

HOLY GROUND

A SERMON

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“Then said the Lord to him, put off your shoes from your feet; for the place where you stand is holy ground.” Acts 7:33

THERE appears to be a four-fold design in the writing of this book called the Acts of the apostles; first to show the fulfilment of the promise which the Savior made of sending the Holy Spirit upon his apostles, as shown on the day of Pentecost; second, to show the ingathering, according to prediction, of the Gentiles, as shown by Peter being sent to Caesarea; third, to show his faithfulness also in being with his servants when they were brought before rulers, magistrates, and kings, giving them a mouth, and wisdom, which the adversaries could neither gainsay nor resist; and then fourth, to show his kind providence over his people, his care of them amidst all the storms of life to which they are exposed, as illustrated and set forth in the voyage of the apostle Paid, for though the ship was broken to pieces, yet they all came safe to land. And there appears to be a two-fold design in this address of Stephen's, of which our text is a part, to the people before him. The one was to show that, while they had accused him of speaking blasphemous words against God, and against that holy place, he had done no such thing; but that he, Stephen, recognized the patriarchs and the prophets; and at the same time, that these patriarchs and prophets did believe in, and recognized, and spoke of that very Person whom they had now slain and hanged on a tree, but whom God had raised from the dead. One chief design, then, was to show the oneness of the Savior with the Old Testament Scriptures. Another design was to bring before us the difference between a Jew after the flesh and a Jew after the spirit; and thereby to bring before us the difference between a man who is a Christian merely after the flesh, and he who is a Christian after the spirit. When a man's conversion is merely natural, merely from conscience, or merely from the letter of the word, he is then a Christian merely after the flesh, and does not enter into the vitalities or realities of the gospel; but he whose circumcision is in the heart, in the spirit, and whose praise is not of men, but of God, he is spiritual, and therefore, he belongs to the spiritual generation, to the generation of the upright. This, I say, is another design that Stephen had in view; and in thus faithfully uniting the dear Savior, or showing that the Savior was one with the prophets, and the prophets one with him; and showing the difference between the Jew after the flesh and the Jew after the spirit, the Lord in this faithful and decisive testimony was with Stephen, so that his face shone as the face of an angel; and though they were determined to thrust him out of this world, they could not thrust him out of God's love, out of God's hands, nor out of God's kingdom, nor out of God's presence; no, in the

face of it all, he saw the heavens opened, he saw the glory of God, he saw Jesus standing on the right hand of God; and he looked around upon his bitterest foes with a heart full of pity, conscious it was grace that had made him thus to differ, and that it was sovereignty, deep sovereignty, as well as inflexible justice, that had left the others to their blindness; and therefore, while they could not endure his testimony of God's truth, witnessing their rage, and being cut to the heart, he could and did endure all their persecutions, even unto death, without feeling one grain of unkindness or malice towards them, but just the reverse; his heart was full of pity for them; "and he cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep." Now here is a prayer, and we must look, we ought to look for the fruit of that prayer; the Holy Spirit inspired that prayer; and there must have been some among Stephen's persecutors, who belonged unto God; and the prayer would reach such, would be answered in behalf of such. And so, we travel but a very little way; this is the 7th chapter; we go to the 9th chapter, that is a very little way; and there we meet a conspicuous answer to Stephen's prayer. The Lord met Saul of Tarsus, and stopped him, cast him down, in his own time raised him up; and has constituted him in the gospel heavens an apostolic and ministerial star of the first magnitude. Here is something like an answer to Stephen's prayer; "Lay not this sin to their charge." Ah, my hearer, what cannot religion do? We may be subjected to all that men and devils can inflict upon us, by slander, or by physical torture, or by anything else; yet if we have the Lord's presence under it all we can smile at it, because it is but the doing of poor puny worms; whereas on the side of those who are the Lord's there is everlasting strength, the everlasting God, the triumphant Redeemer, and that reigning grace the truth of which shall be fulfilled; "my grace is sufficient for you."

Our text presents itself in a two-fold form. Here is first *a command*; "Put off your shoes from your feet;" and there is secondly, *the reason assigned for that command*; "for the place where you stand is holy ground."

FIRST: I notice, first, THE COMMAND. Now the two teachings, or as we sometimes call them, doctrines, and we must remember that the word "doctrine" means "teaching;" I think we sometimes use the word "doctrine" without perhaps having a very definite idea of what it really means; "*doctrine*" means "*teaching*;" it comes from the Latin word *docere* "to teach," the two teachings, I say, or doctrines, that we have in the first part of our text are these, *submission* and *substitution*. These are the two doctrines contained in the command, "Put off your shoes from your feet." First then, *submission*. I scarcely need remind you that it is to this day a mode of doing homage to a superior, a mode of acknowledgment to a superior when they approach his presence, to take their shoes from their feet. But we must look at this in the spiritual, in the gospel, and close sense of the word. Now it is in the first place expressive of submission; and the first idea of this submission is that of relinquishment or renunciation; for the shoe, as we shall have presently to notice, is made use of in the scriptures figuratively as expressive of right, as expressive of possession, and as expressive of dominion. Now all of us by nature, and it is a remarkable truth, indulge in a false right; all of us by nature have a kind of vague hope in the Lord; but in order to be put thoroughly right in this matter, we must be convinced that we cannot stand in our own shoes before God, that we cannot stand in our own right before God; and therefore, we must be brought to renounce that right, to give up that right, and to do homage to the majesty of heaven. Let me try and make this as clear as possible. In the first place, then, friends, we are by nature under God's eternal law, and we are the property and prisoners of that law, and we have no right whatever to mercy, to favor, to one promise of the gospel. So far from that being the case, the Lord might have

dealt with the human race as he has dealt with fallen angels; he might have passed by the whole. He passed by the nature of angels; they fell, he passed by them, he has left them there; he might have passed by the whole human race, and have left them there; and therefore, if any have any favor, that favor must be entirely free. But that law under which we are by nature, then, I say, is that that holds us as prisoners; and not one jot nor tittle of that law can ever fail. And we have no right, in the gospel sense of the word, to call God our Father; we have no right, in the gospel sense of the word, to call Christ our Savior; we have no right, in the gospel sense of the word, to one promise of the Bible; because all these things are given. Now we must be brought to renounce our supposed right and to renounce this possession, and to renounce all pretended dominion, we must be brought down into a state, for that is the first idea here of entire destitution. Let us ask ourselves whether we know what this is. I can hardly find language to express the solemnity and awfulness of that line of things that would try to persuade people that they are Christians when they are not. You may depend upon it, friends, that unless we are killed by the law, we are not alive to the gospel; unless we are killed by sin, we are not really and truly alive to the gospel; and unless we are killed by the body of Christ, we are not really and truly alive to the gospel. We must undergo death in these three senses; we must be killed by the law; that is, we must be so convinced of sin as to feel, and see, and know that there is not the slightest hope of pleasing God by attempting to keep the ten commandments; because if we could keep them in outward form, our fallen nature is as contrary to the law as sin is contrary to God; we are carnal, sold under sin. What will this conviction do? It will kill us to any hope of ever pleasing God by the works of the law. Then second, we must also be killed by sin; that is, we must be sensible that we have nothing but sin to call our own; and all that we do, apart from the grace of God, is like ourselves. So that not only from a sight and sense of what the law is, but also from a sight and sense of what we are as sinners, we must become dead to any hope in ourselves; we must die; and thus feel, see, and know, that there is no hope by any creature power we possess of ever bringing forward any reason before God why we should not be lost, or why he should save us; because we are altogether corrupt before him; the imaginations of the heart are evil, and only evil, and that continually. And then there is a third death in order to come into this real renunciation, this real putting off of the first Adam shoes, and this real renouncing our natural standing, our legal standing, our carnal standing; our position by nature; there must be a third death, or death from a third source; which the apostle speaks of in this way: "I am become dead unto the law by the body of Christ." First, I through the law am dead to the law, as to any hope of pleasing God that way: second, through sin, the sin of my heart and nature, I am dead to all hope of pleasing God by anything that a poor autumnal leaf, a poor cobweb, a poor moth like me can do; I am dead there. But when I come to the body of Christ, when I come to the Lord Jesus Christ, or rather when the Lord Jesus Christ is revealed to me, and I see what a righteousness he has brought in, then I begin to have a hope in God; when I see what an atonement he has made; when I see that he himself was the price paid for the eternal redemption of my never-dying soul; when I see this, ah, then I bid the law farewell forever, its lightnings and its thunders, its voice of words and the sound of the trumpet, sounding louder and louder; not less and less, to denote that the creature gets better, and that the demands of the law upon the creature decreases; but the trumpet sounds louder and louder to denote that the demands of the law do not decrease as you go on, but that they increase. But now, when brought to receive the blessed Redeemer, here we can sing,

"The terrors of law and of God
With me can have nothing to do:

My Savior's obedience and blood
Hide all my transgressions from view."

And thus we become dead to hope from the law, dead to hope from self; and dead to the law legally, and dead to sin relatively; there is an entire separation between us and the law, as a law of works, as a law having penalties attached to it; and there is an entire, an infinite, an eternal, separation between us and sin by the Lord Jesus Christ. My hearer, this is the path that I am now describing which the vulture's eye has not seen; this, in a word, is to be brought on to holy ground; and when the Lord brings a soul thus on to holy ground, he will make you put off your first Adam shoes; that is, he will make you feel you cannot stand in your own shoes; for if you will stand in your own shoes, that is, in your own works, in your own religion, in your own doings, then you must stand both to the demands and penalties of God's eternal law; if you will stand on old Adam ground, if you will stand on free will, if you will stand on something done by the creature, then you must stand under all your sins. But if brought to renounce these, and to become dead to the law, dead to sin, and dead by the body of Christ, then you become alive unto God. This then is what I understand by putting off the shoes; and here then is submission to God's truth. And so, putting off the shoe was the symbol, as I have also said, of homage. So here that soul does homage to God; he looks up and he says, Ah, what a fearful condition I was in, and knew it not. Now that I see Jesus, oh, how my soul loves him; now that I see God the Father in the gift of his dear Son, how my soul loves him; now that the Eternal Spirit testifies of this wondrous Person, how I love him. Are you brought thus far, then; to receive the truth rightly, with that faith that unites you to him? If you have these three things, an understanding of the truth, a divine persuasion of the truth, and the love of the truth, if you have these three, I could then, though I dare not so digress, run through the scriptures, and show how these three demonstrate that there is a work of grace begun in your heart; for if the Lord meant to kill you, he would never have given you to know the law. "I speak" (says Paul) "to them that know the law;" that are thus become dead unto the law, and dead unto sin; and dead to both by the body of Christ. If he had intended to kill you, he never would have made you believe these blessed truths, receive them in the divine persuasion, and receive them in the love thereof. This is the man in coming before God that can understand the meaning of the wise man; and the wise man's meaning will apply literally to the house of God upon earth, as well as spiritually approaching God; when he says, "Keep your foot," there is an allusion you see to the same thing, "When you got to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they consider not that they do evil." If we enter the house of God as though we were coming into a common workshop, or going into a hotel, or going into a mere worldly office, in that irreverent, coarse, barbarous sort of way, all such is displeasing in the sight of God. I am not advocating, nor would I advocate for the world, the worshipping of bricks, and mortar, or worshipping material buildings; but I do hold, that reverence for God in his house is one of the excellencies of divine worship. We always find how a very little wrong behavior in the house of God may disturb a whole congregation, spoil the hallowedness of our feelings, and take us into a state of mind that seems to frustrate altogether the purpose of our meeting in his pure and holy name. So that it is a lesson to us even in that. "Keep your foot when you go to the house of God, and be more ready to hear." If you are going to hear, the minister is come to speak, he is come in the fear of God, and come in solemn concern for the souls of the people, come to glorify God; therefore, "keep your foot, and be more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools." Therefore, I say it is a lesson to us in this way; so that when people walk perhaps to their very seats with their hats on, all these things are displeasing in the sight of the Lord; these persons do not

think so, or else they would not do it, but it is displeasing in the sight of the Lord; for although the Lord looks upon us in Christ, yet not in a way which destroys personal character or conduct; the Lord is a lover of order, and loves to see it. I find in my own mind that the more my mind is regulated by the grace of God, the more my thoughts are regulated, and the more my feelings are regulated, the more comfortable and happier I am. I know at those times when my soul (and alas, alas, I with shame confess I experience much of it,) when my soul is like a field without a hedge, like a town without walls, and like a fortress without any defenses around it, and seems to be the high road of anything and everything, and there seems confusion and every evil work, I am not happy when that is the case. But when the Lord comes, and sets the heart in order, sets the soul in order, and enables me to keep my foot upon the right ground, in the right place, in the right order, in the right path, and to step cautiously and carefully; ah, what sweat and blessed seasons are these, when we can again and again, as it were, cast off our old Adam's shoes, and put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and stand upon holy ground, do homage to the blessed God, feel our affections carried out to him, and feel it is so good to be there. Ah, what a difference is there between standing on unholy ground and standing on holy ground. To stand on holy ground is indeed an experience that none can enter into but those that have been so favored. But you must forgive this digression. One doctrine then taught in this command is submission to God, solemn submission to him who is greatly to be praised in the assembly of the saints, and to be had in reverence by all them that are round about him.

The next doctrine taught in this command is that of *substitution*, "Put off your shoes." Let me stand in your place. Here is the Angel of the Covenant, Christ Jesus, coming into our place, and he stood in our shoes, that we might stand in his shoes; he took our place, that we might take his place. And can we, think you, in this part of our subject, can we do better than take the circumstances under which the Lord appeared to Moses, as recorded in the 3rd of Exodus, and partly repeated here in this chapter, where the Lord appeared to Moses in a flame of fire, out of the midst of a bush; when Moses said, "I will now turn aside, and see this great sight." It is indeed a great sight; and I hope you will say so too presently, when we come to say a word or two upon its meaning. "I will turn aside, and see this great sight; why, the bush is not burnt." But the Lord said, "Draw not nigh hither; put off your shoes from off your feet, for the place whereon you stand is holy ground." Here then I apprehend it will mean, that the dear Savior took our place, that we might stand in that place, on that holy ground which he should make, which he should form, which he should constitute, and which he should bring us to stand upon. Take then the angel of the Lord appearing in a flame of fire out of the midst of the bush, I think this bush represents, in the first place, the Lord Jesus Christ taking our nature with all his arrows. Why, you say, a bush is a worthless thorny sort of thing. May not that represent what we are? Now when the Lord Jesus Christ took our nature, he took all our sorrows into his soul and into his body. Read the 22nd Psalm, and see the description there of his heart melting like wax, of his bones being out of joint, of his tongue cleaving to the roof of his mouth, of his bowels melting like water, and of his being brought into the dust of death. There you will see he was a man of sorrows, he took our sorrows; I think that truth is there, although in a humble form, yet the humbler the better; it is very beautifully set forth. And then there was the fire. May not that fire represent God's wrath? And yet the bush was not consumed. First, the Lord Jesus Christ was not consumed; all our sorrows could not consume him, all our sins could not consume him. He is the only person that ever did, ever can, or ever will survive the penalty of one sin. It was not for many sins that the first Adam was banished from Paradise, but for one sin; and yet the innumerable millions of sins that met upon the Savior could not remove

him from God's presence. Adam was not equal to one sin, whereas Christ was the Master of ten million, times ten million sins. Do you not see here, friends, a wonderful contrast between the creature and Emmanuel between mortal man, and the dear, blissful Mediator of the new covenant? that Adam could not survive one sin, could not atone for one sin, could not recover himself from one sin, could not reinstate himself from one sin; but here comes this Mighty Person, travelling in the greatness of his strength, taking our poor, feeble nature, though he had no sin in him, he had sorrow in him and sin upon him; and our sins and his sorrows were put together. And then the fire, I say, expressive of God's wrath, the flaming sword of justice, yet the bush was not consumed. So, Christ could not be consumed. I hope I shall not be misunderstood, for this is very hallowed ground, very sacred ground. I was going to apply the figure in the 55th of Isaiah, to the dear Savior here, where it is said, that "instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree; and it shall be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off." I would be careful how I apply it, but still may it not in a sense thus apply? The dear Savior took our nature in its thorny state, he took all the sorrows belonging to sin into his person; our sins were laid upon him, and he endured the curse, and then he was, as it were, the thorn and the brier; that is to say, we were unto him thorns and briers; and he was a Man of sorrows, made in the likeness of sinful flesh; but when he rose from the dead, no more thorns, no more briers; now it is nothing but the paradisaical; he is now the myrtle tree; there is no sorrow now, no sin now; and so, when he shall appear the second time it will be without sin, and consequently without sorrow. Here then he is unto the Lord for a name; I am sure Jesus Christ is unto the Lord for a name; I am sure that the name and favor of the great God will extend itself to eternity, through the realms of bliss, according to what the dear Savior is. "And an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off." Oh, who that feels what a poor sinner he is can but prize this wondrous Substitute: who would not gladly cast off his old Adam right, his own righteousness, his own standing, run away from it, embrace the blest Redeemer, and rejoice that he has stood in our place, has survived it all, and lives forever? Again, the bush not only represents the Savior, but it represents us also; and here we can make use of the bush, not merely to set forth our sinfulness, and the sorrows of which we are the subjects, but we can apply it in a way we could not apply it to him. A bush is a worthless sort of thing; we cannot apply that to the manhood of the dear Savior; yet he came into a state in which he himself says, "I am a worm, and no man." O, mysterious humiliation! But here we can apply it to the sinner with full force. A bush, I say, is a sort of a worthless thing, just fit only for the fire; and that is just what the sinner is brought to feel himself to be. He says, what am I apart from the grace of God? All I have ever thought, and said, and done, when tested by the truth of God, would prove to be but thorns and briers; and I am fit only for the fire of God's wrath. The sinner is brought, then, to feel what a poor worthless thing he is. And yet though this was our state we could not be consumed, because the Angel of the covenant took us into relationship with himself: "The goodwill of him that dwelt in the bush;" the very term used at the Savior's birth, "Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, good will toward men." Therefore, the reason we were not consumed, was because our sins were laid upon Christ; and he has borne them all away. Then, second, it represents the Christian. After representing us as sinners, and that our way of escape from destruction is Christ coming into our place, quenching the fire, and eternally taking away our sins, it then represents the Christian, in his tribulation, burning with tribulation, yet not consumed. Why, it is a great sight if you look at it as expressive of Christ standing in our place, it is a great sight. "I will turn aside, and see this great sight." And then if you look at the millions of worthless worms, in and of themselves as sinners, that are saved by it, it is a great sight. And the Christian when he looks at himself, may be said in one sense to be a great sight. He will say, Ah,

how many sins have burnt in me, and how many troubles have burnt around me; what furnaces I have come through; what a wonderful thing it is that I am not consumed; here I am with my life whole in me; here I am still complete in Christ; here I am one with Jesus,

“By eternal union one.”

Substitution, then. How gladly the sinner will put off all confidence in the flesh, to receive Christ Jesus, who stood in our place, that we may stand in his place; in a word, that we may stand on holy ground. Now, the unholy ground will of course mean our old Adam standing; that is the unholy ground. And when we come to stand on Gospel ground, we must not bring our own shoes with us; that is, we must not bring our own supposed right, our own supposed righteousness, our own confidence; we must not bring anything with us, but we must come as it were barefoot; if we bring our old Adam shoes with us, they will betray us, for we have walked in forbidden paths in miry ways, on the brink of the bottomless pit; they betray us; they show where we have been to, and what we have been. But Jesus bore these off; and there shall, be no sign left of the forbidden paths in which we have walked, the unholy ground upon which we have stood, underneath which were the magazines and reservoirs of God’s eternal wrath, ready volcanically to burst, forth, and swallow us up to eternity; but we knew not what was at work under our feet, until God helped us, brought us off from that ground, to stand upon solid ground, to stand upon the Rock of Ages, to stand where, there is all that is indicated by the character of the ground, holy ground.

Second. I now hastily notice, **THE REASON ASSIGNED FOR THE COMMAND**, “For the place where you stand is holy ground.” Literally speaking, this was called holy ground because of the Lord’s presence. And where does the presence of God appear as in and by Christ Jesus? Hence, to typify him in this character, the place of the mercy-seat is called by way of pre-eminence, “the holy of holies.” Our faith by way of pre-eminence, is called “most holy faith”; Christ himself, in the Book of Daniel, is called “the most holy.” Well but, say you, is Christ holier than the law as he is called the most holy? Is the mercy-seat a holier place than Sinai, as this mercy-seat is called the holy of holies? Is faith more holy than the law, as faith is called most holy? I answer, No. Why, then, say you, are these spoken of in the superlative? Because the holiness of God nowhere shines forth as it does in the Gospel, nowhere shines forth as it does in Christ, nowhere shines forth as it does in faith. Holiness is the great secret of all those achievements recorded in the 11th of Hebrews; precious faith laid hold of the end of sin; Christ is the end of sin; sin is our weakness; and these men, by most holy faith, entered into the most holy place, laid hold of the most holy name; and the great God, who is thrice holy, was on their side, and they were all strength; they could do anything, because they had found the end of that which made up their weakness, namely, sin; they stood upon holy ground, and they could do anything there. See the 5th of Romans, which I cannot now enter upon; see the contrast there between the first Adam-ground and the second Adam-ground. Ah, see what poor sinking-sand the first Adam-ground is; see what a solid rock the second Adam-ground is. Here we may stand, on this holy ground, the ground of the gospel, the ground of finished salvation, the ground of free grace. Here, says the apostle, “being justified by faith, we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ; by whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.” But what have we on this holy ground? First, peace; second, strength; third, plenty. First, peace, “Shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace.” Here the prodigal is welcome, put a robe upon his back, a ring upon his finger, and shoes upon his feet; now he is in peace; shod with the preparation of the gospel of

peace. Ah, prodigal, you love your father's house now. Yes, oh yes; I now love the habitation of his house, the place where his honor dwells. You love your Father now, yes, oh yes; no father like him. Little did I think he would meet me while I was yet afar off; little did I think he would receive me without saying a syllable to me relative to my wickedness; little did I think I should thus be treated. Ah, I have peace now. So that on this holy ground, this gospel ground, this ground of faith, we have peace with God the Father; in the words I just now quoted, "We have peace with God." Is this our standing this morning? I would not say a boasting word, but I should very much question whether there are so few as a thousand in this assembly this morning that are, through grace, standing on this ground; bless the Lord for it; hundreds of you were not when I first knew you; bless the Lord that he has brought you to renounce all confidence in the flesh, to receive the truth, and to stand fast therein. Ah, there is no ground so firm to stand upon for life, death, and eternity, as the gospel ground. This holy ground also will denote strength. "Your shoes shall be iron and brass; and as your day is so shall your strength be." Why if you were standing on this gospel ground, then the word of God says, that there is no God like your God. And this gospel ground is also a land of plenty. On the old Adam ground there is eternal privation; all that die on that ground come to such poverty at last that they would be glad for Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water to cool their tongues; such is the privation into which they come. But on this holy gospel ground there is eternal plenty. What a contrast is here!

My eight pages are full or else I intended to have analyzed the blessing of Joseph, for that seems to bear upon our subject; because it is in the blessing of Joseph, as spoken, by Moses in the 33rd of Deuteronomy, where this circumstance is taken notice of. I meant to have said something of the precious fruits brought forth by the sun; and the chief things of the ancient mountains, and the precious things of the lasting hills; something of the glory of the Savior, the power of the Savior; something of the glorious ingathering of the people, and the eternity of that glory into which they are gathered; but I must say no more.