

# WORSHIP SERVICE - 6.22.2025

## PART 20 - STEPHEN'S SEARING SERMON

### I. INTRODUCTION

- We've come to the longest recorded sermon in the book of Acts.
- We're going to read the sermon in its entirety but before we do that we need to engage with the response of those who heard the message. Often we can become so familiar with the story that we may miss some of the profound truths it contains.

#### **Acts 7:54-60**

4 Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. 55 But he, 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 he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." 57 But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. 58 Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

- Have you ever listened to a sermon that provoked in you this kind of impassioned response?
- Stephen's sermon so enraged this group of religious leaders that it incited a full on rage-fueled mob to seize Stephen and murder him.
- This was their response to Stephen's preaching and we need to remember how it was heard and received by its first audience.
- Stephen is going to reply to the charges brought against him by the false witnesses who accused him of blasphemy.
- The penalty for blasphemy under the law was death by stoning (Lev. 24).
- But Stephen, like the apostles, is full of the Holy Spirit, and he delivers a powerful defense as a witness for Jesus, tracing God's redemptive plan through history and demonstrates that God is not confined to buildings made by human hands, God has always been with His people—long before there was a temple.
- God was with his people, long before they were in the promised land.
- Jesus Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of the law and the prophets.
- And just like their fathers rejected the prophets, they rejected the one whom all the prophets were pointing to.
- They betrayed and murdered the Righteous One and it was they who were not keeping the law.
- They had heard enough, they dragged him outside of the city, without a verdict being rendered, and they stone him to death.

- Stephen becomes the first Christian martyr—like a seed, his blood is sown into the ground.

READ ACTS 7:1-53

## II. GOD'S PRESENCE HAS ALWAYS BEEN WITH HIS PEOPLE

- Now we have the proper context and content of the message that provoked the violent response.
- Stephen addressed the serious accusations that were brought against him as he was directly questioned by the High Priest, “*Are these things so?*”
- Why recount the history of Israel’s past with these religious leaders who knew these stories better than he did?
- Why focus on these four epochs of Israel’s history and a few main characters?
  - Abraham and the Patriarchal age
  - Joseph and the Egyptian exile
  - Moses, the Exodus and the wilderness wanderings
  - The monarchy with David and Solomon

KNOW YOUR BIBLE

- Remember who Stephen was. He was not an apostle. He was just introduced in chapter 6 as one of the seven who was appointed to table service in the Jerusalem church to help with the widow’s distribution.
- He was a man full of faith, full of the Holy Spirit, full of grace, full of power, and full of wisdom.
- He goes from serving to proclaiming the gospel, and the Lord was using him powerfully performing signs and wonders through him.
- What is remarkable is Stephen’s grasp and understanding of Scripture.
- This is a man who knows his bible! He knows God’s Word.
- He is speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, from his mind and heart that are filled with God’s Word.
- His defense comes from the word of God!
- Many times we think we need to have clever rebuttals to all of the objections that people will raise but what we really need to have is a deep understanding of God’s Word.
- Study apologetics, that’s a good thing to do, but know God’s Word!

A HISTORY LESSON FOR THE AGES

- Stephen masterfully condenses about two millennia of redemptive history.
- Stephen’s historical account is history as God sees it and as we need to know it.
- It is a summary of the OT story of God’s plan of redemption with its focus on the person of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of God’s redemptive plan.
- Stephen exposed the reality that Israel’s religious leaders are blind guides, who have missed the point, they missed the point that all of Scripture points to Jesus Christ.
- John 5:39-40 You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, 40 yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.
- Jesus and the disciples on the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:25-27)

- The religious leaders were reading the Scripture with a very narrow lens and Stephen widened the lens with his historical retelling.
- Stephen drives home two critical points in his Spirit-inspired message.
- First, through the historical summary he highlights God's covenant faithfulness and Israel's persistent rebellion and rejection of God's messengers.
- Second, he demonstrates that God's presence has always been with God's people long before there was a holy land and holy place—long before there even was a temple.
- For the religious leaders who were zealous of the temple, who had made an idol of the temple and the law, this is especially scandalous for them to hear, but they had missed this vital point in their history and in Scripture.

## ABRAHAM

- Stephen begins with God's call to Abraham in Mesopotamia.
- The patriarch of Israel was a pagan in a pagan land when God called him.
- God appeared to him not in Jerusalem, not in the temple, but in a foreign land.
- God told Abraham that his offspring would be pilgrims in another land who would enslave them for 400 years. After that they will be brought out to the land God had promised so that they can worship him.
- God gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision, which he renewed with Isaac, Jacob, and from them came the twelve patriarchs of Israel.
- God was with Abraham, solemnly pledging to bless him and his posterity and that is why he made the covenant with him.
- Long before there was a holy place there was a holy people.

## JOSEPH

- He walks through the story of Joseph. Those revered patriarchs were jealous of their younger brother, Joseph, they rejected him and sold him into slavery.
- V9-10 "...but God was with him, and rescued him...and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh who made him ruler over Egypt and his household."
- And God sustained his people in Egypt and increased them, they multiplied in Egypt.
- God was fulfilling the promise he made to Abraham that his descendants would be numerous.
- Six times in seven verses Stephen repeats the word "Egypt." He doesn't want them to miss the point.
- Though he was a foreigner in a strange land, betrayed by his brothers, God was with Joseph and with his family.

## MOSES

- This is the longest part of Stephen's sermon and rightly so since they had accused him of blaspheming Moses.
- He divides this section into three, forty year periods of Moses' life.
- First period, when God's people were in slavery in Egypt, God raised up a deliverer.
- He recounts Moses' birth and God's providential protection.
- V20 "...he was beautiful in God's sight."
- V22 Moses was educated in all of the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds.
- When he was forty he saw one of the Hebrew slaves being mistreated, he intervened and struck down the Egyptian.

- He understood his role as savior to his people but they rejected him.
- V27 “Who made you ruler and a judge over us?”
- Moses fled into exile in the land of Midian, where he had two sons.
- Second period, it was there in the wilderness, that God spoke to Moses from out of the burning bush.
- He hears the voice of the Lord, “I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.”
- The Lord said to him, “*Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.*”
- This is not happening in the land of Canaan, this is not in Jerusalem, there is no temple.
- That statement is key for the case that Stephen is making.
- There is holy ground outside of the holy land.
- Wherever God is, is holy.
- And God is raising Moses up as a deliverer of God’s people and he is to go back to Egypt.
- The same Moses whom the Israelites rejected as a ruler and judge, God had appointed as ruler and redeemer.
- The third period is the Exodus and wilderness wanderings.
- Moses affected their liberation by signs and wonders in Egypt and at the Red Sea and the forty years in the wilderness.
- V37 “God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.”
- He foretold of the coming of the Messiah, calling him a prophet like him.
- Moses received “living oracles” from God to give to the people. That is the law of God.
- But the people rejected Moses’ leadership.
- They refused to obey him, their hearts were still inclined toward Egypt.
- They wanted substitute gods to go before them.
- Stephen quotes from Amos 5, about the corrupt worship of Israel during their time in the wilderness.
- The first mention of the tabernacle is made, the tent of witness, in v44.
- It was made according to the pattern God had shown Moses.
- This was the mobile temple, signifying the presence of God in the midst of his people.
- God travels with his people—long before there was a fixed temple.
- Stephen has clearly demonstrated from Scripture, tracing the life of Moses from Egypt, to Midian, to the wilderness period, that in each one of those God was with Moses and his people.
- God is everywhere present and the holy place is wherever God is.

## DAVID AND SOLOMON

- The tabernacle persisted until the establishment of the monarchy and the time of David, who desired to make a dwelling place for God. But it was his son Solomon who built the temple.
- Stephen is quick to remind them of what Isaiah, the prophet of the Lord said.
- Isaiah 66, The Lord declares, “Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest?”
- The Most High cannot and does not dwell in houses made by hands.
- God’s presence cannot be localized, no building can confine him.
- His home is where his people live.
- He has pledged himself in solemn covenant to be their God and to call them by his name.
- Wherever they are, there he is also.
- What a glorious truth this would be to the new covenant community.
- Wherever they are, he is with them. After this, the church scattered under the persecution, they needed this truth more than ever as they

moved further away from Jerusalem.

- And God is with us wherever we are.
- Even when we feel alone, like Joseph in Egypt, God is with us.
- He is with you in your struggles, he is with you in your workplace, at school, as you go about your day to day life.
- He is with you through the Holy Spirit who indwells you, and you can commune with God at any time and in any place because his presence is not localized.

### III. GOD'S PEOPLE REJECTED HIS MESSENGERS

- Stephen's respect for Moses and the law was clear.
  - It was not Stephen who had disrespected Moses, it was the Israelites themselves.
  - They failed to recognize God had sent him, they rejected his leadership, they refused to obey in the wilderness and turned their hearts back to Egypt and became idolaters.
  - V51-53 Stephen's tone notably shifts.
  - Now he accuses his judges of the same sin.
  - They are "stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears..."
  - These echo OT rebukes (Ex. 33:3; Deut 10:16).
  - "Stiff-necked" means stubborn, hard-hearted, resisting God and rejecting his word.
  - "Uncircumcised in heart and ears..." implies that they were still pagans and heathens at heart and deaf to the truth.
  - They are just like their ancestors who rejected Moses and worshipped the golden calf.
  - They "always resist the Holy Spirit."
  - That's what their fathers had done. The prophets rebuked Israel for her sins and unfaithfulness. But the people rejected the prophets, and killed many of them.
  - They killed the prophets who predicted the coming of the Righteous One.
  - But the religious leaders were even worse than them—they betrayed and murdered the One the prophets foretold would come.
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- And the last thing Stephen says to them is that they had been privileged to receive the law through the mediation of angels but they did not obey it.
  - The religious leaders were not defenders of God's law—they had perpetuated Israel's rebellion.
  - They ignored God's messengers, clinging to their traditions, making an idol of the temple, and they missed the Savior when he was in their midst.
  - They had missed the main plot line of Scripture which is God's salvation made available through Jesus Christ who came to fulfill the law and offer himself up as a sacrifice for our sins to bring us to God.
  - Jesus is the fulfillment of the temple and the law they claim to uphold.
  - And they missed the point entirely!
  - We must take care that we do not resist God's Word.
  - We have the immense privilege of having God's Word and we must not fail to respond appropriately.
  - When you sit under faithful gospel preaching you have a responsibility to respond in faith.
  - If you don't respond in faith, you are resisting the Holy Spirit, who draws us by his Word, who convicts our hearts and leads us to Christ.

### STEPHEN'S DEATH

- Instead of responding with humility and repentance, they are outraged and offended.
- V55 But, he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God...”
- Stephen is in the temple of God, he catches a glimpse of glory.
- He sees Jesus in his exalted position, like the apostles did.
- Why is Jesus standing and not sitting as is the most frequent expression to describe his place of rulership and authority?
- I believe Jesus was standing as a sign of honoring and approving of Stephen, who boldly testified of him, and that he was ready to receive him and welcome him home.
- The triune God is not distant but ever present in Stephen’s death.
- He declares what he sees—the one they had rejected and murdered—is risen and exalted.
- They can’t stand it anymore. They plug their ears, they yell and scream and the wild mob rushes Stephen, dragged him out of the city and his accusers and the false witnesses stoned him.
- You can’t miss the relationship between Stephen’s death and Jesus’s death.
- As they are stoning Stephen he offers two prayers that echo Christ’s last words on the cross.
- *“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”*
- *“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”*
- He asks Jesus to welcome him home and to forgive his murderers.
- Only those who truly know the grace of God and the forgiveness that Jesus offers can extend such grace and forgiveness.
- This is how one who is filled with God’s Spirit lives and dies.
- He suffered and died like his Savior and he is assured of being resurrected just like his Savior.
- Christ reigns even when his servants suffer.
- This is no defeat. It is a seed planted in the ground.
- Stephen’s death bears great fruit.
- The only name mentioned of those who were present at his death is a young man by the name of Saul.
- He is a witness to this event. He is likely one of the men who instigated the accusations brought against Stephen and is now presiding over his murder.
- Stephen’s death undoubtedly left a mark on Saul’s conscience.
- Stephen’s death had immediate and long-term effects on the church and the spread of the gospel.
- It triggered a widespread persecution against the church in Jerusalem. (8:1)
- Saul was ravaging the church and dragging off men and women to prison. (8:3)
- It scattered the believers throughout the region of Judea and Samaria. (8:1)
- Fulfilling Acts 1:8 / Philip, another of the seven, ends up in Samaria preaching Christ and widespread revival breaks out. (8:5-8)
- God powerfully used the death of one servant to propel untold numbers into mission.
- It left an indelible mark on all believers that would be a pattern for bold witness.
- Faithfulness, not survival and self-preservation, is the measure of Christian witness.
- Courageous martyrdom became a hallmark of the early church inspiring believers to hold fast under persecution.

## CONCLUSION

- We are challenged by Stephen's sermon still to this day.
  - He proclaimed a God who is not confined to temples but dwells with his people through Christ.
  - A God who is near to his people, he is wherever they are, in whatever situations they find themselves in.
  - We don't need to seek God in sacred spaces and places, we seek him through a person—Jesus.
  - How quickly and easily we become unaware of God's abiding presence with his people and become fretful, anxious, terrified and worried.
  - We need to enter the true and living temple which is Christ. There we will find rest for our weary, fretful, and frightened souls.
  - He proclaimed Christ as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets.
  - We are like the religious leaders who have a tendency to cling to our own traditions or comfort over God's truth.
  - We need to repent of religious pride, traditions without truth, and hearts that resist the Holy Spirit.
  - Receive Jesus completely as God's ultimate fulfillment of the law and prophets.
  - Stephen's courageous witness, his vision of Christ's glory, his Christlike forgiveness and martyr's death challenges us to live with courage and grace.
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- Today, God calls you to trust in Jesus alone, to repent of any resistance to his Word, and to bear witness to his gospel in a world that may oppose you.
  - Like Stephen, we must fix our eyes on Christ and follow him, no matter the cost.
  - Let's pray for the Spirit's strength to live as faithful witnesses—proclaiming Jesus as Lord.

## **APPLICATION AND REFLECTION**

In light of today's message....

- What did I learn about the gospel?
- How can I apply what I learned about the gospel to my life?
- With whom can I share the gospel this week?