

Stephen stands before the highest religious court in the land to answer charges of blasphemy against Moses and against God. This is the same court that Peter and John recently stood before and the same court Jesus recently stood before. All the same men are there who were at Jesus' trial, all the same men are there who were at Peter and John's trial - including the same High Priest Caiaphas.

We saw last week that an epiphany had hit Stephen and the epiphany was this: Since Jesus is our one atoning sacrifice for all time, since through Jesus alone we receive forgiveness, new life and salvation, that means we don't need anything more than Jesus.

Bottom line: All we need is Jesus.

The practical effect of this revelation is that if all we need is Jesus, then we don't need the Temple sacrifices anymore and if we don't need the Temple sacrifices anymore, then the Temple is redundant. By extension, we see that not only is the Jewish Temple redundant, but the Temple and rituals of any other religion are ineffectual.

Stephen has been going around Jerusalem arguing that Jesus is greater than the Temple, Jesus is greater than any religion, Stephen has been in effect saying Jesus is all we need.

For us today, the practical effect is this: If Jesus gives us all we need, what is the point in searching elsewhere for fulfillment? Answer, there is no point in searching elsewhere.

This morning, here in chapter 7, we see Stephen following a traditional Greek rhetorical outline with the heart of his argument in verses 37-53 which is where we will concentrate our study this morning.

Stephen argues that God is not in any one location and that the power of God is not contained in anything built by human hands, God is in the hearts of His believers. This is not a new idea that Stephen has come up with, this is how it always has been. This is not a new progression of understanding of who God is and how God operates, this is how it always has been. God never changes, Jesus is the same today, yesterday, forever.

For us this truth applies the same today. Wherever there are believers, wherever there are those who are believers in Jesus Christ, there exists the Church of Jesus Christ. Fact is, the

holy place of Jesus Christ resides not in any building, cathedral, or historical site, the holy place of Jesus Christ resides in your heart.

Let us understand, and hear me clearly on this: True desecration of the Christian Church is not graffiti spray painted on a church building or some unholy act performed within the walls of a church, true desecration of the Christian Church is the sin we each harbor within our hearts. Respecting the church is not behaving correctly within the sanctuary of a church, (only the ignorant believe that), respecting the church is repentance of sin and the overcoming of sin in your life. Why? The true church is within your heart, not in any physical building.

There are those who do all the right things in church, but in their heart - the true church, their sin chokes out the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Better to have a clean heart, than hold any position of power within a physical church; Better to have a clean heart, than to hold any influence within a physical church; Better to have a clean heart, than to be respected for what you have done for the physical church.

A man and a woman are judged for what is within their heart. What is within the heart takes precedence over everything we see in happening in the physical church.

As Stephen stands before the Sanhedrin he is asked a simple yes or no question about Stephen's views on the Temple, "Are these charges true?" Yes, or no? But, Stephen, sees an opportunity to offer the Gospel, and so Stephen proceeds with an extended argument.

Stephen is not simply recounting the history of the Hebrew people, everyone in the Sanhedrin knows this history by heart. Instead, in the first part of his argument, Stephen is showing two parallel truths: He shows how historically there was no Temple, and yet God was still there with his people, and that historically humans have had a hard heart toward God.

Abraham. There is no Temple in existence, but still God appears to Abraham and He appears to Abraham in Iraq of all places - not in the holy city of Jerusalem. (verses 2-8)

Joseph. There is no Temple in existence, but God still appears to Joseph in Egypt of all places - not in the holy city of Jerusalem...and note that the ancestors of the Hebrew people rejected God's representative Joseph, the history of the hard heart starts here. (verses 9-19)

Moses. Again, there was no Temple in existence, but still God appeared to Moses, in the middle of nowhere - not in the holy city of Jerusalem. Again, the people rejected God's representative saying (verse 27) "Who made you ruler and judge over us?" and later in the desert they refused to obey Moses (verse 39). Even with the great leader Moses and the presence of God in their midst, the people's hearts are hard.

The prophets. "Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute?" (verse 52) There is a pattern of the Hebrew people rejecting those who represent Him, there is a pattern of the hearts of humanity being hard, so it was no surprise when they rejected the Righteous One, Jesus Christ.

Stephen establishes the fact that before the Temple existed God was powerfully with His people. Stephen establishes the fact that it is our nature to reject the things of God. Stephen is not merely giving a history lesson, Stephen is establishing the fact that we should not expect that God will meet with us more in any one physical location. If you only expect to hear the Holy Spirit while you are in church, or if you think you will hear the Holy Spirit in church more clearly than another place - Stephen has a message for you - God will speak to His people anywhere, even in the middle of nowhere.

Well, OK, it is true that God met with His people when there was no Temple, but God did establish the Temple. Is God being self contradictory? Why does God allow a Temple to be built, if God's people do not need a temple?

See, before the Temple, there was the Tabernacle (verse 45). The Tabernacle was in essence a portable temple. It was a large tent like structure. Wherever the Hebrew people went in the desert, the Tabernacle went. It was easily taken down and easily back set up again. In fact, Stephen points out that for many years after the nation of Israel had settled in the promise land, there was no Temple, there was only the Tabernacle. The mere existence of the Tabernacle further emphasizes the portability of God, of how God is in the hearts of the people, not in a building. The Tabernacle was not a permanent - it was a

tent, and the Tabernacle was never meant to be permanent and neither was the Temple meant to be permanent.

The Temple is built after the floor plan of the Tabernacle. This in itself shows that the Temple is not a permanent structure. See, all things on earth will pass away, all things that is except God Himself, the only permanent temple can found in relationship, not in physical structure. The Tabernacle and the Temple are in essence a shadow of things to come. The Tabernacle and the Temple are not ends in themselves, but they point to the greater one who has come - the Lord Jesus Christ.

King David wanted to build a house for the name of God, and his son Solomon build the Temple, but as Stephen saw it, the Temple was not the fulfillment of the house that David wanted built; Stephen saw correctly, that since the presence of God cannot be contained, the house that was built for God was not a physical temple, the house built for God was the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the promise fulfilled of the new house built for the name of God.

Verses 49-50 are the core of Stephen's argument, Acts 7:49 " 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? 50 Has not my hand made all these things?' " Stephen emphasizes that God cannot be contained, something even Solomon, the builder of the first Temple said, (1 Kings 8:27) "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!"

Though Jewish theology and Hebrew Scripture stated that God cannot be contained, once the Temple was built, there had arisen an attitude that God was somehow more prominent in one location than any other location. Stephen is saying, hold on here, throughout the entire history of the Hebrew people we have known that God can meet us anywhere, why are we holding up the Temple as such a holy place?

Further, the prime function of the Temple in Stephen's day had become sacrifice, but when the first Temple was built its primary function was to be a house of prayer. Prayer was to be first and foremost the function of the Temple. God wants to interact with us, God wants a relationship with us, God doesn't want empty ritual and sacrifice. We see Jesus commenting on his observance of the Temple in disgust when He says, (Luke 19:46)

“It is written,” he said to them, “ ‘My house will be a house of prayer’; but you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”

Stephen is insinuating that pagan thought has infiltrated the minds of the religious leadership as they seem to believe that God can somehow be contained in the confines of the Temple.

Stephen’s argument is finished by verse 50. He has shown that God will meet with His people in any location. He has shown that what matters is our hearts, not a physical location. And further, Stephen has shown that we as human race tend to turn away from God - a modern way to put it is, people are NOT basically good, and because we are not basically good, we need Jesus Christ to heal our hard hearts. Stephen had emphasized how the Jewish people (representing all the people worldwide) habitually rejected God and his representatives - that includes everyone in the room where the Sanhedrin met, that includes everyone in this room as well.

This is why I have emphasized last week that Jesus Christ alone is what we need - and nothing more, or nothing else. Nothing else can take away our sin, nothing else can give us a new start, nothing else can offer us forgiveness. We habitually have hard hearts, we are not people who are basically good, any attempts to take away sin, seek forgiveness or seek atonement outside of Jesus Christ are ultimately futile. Jesus is greater than the Temple, Jesus is greater than any philosophy or any religion.

His argument finished, Stephen now brings it on home in verses 51-53 when he accuses those in the room as being just like their ancestors - rejecting the representatives of God. They like all humans, naturally have hard hearts, and they were the one who personally rejected the Righteous One, that is Jesus Christ. (This council cannot seem to eliminate this idea that Jesus is the Messiah. First they see Jesus then Peter and John and now Stephen - all are claiming that Jesus is the one who is the promised Messiah)

Stephen is interrupted by the council when he throws out what would be his final line, “53 you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.”

The Sanhedrin has had enough and they burst out in anger, they know where Stephen is heading with his next statements. They know Stephen is going to reiterate that Jesus alone

can atone for their sin. They know this because they have recently heard Peter tell them so.

Everything that Stephen has said has ticked them off, so much so that they can no longer contain themselves, but what puts them over the edge is not something about the Temple. What puts them over the edge is Stephen's statement about Jesus, 56 "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

See this isn't all about the Temple, and this isn't all about Stephen, this is all about who Jesus really is. Remember, we have seen this from the very beginning. The book of Acts is primarily about Jesus, not the church, not the Apostles. I say this over and over again, Sunday after Sunday, to try to emphasize the point that this is also true in your life: Your life, once you become a Christian is not primarily about you anymore, your life is now about Jesus. Events that happen in your life are not primarily about you anymore, events that happen in your life are primarily about Jesus. Many of us, even though we have been believers for many years, still fail to recognize that.

Here, we see in our Scripture, that the attack that falls upon Stephen is not ultimately about who Stephen is or what Stephen has said - it is about who the person of Jesus is.

When Stephen says that Jesus is at the right hand of God - this throws the Sanhedrin into a rage. The place at the right hand of God is reserved for the most favored person in the Father's sight. Here, by making this statement, Stephen is directly pointing out that Jesus is the Messiah and currently enjoys the great favor of God. Even more, when Stephen uses the phrase Son of Man, which has its roots in Dan 7:13-14, he further emphasizes that not only is Jesus in God's favor, but Jesus hold dominion over all creation.

Now unless the Sanhedrin are prepared to admit that their former decision concerning the execution of Jesus was wrong, they now must take action against Stephen as well. Honestly, their action taken against Stephen is really action taken against Jesus Christ.

Now in all other references we see that the Son of Man is sitting at the side of the Father, here we see that Jesus is standing. There is a lot of discussion in scholarly circles concerning this, but all of the discussion boils down to this concept: Jesus is standing in Stephen's vision because the vision that Stephen sees is the actual event that will momentarily unfold - it is Jesus Christ himself welcoming the believer Stephen into His

presence. We can term this a believer's private and personal parousia of the Son of Man. In other words, each believer can expect what amounts to a personal, one on one, time of welcome with the person of Jesus Christ upon their death. Plainly speaking, when you and I die, as believers, the first thing we will experience is Jesus Christ himself.

See this is why the discussion about what is the Temple what is the church is so significant. The presence of The Son of Man, Jesus Christ, has opened up a way that is more immediate and a much more satisfying access than the Temple could ever provide.

The Temple isn't the place we have to go to worship God; The Temple isn't the place we have to go to pray; The Temple isn't the place we go for atonement. The Temple / the Church is where ever believers are gathered.

You, who are believers, you who are followers of Jesus Christ, you are the temple of the Lord God:1 Corinthians 3:16, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?" 1 Corinthians 6:19a Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?..."

What makes a place the Temple of God?

The Spirit of God.

We have come full circle so to speak. God met with believers before the Temple and God meets with believers now, when there is no Temple (It was destroyed in 70 A.D.). We, as believers have full and immediate access to God. Same as it ever was.

And so they drag Stephen to his death.

In Jewish law the witnesses play a very important part in an execution. The witnesses were always the first to to put a person to death and in order to throw the first stones, the witnesses would have to take off their outer garments first, and as they do, they place their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

Here we see the last words of Stephen honored by the Lord Jesus Christ, for Saul who soon becomes the first great enemy of the Church, will himself in a short time, agree with

every single word spoken by Stephen, and will carry out the work that Stephen was headed to - bringing the Gospel to those who do not speak Hebrew.

The church will now scatter across the globe. But, as the church scatters it loses no power, it loses no influence, because the church is not contained in any one location more than another location, it is within the heart of each believer.

In communist China, many years ago, communist party leaders met and discussed with worry the Christians found within the great cities of China. As they met they realized that these Christians met quite frequently and the communist leaders feared that these frequent meetings may turn into a revolt against the communist government.

So they came up with a brilliant idea - if the Christians are alone, they cannot meet, if they cannot meet, they will never be able to challenge the government. So in response to this meeting, Christians families were split up, husbands, wives, children and sent alone to remote parts of China. Each believer now alone could not meet, and so they believed the church would die.

But, as Stephen tells us, the church is in the heart of every believer, it is not a location, and the scattered believers soon started local churches wherever they were moved to. Soon the communist leaders discovered that, where before Christianity had been predominantly in the large cities, now Christianity spanned the whole breadth of China. Instead of silencing Christianity they had accomplished exactly the opposite - they had placed Christianity in virtually every part of China - and all because of the truth that the true Temple of God is without walls.