

Armagh Baptist Church
Sunday 20th September 2009 - 11:30am
Acts 7:44-8:3

Introduction

This morning we come to the end of Acts ch.7 and the account of Stephen's Speech to the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. In it he is giving a very clear defence of the Christian faith. I tried to summarise this speech for you under three headings last time. It breaks up into 3 sections:

(vs.1-19) are all about Abraham – and focus on the **Land**

(vs.20-43) are all about Moses – focussing on the **Law**

And then we come to vs.44-50 which focus on the **Temple**

This section brings us to another aspect of the charges that were levelled against Stephen back in Acts 6:12-14. There we read that:

'They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin.

They produced false witnesses, who testified,

*"This fellow never stops speaking **against this holy place** and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will **destroy this place** and change the customs Moses handed down to us".'*

So not only were they accusing Stephen of breaking the Law of Moses, they were also very concerned about his attitude to their Temple.

That's why Stephen moves on to talk about the Temple in this final section.

Towards the end of the section on Moses, Stephen had been pointing out that whenever the people rejected God's message, and God's servants, and God's leadership in their lives, then Idolatry would inevitably follow. (vs.40-43).

Even while Moses was up on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments from God, the people down at the foot of the mountain were asking Aaron to...

'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt – we don't know what has happened to him!'

And before Moses could get back down the mountain again, they had made an idol in the form of a golden calf – and had begun to worship it!

God knew the hearts of his people. Before He had even given the Ten Commandments, they had already broken them! So we read in v.42 that...

'God turned away and gave them over to the worship of the heavenly bodies.'

God didn't force his people to respond to him. He let them go their own way.

They chose idolatry. He let them go – to worship the false gods, idols and images. They made their choice. God allowed them to experience it in full.

And when the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem chose to put the Son of God to death on the cross, and when they continued to put Stephen and many other followers of Jesus to death, it was inevitable that they would end up in idolatry – worshipping created things rather than the Creator himself. They ended up worshipping **their Land, their Law and their Temple** instead of God!

These things were becoming the idols and images in the minds of these Jewish religious leaders. They chose to worship them, instead of the one they were supposed to point to – Jesus! That's why they put him to death.

Stephen finished in v.43 by making the point to these religious leaders that the reason God's people were sent into Exile to Babylon, was because of the idolatry that was still in their hearts – because they weren't worshipping God in spirit and in truth. So in the OT, from the Exodus to the Exile, God's people never learned – they continued to reject God's ways, and to go their own way into idolatry, and now these religious leaders were doing the same again!

So what was the problem with these religious leaders as far as their attitude to the Temple was concerned?

1. From Tabernacle to Temple (vs.44-47)

In these verses, Stephen gives us a potted history of how the Temple actually came about. He reminds us that the forerunner to the Temple was in fact the Tabernacle. What's a Tabernacle? A Tabernacle is a Tent. It's portable; It's moveable; It's not fixed to the one spot. It is temporary – not permanent.

God had directed Moses to build the Tabernacle, according to the pattern he had seen in heaven. The book of Hebrews bears that out. There we have God's detailed revelation about what the Tabernacle should look like, and how it should all be arranged. There was so much symbolism involved in it.

The Tabernacle makes the point that we can't just worship God whatever way we like. God is concerned about detail. It does matter how we approach God. We can't just drop all our standards, unite with anybody and everybody, and still expect God's blessing upon our Worship as a church.

The basic layout of the tabernacle and its enclosures taught all of that:

The boundary fence of poles and curtains – was a physical boundary to keep out those who were not part of the people of God. They weren't allowed to draw near to worship the Living and True God, just the way they were.

At one end of the rectangular area enclosed by this fence there was an opening. And as you came through this opening, straight ahead of you, in the middle of the enclosure you would see the Tent of Meeting – enclosing the Holy of Holies itself. Inside it was the Ark of the Covenant and the Mercy Seat but beyond a dividing curtain inside the Tent of Meeting – 'within the veil' – that was where God symbolically dwelt among his people. And only the priest was allowed to go in there after he had been symbolically cleansed from sin, enabling him to do so.

But between the opening in the outer fence and the Tent of Meeting itself, there were a number of symbolic pieces of furniture:

The Laver, the Table of Shewbread and the Altar.

All of these things were full of symbolism.

The Laver spoke of the need for cleansing. The Priest had to wash his hands and his body before he proceeded any further.

The Table of Shewbread reminded him that he needed spiritual food, not just physical food, to sustain him as he came to worship God.

The Altar reminded him that he needed a blood sacrifice, to cleanse him from his sin, only then could he approach the throne of grace, the mercy seat, with confidence. In the Old Testament the blood of a bull or a lamb had to be shed, but in the New Testament all of that has been fulfilled by the shed blood of Christ, on the cross 2000 years ago.

All of the symbolism of the Tabernacle had been given by God for a reason, to teach his people the seriousness of sin, and the importance of cleansing from sin, before they could approach God in worship. But the Tabernacle was portable, it was temporary – it was flexible, it could move around. It wasn't a permanent fixture. But nowhere does God in the OT require, or ask, or command, for a Temple to be built for him in Jerusalem or anywhere else!

The Temple was man's idea.

Joshua simply brought the tabernacle with him when he led the people into the Promised Land. But it was David who asked that he might build a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. He was uneasy living in an elaborate Palace, while God's Ark – the Ark of the Covenant – was in a Tent! (2 Samuel 7:1-17). He wanted to build an elaborate structure for God to 'live' in, so that he wouldn't feel so bad living in his magnificent palace. Yes, he was concerned for the honour and glory of God, but was it ultimately God's Will for an elaborate Temple structure to be built for him in Jerusalem?

Because David had sin on his hands, he was not allowed to build the Temple in his day, even though he wanted to, but he did prepare the plans and gather up the finance for it to be built in the future. In the end it was his son Solomon who built the magnificent, ornate Temple in Jerusalem. (v.47)

That's how it came about – it was over the top – but it wasn't God's plan.

This just showed man's need to have something physical to worship - a Temple! But having traced the story from Tabernacle to Temple, Stephen goes on to say, secondly, that...

2. You can't put God in a box! (vs.48-50)

According to 1 Kings 5:1-5 God did eventually allow Solomon to build a Temple. Much of the Tabernacle symbolism was carried over into the Temple,

which in a sense was good. But God never commanded a Temple to be built. Solomon went ahead, and then God spoke to him about it in 1 Kings 6:11-14.

So what was the problem with the Temple?

- It was a permanent structure – God was limited to the one place.
- God was put in a box – it was felt that only here could people truly worship God!
- Tradition squeezed God out – the Temple worshippers went through the rituals – but they were increasingly ignoring God. (Isaiah 1:10-20).
- Israel began to put more confidence in the Temple than they did in God – all sorts of superstition arose – for example in Jesus' day, in John 4:19-24 there was an argument going on between the Samaritans and the Jews. The Samaritans were quite happy to worship God at Mount Gerizim in their own part of the country, but the Jews said that the ONLY place to worship God was at the Temple in Jerusalem – which was in their territory. So they concluded that they were the true people of God, and no-one else mattered. If they couldn't get to the Temple, because of political boundaries, that wasn't their problem!
- But you can't put God in a box! Jesus, the Son of God, went out of his way, while he was here on earth, to visit Samaria – and there to lead an immoral woman to the Lord at Sychar, and through her to reach many in her village for Christ! He told her that God was looking for worshippers who would worship him 'in spirit and in truth' anywhere, not at this or that Temple!
- We need to learn the lesson from the Jews and their Temple, not to let structures in our churches become so elaborate that God gets squeezed out! We need to keep looking beyond external ritual to spiritual reality. We need to be careful that tradition and superstition don't build up within our churches that are totally unbiblical.
- We, as Baptists, may not worship God in an ornate Cathedral, like the two buildings in Armagh City, however, we do have a lovely building here on the Newry Road. But we need to make sure that we don't let the building become the be all and end all. This building is to be a servant to the work of the Gospel in this place, not our master. It must be used for the glory of God, not just preserved in pristine condition for the generations coming after us.
- We need to remember that when the building took over as far as the Jews were concerned, and it squeezed God out of their thinking, that God responded by destroying the Temple!

In A.D.70 the Romans over-ran Jerusalem, and burnt it to the ground. It has never stood on that site since. In fact today there is a Muslim Mosque on the site, and the Jews and the Muslims are still fighting over who the site really belongs to! But as Christians we agree with vs.48-49 that:

*'The Most High does not live in houses made by men –
Heaven is God's throne, and the earth is his footstool.'*

We could never build anything that would be big enough to house God! So...

3. Stephen Turns his Accusations back on the Sanhedrin (vs.51-53)

Remember the accusations that had been levelled against Stephen back in Acts 6:14?

*'We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will **destroy this place** and change the customs Moses handed down to us.'*

Jesus had been accused by the same Sanhedrin of the very same charges in Matthew 26:59-61

'The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death.

But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward.

*Finally two came forward and declared, 'This fellow said, 'I am able to **destroy***

***the temple of God** and rebuild it in three days.'*

Jesus did say something like this, but he wasn't talking about the Temple Building in Jerusalem. It's in John 2:18-22. He was talking about his own body. The physical earthly body of the Lord Jesus Christ was the true Temple of the Holy Spirit. And when that body was nailed to a cross and then laid in the tomb it was destroyed, but within three days he took it up again, by rising from the dead, and Jesus reappeared in a glorified resurrection body! He did exactly what he claimed he could do, and according to John ch.2 that was the proof or the sign that he was who he said he was – the Son of God, the Messiah. And what's more, now that Jesus has gone back to heaven the Body of Christ on earth now is the Church. The believing Church of Jesus Christ is now the True Temple of the Holy Spirit – the place where God dwells on earth. God still doesn't dwell in a Temple made by hands, he dwells in each one of us who are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ – our bodies are the Temple of the Holy Spirit – therefore we need to honour God by what we do with our bodies! (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

It's not our relationship with a building that makes us right with God.

It's our relationship with Jesus, that's what makes us right with God.

We need a living relationship with Jesus – based on faith.

He is the one mediator between God and man now – not any priest.

We are to listen to Him, and respond to Him in our lives day by day.

Instead the people of Stephen's day had just rejected Him and crucified Him!

Faith alone in Christ alone is the only means of salvation in the N.T.

Having trusted in him, he cleanses us, and forgives us, and the merits of his perfect sacrifice are our only grounds for approaching God in worship now.

As God's people we now meet together in simple New Testament fashion, as seen in the Book of Acts. They have already been meeting in Solomon's

Colonnade since the Day of Pentecost, not inside the Temple at all. But very soon, in the very next chapter, they'll be scattered from Jerusalem, out into the surrounding countryside, and they will simply have to meet in homes, or wherever they can, not in any grand elaborate structures. That's how God had always intended it anyway!

But sadly church history has repeated the same mistakes, building bigger and bigger churches and cathedrals, bringing back altars and priesthoods, and elaborate rituals, until basically what goes on in many a so-called 'Christian Church' or Cathedral today is actually more akin to OT Temple worship than it is to NT early church worship.

And that's why Stephen rounds on these pious hypocrites on the Sanhedrin in vs.51-53:

'You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears!

You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!

'Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him – you who have received the Law that was put into effect through angels – but [YOU] have not obeyed it!

And as a result of those words, and as result of his whole brave speech...

4. Stephen is Stoned to Death (7:54-8:3)

The men on the Sanhedrin are furious! They gnashed their teeth at him! (A high-pitched screech, like snarling lions, trying to drown out what he was saying.) They were refusing to listen to any more of the truth from Stephen! They were full of fury – but Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit (v.55)

In fact he's given a glimpse of heaven at that very moment:

'He looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' (v.56)

Stephen was left in no doubt – he knows that His Redeemer Lives! He could see him back at the right hand of God in heaven, following his death, burial, resurrection and ascension. That's why we know he's back in heaven, at God's right hand, right now – interceding for us, and sending us his grace!

(v.57) *'At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.'*

Stephen's last words: *'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit'* – compare to Jesus - *'Into your hands I commit my spirit.'* He died in peace, even though in pain!

And *'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'* – compare to Jesus – *'Father forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing.'* He died forgiving the

perpetrators. Then he fell asleep – down here – and woke up in God's presence! And (8:2) *'Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.'*

But there are a few interesting things in these verses as we close:

(v.58) Those who were doing the stoning, not wanting to get blood on their clothes, laid their outer garments at the feet of a young man named Saul!

(v.60) *'And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.'*

(8v3) *'But Saul began to **destroy** the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.'* (destroy = wreak havoc!)

The split had come!

No longer would the early Christians be able to regard themselves just as believing Jews, or Messianic Jews, or worship at the Temple in Jerusalem. Now they were scattered, now they were on the run, now they had to fend for themselves, now they had to watch their backs every day.

But they had Jesus *in their hearts*, and despite the consequences, he was often ***on their lips*** as well – because wherever they went, they talked about Him. They shared their faith, and even though the church was being severely persecuted, and many were losing their lives, yet the Gospel was continuing to spread.

The Battle was raging, between the Devil and the Church, but God was at work, and God's People were at work – obeying Christ's command to tell the world about Jesus, and to make disciples wherever they went.

The Salt-shaker of the Church in Jerusalem had just been up-ended, now the salt was out into society at large, and the areas around Jerusalem – Judea and Samaria - were about to feel the effects, and so next time, we'll see Philip (another one of the original deacons – just like Stephen) going down to Samaria and telling the **Samaritans** about Jesus, and before long we'll see him talking to an **Ethiopian**, and through him the Gospel will get to **Africa**!

Difficult, but Exciting times were ahead for the Church of Jesus Christ!

If we're not afraid to open our mouths, and back it up with our lives, then maybe difficult but exciting times will be ahead for us as a Church as well!

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