

“TESTIFYING TO THE ONE WHO IS GREATER THAN THE TEMPLE”

This chapter contains the speech that Stephen made after he was arrested and brought before the Jewish Ruling Council. As you can see, it was a lengthy speech. The fact that Luke devotes so much space to it testifies to its importance. It comes at an important turning point in the book of Acts: just before the gospel begins to be preached beyond Jerusalem in the broader regions of Judea and Samaria. You will recall that this was exactly what Jesus had foretold in chapter 1, where he said to his apostles, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” [1:8] Stephen’s speech explains how the gospel could go forth in this manner. It demonstrates that God’s redemptive presence is not bound to the temple.

One of the things that is so surprising about Stephen’s speech is the fact that he does not respond to the charges that were brought against him in the way we would expect him to. Those charges were set forth at the end of chapter 6, where Stephen’s accusers said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.” [6:13-14] Stephen was accused of speaking against the temple and against

the law of Moses, the two things that the Jews held most dear. In the face of such charges, we would expect Stephen to try to defend himself. But the overall tone of his speech is not defensive but offensive. He turns the tables on his accusers, a fact that becomes especially clear in the last paragraph of his speech. In those verses we see that this is a prophetic indictment against the Jewish leaders for rejecting Christ. Stephen is not focused on defending himself, but he does respond to the charges of speaking against the temple and against the law. In his speech, he shows that *Israel's history demonstrates that God's presence with his people is not confined to a physical place and that God's people have often rejected the deliverers that he sent to them.*

### **A Promise to a Wanderer**

Stephen's speech is a survey of Israel's history, beginning with the call of Abraham and ending with Solomon's construction of the temple. The first thing to point out about what Stephen says about Abraham is that he focuses upon the fact that God appeared to Abraham when he was living in Mesopotamia, far away from the land of Palestine. And even though the Lord eventually brought Abraham to the Promised Land, Stephen is careful to point out that God did not give him any of the land. Abraham remained a sojourner to the end of his days.

Abraham would only receive the land in his offspring. And as Stephen points out, they themselves would be sojourners in a foreign land, where they would be enslaved for four hundred years.

The point of all of this is to demonstrate that God's promise to Abraham was not inextricably bound to the land of Israel, the land where the temple would eventually be built. God was faithful to Abraham throughout his sojournings, and he was faithful to Abraham's descendants during their time in Egypt. God was able to pour out his covenant blessings upon his chosen people before they possessed the Promised Land, even when they were outside of that land. This sets the stage for the point that Stephen will make again near the end of his speech. He is demonstrating that the physical temple was a provisional structure. It was something that was given by the Lord for a certain period in the historical unfolding of his plan of redemption. And even then, it was still subject to misuse. Because of this, it was by no means blasphemous for Stephen to talk about Jesus as the One who is greater than the temple.

The most direct application that we can make from this first part of Stephen's speech has to do with the fact that we too, like Abraham, are sojourners. Like the Israelites in Egypt, we are living in exile. And even though we are still waiting to

receive our inheritance, we can be certain that God will be faithful to his covenant promises.

### **Saved by One Who Was Rejected and Exiled**

The second part of Stephen's speech focuses upon Jacob's twelve sons, whom Stephen refers to as the twelve patriarchs. The main emphasis here is upon the story of Joseph, who was despised by his brothers and sold as a slave into Egypt. In spite of all of the terrible things that happened to Joseph, the Lord was with him throughout his time exile. He raised him up to a position of power and influence in Egypt. And, most amazing of all, it was through Joseph, the despised and rejected one, that God preserved Jacob's family in the time of the great famine. Stephen also points out that Jacob and the patriarchs all died in Egypt and were buried in Shechem, a Samaritan town. Yet in all of this, the Lord was not unfaithful to his promise.

Joseph stands as a typological foreshadowing of Christ. Jesus is God's only begotten son, yet he was despised and rejected by his brothers, just like Joseph. Jesus was falsely accused. He was taken outside of the holy city and made to die a painful and shameful death. And yet, like Joseph, it was through this very rejection that the Lord secured the salvation of his chosen people. This is a point

that Stephen is going to drive home again and again in the next section of his speech. God's appointed deliverers are often rejected by those they are sent to deliver. For this reason, it should never surprise us to see people who claim to be Christians rejecting those who faithfully proclaim the gospel. The visible church has a long history of rejecting her deliverers.

### **Persistent Rejection of the One Who Gave Living Oracles**

The third part of Stephen's speech, and by far the longest, has to do with Moses. This shows the absurdity of the charge that Stephen was speaking against Moses. Stephen divides Moses' life into three forty year periods: the years he spent being raised in Pharaoh's house [vv. 17-22]; the years he spent living in exile in Midian [vv. 23-34]; and the years he spent leading the people of Israel out of Egypt and through the wilderness [vv. 35-43]. Once again, the emphasis is upon the fact that God was with Moses in spite of the fact that he was persecuted and rejected. He was exposed as an infant, yet God delivered him and even worked through those circumstances to ensure that he would receive the best education available. He was rejected and forced to go into exile after his first attempt to bring deliverance to his people, but the Lord provided a refuge for him and blessed him with offspring during the years of his exile.

Notice also what Stephen says about God's commissioning of Moses at the burning bush. The Lord appeared to Moses in an area that was far away from the land where the temple would eventually be built, yet Stephen notes that God said to Moses, "the place where you are standing is holy ground." The phrase "holy ground" is especially significant when we remember that Stephen's opponents had referred to the temple as "this holy place" back in chapter 6. They saw the temple as the holy place, but Stephen pointed out that the Sinai wilderness became a holy place when God appeared to Moses there. The point could not be made any more clear: God was with his servants in the Old Testament era even when they were outside of the Promised Land, the land where the temple would eventually be built. And if God's redemptive presence was not bound to one location at those times in Old Testament history, then it is not out of the question that his presence might not be bound to one location in the New Testament era. This is the point that Stephen is subtly making in this speech. He is demonstrating from Scripture why the church could say that Jesus is greater than the temple. He is saying the same thing that we will sing later on in tonight's worship service:

*Jesus, where'er your people meet,*

*There they behold your mercy seat;*  
*Where'er they seek you, you are found,*  
*And every place is hallowed ground.*

After leading the Israelites out of their slavery in Egypt, the Lord gave his living oracles to Moses on Mount Sinai. But the people of Israel rejected God's servant once again, telling Moses' brother Aaron to make an idol for them to worship instead. Stephen says that God gave them over to this false worship, and because of this idolatry they would eventually be sent into exile in Babylon. This further underscores the point that Stephen is making in this speech. Just as Israel's rejection of Moses resulted in their worship becoming idolatrous, so also does the Jewish leaders' rejection of Jesus result in their worship becoming idolatrous.

### **God Does not Dwell in Houses Made by Men**

This is a point that Stephen makes even more clear in the last part of his speech. He notes that though the Lord made his saving presence dwell in the tabernacle and later in the temple, God is not confined in manmade structures. Even Solomon, who oversaw the building of the temple, understood this. When

the temple was completed, he said to the Lord, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!" [1 Kgs. 8:27] Similarly, the Lord said through the prophet Isaiah, "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?" These Old Testament passages testify to the fact that the temple was never intended to become a permanent institution. By treating it as such, and by rejecting the One to whom the temple was pointing all along, Israel's leaders had turned their temple into an idol.

After saying these things, Stephen makes his final point of application. As I said at the beginning of this sermon, this a prophetic indictment upon the Jewish leaders for their rejection of Christ. Stephen's words are extremely blunt, so much so that it almost seems as though he is inviting them to put him to death. While this might seem surprising to us, it shows us the seriousness of what is at stake. God's truth confronts sinful man. The Lord brings his indictment upon those who persist in their rebellion against him. It may sound harsh for Stephen to call his hearers "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears," but that is what we all are apart from Christ. The natural man needs to be humbled before he can come to know the living God. As we saw in the verse with which

we began our service of worship this evening, the Lord dwells in a high and holy place. Yet the glory of the gospel is that he also makes his presence dwell with the one who is of a contrite and lowly spirit.

The Jewish leaders' problem was that they were placing their trust in something that was made with human hands, not in the Lord. This is the problem that ensnares everyone who refuses to see their need for Jesus Christ. May God give us grace that our confidence might always rest in Christ, the true temple, the true fulfillment of the law, and never in the works of our own hands.