

Scripture Reading:

Acts 7: "44 "Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as He appointed, instructing Moses to make it according to the pattern that he had seen, 45 which our fathers, having received it in turn, also brought with Joshua into the land possessed by the Gentiles, whom God drove out before the face of our fathers until the days of David, 46 who found favor before God and asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob. 47 But Solomon built Him a house. 48 However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says: 49 'Heaven is My throne, And earth is My footstool. What house will you build for Me? says the Lord, Or what is the place of My rest? 50 Has My hand not made all these things?' 51 "You stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. 52 Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, 53 who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it." 54 When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. 55 But [Stephen], being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, 56 and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" 57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; 58 and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep."

"Jesus Standing at the Right Hand of God"

We have been considering together Stephen's great defense before the Sanhedrim in Jerusalem...Facing many of the same men who sat in judgment over Jesus and quite likely in the same place.

- Just as they had done with Jesus, Stephen has been brought before them with false charges

Stephen was said to have spoken blasphemous things against God and Moses and of wanting the Temple to be destroyed.

We considered the address in its entirety where Stephen defended himself against all of these false charges and managed to turn the tables on the council showing that it was they who stood in the long line of those in Israel who had rebelled against God, against Moses & did not know the purpose of the Temple.

Last week we considered in more detail what it means to be the true disciples of Moses and now we move on to see how Stephen addresses the issue of the Temple...

- Here these religious leaders had wandered far afield from how the Bible presents the Temple, which Stephen will address
- And sadly, many in the church today have done the same, which is something we must address.

Stephen in his defense now turns to the Temple, a Temple which they were in or very close to, and he in affect asks a very simple question:

- How big is your God?

Again we see that Stephan knows his Bible... I mean the Old Testament.

Stephen quickly traced the history of the Temple beginning with the Tabernacle in the wilderness which Moses built according to the vision & instructions that God had given him. The Tabernacle is brought through the wilderness and into the Promised Land and eventually David's son Solomon is allowed to build a grand Temple: A house for God's name. Stephen quickly adds the admonition from the Prophet Isaiah where God says "heaven is My throne and earth is My footstool. What house will you build for Me? Says Jehovah, or what is the place of my rest? Has not my hand made all these things?" I believe Stephen quoted Isaiah because these leaders in their hearts knew what Solomon himself said when the Temple was dedicated and the Prophet was calling them to the remembrance of these things...

- They, in their pride, believed that they were God's special people because the Temple where God lived was their Temple right there in Jerusalem!
- They were sadly mistaken!

This was not true when Solomon built the Temple and it was certainly not true after all the centuries of sin and corruption that followed. Hear what Solomon himself said as he dedicated the Temple he built:

1 Kings 8:20 "So Jehovah has fulfilled His word which He spoke; and I have filled the position of my father David, and sit on the throne of Israel, as Jehovah promised; and I have built a temple for the name of Jehovah, the God of Israel.

21 And there I have made a place for the ark, in which is the covenant of Jehovah which He made with our fathers, when He brought them out of the land of Egypt."

- Note that Solomon says it is a place for God's name and a place for the Ark of God's Covenant

22 "Then Solomon stood before the altar of Jehovah in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands toward heaven; **23** and he [prayed]: "O Jehovah God of Israel, there is no God in heaven above or on earth below like You, who keep Your covenant and mercy with Your servants who walk before You with all their hearts. **24** You have kept what You promised Your servant David my father; You have both spoken with Your mouth and fulfilled it with Your hand, as it is this day. **25** Therefore, O Jehovah God of Israel, now keep what You promised Your servant David my father, saying, 'You shall not fail to have a man sit before Me on the throne of Israel, only if your sons take heed to their way, that they walk before Me as you have walked before Me.'"

- Notice that God has been faithful and now Solomon calls on the people to faithfully obey
- Solomon, as Moses did before him, reminds Israel that there is a greater King David to come... The King of Kings: Jesus

26 "And now I pray, O God of Israel, let Your word come true, which You have spoken to Your servant David my father. **27** But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built!"

- Notice that King Solomon at the dedication of the greatest Temple says that it cannot contain God: Not even heaven can!
- Just as Isaiah would say later with words that Stephen quoted to the council: A learned council, which had forgotten these things.

28 "Yet regard the prayer of Your servant and his supplication, O Jehovah my God, and listen to the cry and the prayer which Your servant is praying before You today: **29** that Your eyes may be open toward this temple night and day, toward the place of which You said, 'My name shall be there,' that You may hear the prayer which Your servant makes toward this place."

- Solomon is explaining the real purpose of the Temple right here at the dedication for all to hear!
- These religious leaders would have read and studied this prayer, but just as we often do with portions of the Bible that don't fit OUR thinking, they had set it aside and simply ignored what Solomon was plainly saying
- They had neglected this and it would be costly because it is the heart of the Gospel, yes the Gospel here in the Old Testament!

30 “And may You hear the supplication of Your servant and of Your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. Hear in heaven Your dwelling place; and when You hear, forgive.”

- Remember the first important part of Luke's orderly account: -- -- Jesus has come to save His people from their sins
- This grand Temple with all of its sacrifices and ceremonies, courtyards and holy places was to remind Israel where they could find forgiveness of their sins...
- In the great sacrifice of their Messiah.

Solomon then gives a long lists of sins and problems that the people might face which I will have to commend as your homework, pointing to the same solution for them all...

38 “whatever prayer, whatever supplication is made by anyone, or by all Your people Israel, when each one knows the plague of his own heart, and spreads out his hands toward this temple: 39 then hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and forgive, and act, and give to everyone according to all his ways, whose heart You know (for You alone know the hearts of all the sons of men), 40 that they may fear You all the days that they live in the land which You gave to our fathers.”

- Perhaps Jesus pointed to this prayer as He taught the disciples on the road to Emmaus
- At His ascension, Jesus commanded His disciples to be His witnesses in Jerusalem and all of Judea and Samaria and then to the ends of the world, something that Solomon also understood as he continued to pray:

41 "Moreover, concerning a foreigner, who is not of Your people Israel, but has come from a far country for Your name's sake

42 (for they will hear of Your great name and Your strong hand and Your outstretched arm), when he comes and prays toward this temple, 43 hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to You, that all peoples of the earth may know Your name and fear You, as do Your people Israel, and that they may know that this temple which I have built is called by Your name.”

As we will clearly see as we move on in Acts, the fullness of the Gentles will be brought in, Abraham will be a blessing to all the nations, just as God had promised him. Solomon goes on to list more ways that God's people will be protected in battle and persecutions and again calls them to obedience.”

- After this great prayer the Temple is dedicated with massive sacrifices and a grand celebration.

Now it is interesting that Stephen did not quote Solomon directly, but rather Isaiah, which certainly would have brought Solomon's prayer to their remembrance.

I think what these leaders found more troubling was that Isaiah gave his reminder that God does not dwell in physical buildings here on earth right after the pronouncement that God was bringing forth the new heavens and the new earth in chapter 65 of Isaiah.

As we have studied together, the Apostles and now Stephen are showing these hard-hearted religious leaders that this is exactly what happened with the ascension of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit to empower the Church:

- The New Jerusalem, which Paul in Ephesians chapter two argues is the new Temple:

Ephesians 2:17 “And [Jesus] came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. *[both Jew & Gentile as we shall see]* **18** For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. **19** Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, **20** having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone, **21** in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, **22** in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”

- Stephen had been falsely accused of blaspheming God, of blaspheming God’s prophet Moses and of speaking against the Temple in Jerusalem.

Stephen has clearly shown them that he serves the God of their fathers... Stephen shows that it was they, not he, who rejected the greater Prophet whom Moses told them to listen to... And Stephen shows that it was they who thought God dwelt in their Temple rather than the throne room of heaven!

- The very place where God had intended the people to bring their supplications had become an idol!

It is at this point that the members of the Sanhedrin had had just about enough: They saw where Stephen was going and there was likely a growing chorus of murmurings which may have grown to actual shouting by the time Stephen came to his conclusion: If you have seen a lively debate in the English parliament you have the right picture.

So Stephen turns to them and declares, “you stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you.”

- They had refused to hear the prophets, including Moses, they killed the just one who was sent and had not kept God’s Law.
- They had been proven very guilty just as Peter did with the crowds that had gathered at Pentecost

It is interesting to see how Luke portrays the reaction in similar terms: In both cases they were cut to the heart, but in different ways: At Pentecost the overwhelming guilt brought a broken heart and much repentance as thousands are saved. Here in the hall it brings hardened hearts and stubborn rebellion. At Pentecost they repented with their lips and received baptism and forgiveness of their sins. Here they gnash their teeth and refuse to hear any more of what Stephen has to say.

- So the Holy Spirit glorifies Jesus to finish the defense of His beloved Saint at this trial, just as Jesus had promised His disciples would happen when they faced great persecutions

Stephen is filled with the Spirit [again] and allowed to see the real throne room in heaven so that he can declare to these judges of Israel: “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

The trial is now over as they stop their ears and rush at Stephen in anger to kill him which we will consider next week.

- I want us to consider this morning what Stephen saw, what it meant for the council and what it should mean for us today.

The first question is how did Stephen see the throne room of heaven?

Now we could speculate about visions or roofs opening up or other ideas that folks might have, but once again we have an account in Scripture that should inform us here.

- By it we learn that the heavenly realms are not far removed from our daily lives...

In II Kings 6 we have a series of events taking place that involve the prophet Elisha who had taken up the mantle of his master Elijah.

At one point the King of Syria is trying to attack the armies of Israel and the prophet gives the King of Israel constant reports about what the Syrians are planning so they can be foiled & God's people protected. The Syrian King has finally had enough and marches down with a great army to get Elisha and we pick up the account in verse 14:

"Therefore [the king] sent horses and chariots and a great army there, and they came by night and surrounded the city. 15 And when the servant of the man of God arose early and went out, there was an army, surrounding the city with horses and chariots. And his servant said to him, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?"

Those who have read Lord of the Rings or seen the movies have a picture of this with the scenes where tens of thousands of Orcs gather

16 "So [Elisha] answered, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." 17 And Elisha prayed, and said, "O Jehovah, I pray, open his eyes that he may see." Then Jehovah opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha."

The same veil that kept Elisha's servant from seeing the forces of God's army was lifted from Stephen's eyes that day so he could see and testify about the risen and ascended Jesus!

- The next thing to note is that Stephen refers to Jesus as the Son of Man.

This will be the last reference to that title in the New Testament until we reach the Book of Revelation and it is the ONLY time it is used by anyone other than Jesus!

- Jesus often referred to Himself as the Son of Man...

A title which most of the people of that day knew would be given to the Messiah promised by the Prophet Daniel and of course something we should know IF we know our Bible.

Daniel was given this grand picture of the coming Messiah as the one who gave His life to save His people and then was raised from the dead and ascended to God's right hand: Hear the prophet and tell me this is not the very thing that Stephen now testifies about before the council, remembering on this ascension Sunday that Jesus ascended with the clouds INTO heaven:

Daniel 7:13 "I was watching in the night visions, And behold, One like the Son of Man, Coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, And they brought Him near before Him. 14 Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, Which shall not pass away, And His kingdom the one Which shall not be destroyed."

- This is what we celebrate each year with Ascension Sunday and what Jesus, as well as Peter and John had already witnessed to this very council at least three times!

Stephen leaves no doubt about who he sees standing at God's right hand and it was exactly what Jesus had told this same council they would see when He stood before them in His trial!

Rather than hearing this final witness in Stephen's defense, they cry with loud voices, stop their ears and run at Stephen with one accord.

- **This leads to our final question: Why was Jesus standing when all the other references say He ascended into heaven and was seated at the right hand of God?**

The commentators have many ideas which they present and I think they are almost all correct!

Jesus has risen to the defense of His beloved Stephen to give him a final witness and comfort as he faced a very violent death. It shows that Jesus is not a figure head sitting at God's right hand, but truly the King of Kings who is with us always as He promised! And it clearly shows that Jesus is not some future King of Kings after His second coming, but that He is the King of Kings now and forever.

What was occurring here was not history spinning out of control with things happening without God's direction.

- **We will see in the coming weeks how God uses the death of Stephen and the wickedness of this council to spread the Gospel to all of Judea and Samaria**
- **We will see a little further along in Luke's account how the man called Saul will be converted and sent as the Apostle to the Gentiles!**

In a few short years this council will have been disbanded and the grand Temple destroyed just as Jesus had foretold. In a few centuries even the Roman Empire would be gone, but Jesus would still be ruling as the King of Kings and His Church would be on the way to filling the earth.

So what does all of this mean for us today... Well at least a couple of things

Do we desire to see Jesus standing at God's right hand? If you want that you must be prepared to have some massive armies like those of Syria marching down on your house or a wicked council ready to stone you! We have seen similar witnesses like that of Stephen down through Church history, but it always comes in the midst of great tribulation, so be careful what you ask for!

- **More importantly, on Ascension Sunday, we are to remember that Jesus still reigns!**

Whenever we hear talk today about a new temple being built we need to be ready to politely respond with something like... 'you have GOT to be kidding!'

- **We need to point them to this great defense by Stephen before a council who wanted the same thing: A Temple where their God could live and rule from.**

Solomon, the prophets, Jesus Himself and here Stephen clearly teach us that God does not dwell in buildings made with human hands, in fact even heaven itself as a part of this creation cannot contain our Triune God!

However, it also reminds us of the wonder of the incarnation:

- **God has become man**

The infinite, eternal Son of God who the entire creation cannot contain, has humbled Himself to become a man so that He can save His people from their sins!

That mission was accomplished and that mission had a purpose:

- **To fill the earth with His Kingdom as He rules as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.**

The men sitting in this council who tried and stoned Stephen had forgotten all of this: They wanted a god small enough to live in their temple & to focus only on them.

Stephen witnessed to them, telling them that Jesus stood at God's right hand with all of the power and authority of heaven and earth at His disposal just as He had said in giving His Great Commission.

So the bottom line question for us today is also: How big is your God?

Do we believe with Elisha and Stephen that God reigns from heaven in the affairs of our lives if only we could see with the eyes of faith?

Or are we closer to the deists who think God wound up creation & lets it run on its own until the end of time?

Or do we think Jesus is only "lord" in our hearts until a new Temple is built so He can finally come back and rule like a real King?

As we consider these questions and the implications of the answers that we give, we must remember that we serve a Great God who has done Great Things:

He has brought forth the new heavens and the new earth: A new creation

As His Church we are called the new Jerusalem, the Temple and even the very bride of Jesus...

We have a BIG job to do, but it is comforting to know that just as a faithful husband protects his lovely bride, so we know that Jesus stands at God's right hand, with ALL authority and power...

Ready and willing to defend His bride!

Communion Meditation: Revelation 5:6

"And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth. 7 Then He came and took the scroll out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne. 8 Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. 9 And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll, And to open its seals; For You were slain, And have redeemed us to God by Your blood Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, 10 And have made us kings and priests to our God; And we shall reign on the earth.""