord determined that His servant's voice should be heard, and the high priest's broken sentence is the opportunity for the unbroken sentences of the man of God. Ah, dear friends, the Lord can rule a raging crowd. The Lord can rule the Sanhedrim. The Lord can rule everything; His infinite power is marked out in these strange circumstances, - yet not strange. "If these things are so..." What was the high priest intending to add? I suppose, words similar to those which were used in connection with the murder of our beloved Lord. The high priest rent his clothes, "What need we any further witnesses? Ye have

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heard the witness, what think ye? and they all condemned him to be guilty of death". "If these things are so", said the high priest, with a show of justice, for there had been witnesses according to the law, "If these things are so", - then of course that man must be removed, the Jewish Sanhedrim cannot countenance one who speaks against the customs which they proclaim Moses gave by tradition; but a voice interrupts, as we have just seen, "But he said, Men and brethren and fathers, hear". "Men, brethren", a common mode of address, then, and not to be misunderstood through sinful theories of a "universal fatherhood. "And fathers", because here was the assembly of the aged men of Israel. Stephen speaks with politeness, though not with the fear of men. There is a vast difference between the two. "Men, brethren, and fathers, hear". "Hear at once" as the word suggests, for there is an urgency, but yet there is a quietness. "The God of the Glory was seen by our father Abraham". A man with a face like an angel can talk about the God of the glory. Herein is a fitness. The man who utters these words, like Moses has been in such communion with God, that, as it were, the skin of his face shines, but he does not speak of himself. "The God of the glory". The Jews thought much of the Shekinah glory, and rightly so, but in the second temple they had it not. The second temple was the one then standing at Jerusalem; about which, they said, this man speaks disrespectfully; - but this man speaks of the God of the glory. The glory which, was withdrawn from them with its striking evidence that there was something wrong in their experience and religion, was before and upon him; They were clinging to the customs and this place. Stephen thought of the God of the glory. The charge they made against him had doubtless an element of truth. As the charge reads, though we recognize there is misrepresentation, I feel sure we sympathize with the one who is charged. Even his enemies' words acquit him, for they say, "He doth not cease" - a

splendid testimony. It is a poor thing to be changeable. "He doth not cease" they add, "speaking words against the place and the law, and changing the customs which Moses gave." They have nothing here, like we might have expected in such a charge, to be brought against him. It is true in verse 11 of chapter 6 they say, "Against Moses, and against God", but, even there, Moses is first. And now in the charge before the council, there is nothing about God. The PLACE is made their god; the LAW is their exaltation; the CUSTOMS are their climax. The servant of GOD was against the customs. Those customs, which, they said, Moses gave, but some of them were making the Word of God of none effect by their traditions, and the others were given by GOD through Moses to Israel in the flesh; God having a right to change them in a fresh dispensation. But the CUSTOMS were the idols of these men, they had forgotten the God of the glory. They thought of the place from which the glory had departed, they thought of the customs to which they clung with ritualistic tenacity, but they forgot the GOD of the glory. Stephen is in harmony with that glorious God. The whole of the chapter brings before us the God of the glory; it emphasizes God's wondrousness, and it shows the thread of His purpose, never in a tangle, though often veiled. The chapter begins with the God of the glory, and the man who emphasized the God of the glory was granted permission to see the glory of God; for in verse 55 we read, "He being full of the Holy Spirit looked up steadfastly into heaven and saw the glory of God". The glory was surrounding the ark. Concerning the grandson of Eli it was said "Ichabod" - the glory is departed", because the ark of God was taken. The glory was the glory of the Lord's presence. We remember Moses' prayer: "I beseech Thee, show me Thy glory". The passage there, in its context, shows plainly what the glory of God meant. The cherubim that were in the Holiest of all were called the Cherubim of Glory. They were in the

glory, and linked with the glory, and Ezekiel well describes the Glory of God with regard to the temple. Hence it was no meaningless answer to Stephen's words when the Lord granted him to see the glory. Stephen, whom they say to be a speaker against the Holy Place, is, as it were, in the Most Holy Place. They say he is against the law, and he brings the charge against them, "You have received the law, and have not kept it". Let me repeat it they say he is against the place, nay, he is IN the Holy Place, in that secret place of the Lord's presence. God does not give them the glory, but he gives it to the despised and reproached Stephen. Here then is the precious thought "God dwelleth not in temples made with hands". An earthly Jerusalem is not His center in the present dispensation, but He dwelleth among His people, of whom Stephen here is a beautiful type. Not to the Sanhedrim is the glory shown, but to the spiritually-minded, and earthly rejected, child of God. I do not say that our earthly eyes will see, as he saw, the glory, but spiritually there is a parallel, if we realize the wonderful privilege of walking in the light. "The God of the glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia". Striking is this expression. "The God of the glory appeared", He was seen. We read in Genesis SOMETHING of the way God brought Abraham out from Ur of the Chaldees, but here are supplementary facts. The God of the glory appeared unto our father in Mesopotamia, - Ur of the Chaldees was therefore in Mesopotamia, "Our father Abraham", for Stephen does not cut himself off from Abraham. For they that are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham. But the God of Glory appeared unto him when he WAS (and the word "was" is emphatic) when he was in Mesopotamia. They said, "This place". The God of glory appeared in THAT PLACE. God is not limited to a place. ~~¶~~ They wanted to lay a stress upon their earthly temple. Stephen said, we will go back further, we will go back to the first man who was made a Jew. The God of glory

appeared to him in Mesopotamia, far away from the land of Israel, far away from chosen Jerusalem. God is not limited. It is not that a holy place makes God, but that God makes a holy place. They were clinging to the skeleton; they had not the reality. "Trust ye not in lying words, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these". "See ye not these things?...There shall not be left here one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down". "Behold, YOUR house is left unto YOU (a wilderness) for I say unto you, ye shall not see ME henceforth" etc. (A wilderness) without the Lord. The MOUNTAIN of the house TRODDEN DOWN. Without the Lord, all is vain. The God of glory makes a temple wherever He is; it is not that the temple causes the glory. You will recollect how the Lord Jesus had dealt with this same superstitious foolishness when He referred to the Pharisaic reasoning about that which was brought to the temple. "Whosoever shall swear" these Pharisees said, "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? Whosoever shall swear by the altar sweareth by it, and all things thereon, and whose shall swear by the temple sweareth by it, and by Him That dwelleth therein". They were thinking so much of the IT, they were forgetting the HIM. A like danger exists today. But Stephen refers back to Abraham, before there was a temple or anything of this character, before Abraham was near Jerusalem. And he says, as it were, I go up to Abraham before you. Later, in Romans IV, Paul continues the same argument. I may say here in passing, that I believe when men filled up the gap of the twelve and said, "Now we are complete, the others must serve tables", the Lord arranged that the first one of those who served tables was brought into prominence as the PREACHING one. Thus the Lord would show, as it were, how He would fill up the gap. but He did not fill up

the gap with this man, but with the one who continued this man's witness; inasmuch as Stephen prepared for Paul's testimony, and Paul was evidently saved in answer to Stephen's prayer, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge". Stephen saw the Lord standing up, and next with regard to HIS position, we are told the Lord was on the road to Damascus, - surely HE had come to save Saul in answer to Stephen's prayer. The Lord had, as it were, risen up to do this, at the end of the seventh chapter. But to return to that which is in front of us, - Paul continues the witness in Romans IV emphasizing the thought in view of those boasting in circumcision. Abraham was declared righteous before he was a Jew, before he was circumcised. The argument is likewise in Gal. 3, "We go back to Abraham before you" is his answer to Judaizers. It is Stephen's plea here. "The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham in MESOPOTAMIA" ~~At the~~ ~~the~~ - 'the midst of the river', as the word means literally, and oh dear friends, that is where grace meets us, for it does not literally mean "between two rivers", but "the midst of the river", though the term in usage suggests between two. Grace meets us in wrath, and brings us out." Except a man be born OUT from water" all is vain. "He sent from above, He took me, He drew me OUT of many waters". "Except a man be born out from water and (out from) Spirit" - for here is the work of the Spirit of God, "he cannot enter into the kingdom of God". But infinite grace comes down to us in our ruined condition, comes down to us in our position under judgment, and lifts us out. In the midst of the water, the God of Glory appeared, in the midst of the river. So whether you think of Abraham's position in a HEATHEN land, where the God of Glory could come to one undeserving; or whether you think of the root meaning of the term "Mesopotamia", you have spiritual lessons. That there is great force in the word "Mesopotamia", I believe, for it would have been natural to say in Ur of the Chaldees, THAT would have been a more literal quoting

of the Earlier Scriptures, but the Holy Spirit brings in the word "Mesopotamia". Yes, Stephen was LED to bring in that word "Mesopotamia", that its derivation might have a forceful meaning in our experience. "In Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran". Here we have that which illustrates the Earlier Scriptures. We know the story, or should know it, in Gen. 11 and 12. There we read first these striking words. "These are the generations of Terah. Terah begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran begat Lot. And Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his nativity, in Ur of the Chaldees...And Terah took Abram, his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his son's son, and Sarai his daughter in law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan; AND THEY CAME UNTO HARAN AND DWELT THERE". How much is wrapped up here in what is NOT said. We do not read of the Lord's instruction; we do not read of the special message to Abram, but we are told Terah took Abram his son. Here was a NATURAL failure, for Abram was rightly seeking to follow the guidance of his father, but the Lord had spoken to Abram, hence there was a mistake. "Terah took Abram his son, and Lot, and they went forth with them". THEY went forth with them. There is something wrong. They went to go into the land of Canaan, and they came unto Haran and dwelt there. Oh how many broken purposes there are. Beloved friends, did you not intend to be more earnest once; did you not intend to go forward once more fully than you have gone forward? Have there not been broken purposes? Has there not been a going in intention into the land of Canaan, and only a reaching of Haran? There are many half-way houses in the pilgrim path, which delay the spiritual progress. It is true the Lord waits to be gracious, and He may, through a painful path, bring an Abraham to Himself away from all that would draw aside. Yet how much time often we waste in a Haran. Oh that we might be like Caleb; he "f^{ew}lled after" the Lord. He filled the space that was

made for him, but he never sought to control the Lord; he filled AFTER the Lord (Deut. 1:36). Abraham was natural, but that was the pity of it; grace is super-natural. The 12th chapter of Genesis goes on. "Now the Lord had said unto Abraham, get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee". The tense here used in our ENGLISH Bible is evidently in the light of Acts 7, and undoubtedly suggestive of truth. It is true that the Lord had said this to Abraham, but evidently the Lord said it again in Haran, and to that further revelation Gen. 12 seems to point as well. Or it MAY be the Lord did not speak again; it may be the Lord let Abraham feel there was something wrong at first till Abraham felt he must go forward; although even then he still clung to Lot. Unmindful of the striking words of Isa. 51, how often we have acted in like manner, "Look unto Abraham your father...I called him alone". Beloved friends, when an Abraham is called, he may be held back by a Terah, and he may hold to a Lot, but "I called him alone" will break the closest ties which would break that which is closer, - the tie unto the will of God. "Before he dwelt in Haran", ah, solemn words. He DWELT. The same term is employed in Matt. 2:23, and Matt. 4:13 of the Lord's dwelling in places for a considerable period. It is the same word used for the devout men dwelling at Jerusalem in Acts ~~2~~ 2:5, He DWELT in Haran. God had appeared to him first, and yet he dwelt, and not merely sojourned, but had a fixed house, and settled DOWN in Haran. There are many Harans which will bid for our favor. How often children of God see the privilege of giving up THIS, and giving up THAT for the Lord, and stepping forth to Him, without the camp, bearing His reproach, but they find a Haran in a denomination that is better than the one in which they were, or in some meeting that has some characteristics which are beyond those which ensnared them before, and they embrace the Haran of a half-way compromise, instead of

seeking only unto the Lord. You remember how that when there came wise men from the east toward the Lord, that we read they said, We have seen His star in the east, and are come to worship him; and then we read they went to Jerusalem, and we are not told while they are there that they pointed out the star to those at Jerusalem. They decided for themselves, and they lost the star. When they had heard the king they departed, and lo, the star which they saw in the east, went before them. Beloved friends, if the Lord calls us to Canaan, and we go to Haran, we shall lose a blessing, If the Lord calls us to Bethlehem, and we go to Jerusalem we shall lose the star, We need to have our eyes fixed upon HIS will, and not OUR reasoning, and to be willing to give up all for Him. And so we find that Abraham clung to associations that were natural. A man's friends will usually be his worst enemies, to draw him most away from the Lord. A man's relatives may oftentimes become his greatest hindrances to draw away from the Lord. Abram was first held back by a Terah. It was not till his father had died that he went on from Haran, and then he kept to a Lot, till God brought him to see he must part even with Lot. Lot came up to Canaan, it is true, but God said of Abraham, I called HIM. It is a blessed thing to be called. There are some who have followed Abraham outside the camp in some measure, but like Lot, they have followed someone else. Abraham went simply at the Lord's bidding. Oh, my friends, let our separation be at the Lord's bidding, not simply to imitate someone else. The draw-back, a continual draw-back, in all testimony for God, is the presence of those who, like Lot, have never FELT THE LORD'S OWN CALLING. To return to Acts 7, - "The God of the glory was seen by our father Abraham", - not by Terah, not by Lot, "And He said to him, Come out thou". Our translation loses the force of this, the word is in the singular, and the tense implies, Come out at once, - "Come out thou at once", and the flesh seeks to make it a

"Come out YOU a LITTLE LATER". Ah, dear friends, this is an alteration of the fulness of God's Word into which we all so easily fall. "Come out thou at once, out from thy land". Here is a test, but the test must go deeper, - "And out from thy kindred" "Out from thy land" - he must give up things; and "out from thy kindred", - he must Give up persons, and the latter tie is the closer, and the latter wrench the fuller. "Out from thy land" - here is a suggestion to children of God. Here is an encouragement to those who are in Christ, for here we have no continuing city, we seek one to come. "Out from thy land,...come into THE land which I will show thee". Not "thy land", out from thy land. The child of God is made into a PILGRIM. He loses everything, but has everything because he has One Who is more than everything. "Out from thy land, and thy kindred", - "those who were born together with thee, and who became together with thee" as the word implies. Break, awhile, the "together" for a closer "together". To delay is to disobey. The Lord tested Abraham further and further and Abraham stayed awhile in Haran to regret it after. The Lord would therefore give Abraham a further opportunity of showing love. The man to whom He said, "Come out from thy kindred" was the man to whom He said, "Take now thy son, thine only son, and offer him"; this was a greater severance than from Lot. It was greater, moreover, in the manner in which it was to be made. Not only must thou withdraw from him, but OFFER him "upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of". The same wording, for the Lord meant this to be an echo of His earlier command that was obeyed so falteringly. HERE it is "Come into the land that I will show thee of". THERE - One of the mountains which I will tell thee". God does not always say all at once. He desires that His people shall trust in the dark, for THAT is the only true light, and so the Lord tests Abraham again. Will he give up his only son? Abraham rises early in the morning. He does not

go and live in Haran for a few years first. He rises up early in the morning, and goes toward the district, and very place which God had told him, and there is that readiness until the last moment, or the last but one, for the Lord steps in, - "Now I know that thou fearest Me", and "He was called the friend of God". But reverting to our first passage, "Come into the land which I will show thee" has a double thought to us. It brings before us the prospect of seeing our beloved Lord in that day, that land, the better country, the heavenly country, for which (we are told in Heb. 11) Abraham looked. In this sense we are to come out of our land and to keep that land in view, but in another sense the idea is, give up the things of earth, and have simply what the Lord appoints now. "A land which I will show thee", - we are not to choose for ourselves, we are not to arrange for ourselves. It is enough that the Lord shows what the Lord has chosen, "As for God, His way is perfect". That way may oftentimes be in the sea, His footsteps may not be known to us, but His purpose is there, and He Who knoweth the way that we take, also knows the way that He takes, and graciously says, "I know the thoughts that I think toward you". He has a plan for us, and though, beloved friends, He oft-times separates us painfully from things of earth, it is that we may be useful unto Him, and to the praise of the glory of His grace. There is nothing unkind in God's call to separation; nor will His Holy Spirit fail us; there is everything unkind to ourselves, and to others, as well as ingratitude to Him, in our feeble response to His gracious call.
