

Last week we considered how Luke describes Stephen in Acts 6 and we saw how Luke presents him as someone who stood out for his faith and zeal and courage and as such he reflects the character of Jesus and is an inspiration for us to grow in faith and the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In Scripture the example of Jesus and outstanding believers are an encouragement for us to grow.

This evening we will consider the last part of chapter six and parts of chapter seven. Stephen must have been quite vocal in the synagogue speaking about Jesus and his significance and we are told in 6:9 that some of the members of the synagogue of the Freedmen “rose up and disputed with Stephen.” “But,” verse 10 goes on to say, “they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.” Stephen clearly was knowledgeable of how Jesus fulfilled the OT Scriptures and enabled by the Holy Spirit to be very skillful in presenting his case.

Rather than acknowledging that Stephen was correct in his teaching, his opponents resorted to accusations. They were not interested in considering the points that Stephen was making. They wanted to silence him. They got some of their number to accuse Stephen of speaking “blasphemous words against Moses and God” (Acts 6:11). They brought him before the Jewish council. They brought in false witnesses who 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 his place and will change to customs that Moses delivered to us” (Acts 6:13-14).

Verse 15 describes Stephen’s face as he stood before the council. “And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.” Stephen’s face was supernaturally luminous. God was making the point that Stephen was correctly interpreting Moses. Remember how Moses’ face shone when he came down from the mountain after having received the law from God. By making Stephen’s face shine as he was being accused of speaking against Moses and God, God is confirming that Stephen’s interpretation of Moses was the correct one.

Now these accusations are the key to interpreting Stephen’s speech in chapter 7. Chapter 7:1 says, “And the high priest said, “Are these things so?” And Stephen’s speech is his answer to that question. It is his defense against the accusations. Stephen’s speech is in a style that we are not used to. It is challenging to see how much of it relates to the accusations. Thankfully we have commentaries that help us understand the points that Stephen is making. There are two main points and we will consider them in two separate sermons. We’re not going to go through Stephen’s speech line by line, but we will focus on the main points that Stephen is making and how he answers the accusations that were leveled against him.

The first point has to do with the temple. The false witnesses say, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place....” They are talking about the temple. They also accuse him of quoting Jesus as saying that he will destroy the temple. So the issue is about the significance of the temple. And that means that the issue is about how God is present with his people.

And this is where this seemingly irrelevant dispute connects to our lives. The most important issue in life is our relationship to God. We were created for fellowship with God. When Adam and Eve sinned against God that fellowship with God was broken. God's plan of salvation is about reconciling us to God. Jesus is at the heart of that. The great truth that underlies all of the biblical story is that we were created for fellowship with God and that we need fellowship with God to be truly alive. There is nothing more important for human beings than fellowship with God. And that is what is so important about the temple and understanding the significance of the temple correctly. The temple was about God dwelling in the midst of his people. It was the place where God met with his people. And the Jews believed that Stephen was attacking the temple. "This man never ceases to speak works against this holy place...." And, "we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place...."

Now Jesus had said something like that. John records Jesus in John 2:19 saying, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." And John says, "But he was speaking about the temple of his body." Jesus did not say that he would destroy the temple. But he did predict that he would replace it. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." We are meant to see that Jesus was talking about his resurrection. Jesus was saying that he would replace the temple – He would fulfill the meaning of the temple. He would become the meeting place between God and his people.

But the Jews were not willing to consider this as a possibility. They were not willing to accept Jesus' teaching that the meaning of the temple would be fulfilled in him. They were not willing to think of the temple as a temporary institution in God's history of redemption which meant that they saw it as permanent. They saw it as the permanent place where God met with his people. Stephen must have been teaching that Jesus was the fulfillment of the temple. He must have been quoting Jesus's teaching that predicted his death and resurrection as the replacement of the temple. He must have been working out the implications of Jesus' teaching. And rather than considering what Stephen was saying, his opponents accused him of speaking against the temple.

Stephen's defense against this accusation was to show from the OT Scriptures that God had not limited himself to being with his people only in the OT temple. First he mentions Abraham. Acts 7:2 says, "And Stephen said: "Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia..." The point that Stephen is making in this first section is that God appeared to Abraham and made a covenant with him long before there was any temple in Jerusalem. The same was the case with Joseph. Verse 9 says, "And the patriarchs jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him." The same was that case with Moses. He tells the story of how God appeared to Moses in the burning bush – again long before there was any temple in Jerusalem. And then Stephen summarizes how the tabernacle in the wilderness had been build and how Solomon build the temple in Jerusalem, but what he goes on to emphasize in this section was that God is not restricted to the temple. In verses 48-50, Stephen quotes from various OT passages that make that point. "

“Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, ‘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?’”

So one of the main points of Stephen’s speech was that God’s presence had never been restricted to the temple. And the implication was that it was consistent with the OT Scriptures that God would one day meet with his people in a way that did not require the OT temple. No doubt the OT temple had its place in the worship of Israel from Solomon’s time until Jesus. But Stephen’s point is that God is not restricted to meeting with his people in that temple. And the implication is that Jesus takes the people of God beyond the OT temple.

So getting back to the scene in which Stephen makes his speech, he is before the council answering the charges that he “never ceases to speak words against this holy place” and “we have heard him says that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place.” What this makes clear is that Stephen had been teaching about how Jesus replaced the OT temple. Stephen was not teaching against the temple, but he was speaking about how Jesus fulfilled the temple and made it obsolete. Stephen had been working out the significance of Jesus’ words recorded in John 2:19, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” He must have been working out the meaning of Jesus’ saying recorded in Matthew 12:6, “I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.” The true interpretation of the significance of the temple was that it was a temporary institution in God’s dealings with his people and that Jesus would replace it. That was not speaking against the temple. That was interpreting the significance of the temple correctly.

What we will do for the rest of this sermon is explore the idea of how Jesus’ fulfilled the meaning of the temple and made it obsolete. That at the heart of the conflict between Stephen and the Jews who opposed him. The Jews saw Stephen’s teaching, and Jesus’ teaching before him, as an attack on the temple. Stephen was teaching about the meaning of Jesus words: “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.”

John when he records these words of Jesus, he tells us what Jesus meant by this saying. John 2:21 says “But he was speaking about the temple of his body.” So by saying “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,” Jesus was referring to himself as the temple. He is referring to his death and resurrection. Jesus is speaking about himself as the fulfillment of the OT temple. And then John goes on to say, in John 2:22, “When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.” So when Jesus had risen from the dead the disciples remembered this saying “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” They came to understand the point that Jesus himself was the temple. His resurrection from the dead was the raising up of the new temple – Jesus himself as the crucified and risen Saviour. This is what Stephen was teaching to the Jews in the synagogue.

Now John had made this point earlier in his gospel. In John 1:14, John had written “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” The phrase “dwelt among us” means literally “tabernacled among us.” The meaning of the tabernacle was the same as the meaning of the temple. Again the point is that Jesus fulfilled the meaning of the tabernacle and the temple because he was God in the flesh who dwelt among his people and they saw his glory.

Stephen was preaching about Jesus as the fulfillment of the tabernacle and the temple. Once he came and died and rose from the dead, the OT temple was obsolete. Stephen’s opponents did not want to hear that, but this was part of the message of the early church about Jesus. Jesus was the new temple and as the fulfillment of the OT temple he was much greater than the OT temple had been. Jesus himself said in Matthew 12:6, “I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.” As D/A Carson puts it in his commentary on John, “the temple itself pointed forward to a better and final meeting-point between God and human beings.” Jesus is the “better and final meeting-point between God and human beings. And it is that idea of Jesus being better than the OT temple that is so edifying and comforting.

The book of Hebrews teaches us of the limitations of the OT temple. Hebrews 10:4 says, “For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” The sacrifices of the OT temple did not actually take away sins. That is why they had to be offered again and again and again. They were temporary measures. They pointed ahead to the final sacrifice that Jesus would make. Hebrews 9:11-14 speaks of Jesus’ sacrifice and its significance. “But when Christ appeared ... he entered **once for all** into the holy places, not by the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing eternal redemption.” A few verses further, comparing the animal sacrifices to Jesus’ sacrifice, he says, “how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our consciences from dead works to serve the living God.” And 9:26, “But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.”

The OT sacrifices did not really put away sin. But Jesus’ sacrifice really and truly and permanently did put away sin. And that means that those who believe in him are really and truly reconciled to God. Jesus has paid the penalty for our sins. We can have clear consciences because Jesus’ blood really and truly puts our sins away. And so our sins are no longer between us and God. There is nothing between us. God looks upon us as if we had never sinned and always perfectly obeyed. We can come before God without fear. We can come into his presence with confidence in his acceptance of us and our worship. We can be confident of his love and favor. Jesus as the final temple is so much better than the OT temple because it was not a temporary measure, but the final solution for the problem of our sins.

And the question for us is whether we appreciate the significance of that. Stephen was so excited about how Jesus was the new and better temple that he was trying to convince his fellow Jews of how much superior

Jesus was to the OT temple with its sacrifices of bulls and goats. Is this precious to us? Do we see what a blessing it is that through Jesus our sins no longer separate us from God? Do we prize and cherish our relationship with God? Do we delight in fellowship with him? The whole temple idea is about our relationship with God and Jesus as the new and better temple means that we have peace with God because our sins have been completely forgiven.

Perhaps this is all boring to you. Your relationship with God is not a priority. The fact that God has done to such great lengths to make it possible for us to have a loving relationship with God is not all that interesting. If that is the case you must understand that that God requires of you that you love him with all your heart and that a loving relationship with God is more satisfying and enjoyable than any joy and satisfaction that we can have apart from God. It is greatly dishonoring to God not to love him supremely because he is so worthy of that, but we also miss out because God has designed us to experience the greatest joy and satisfaction in loving and worshipping and serving him. Jesus came and gave his life so that we could be in a loving relationship with God. If that is not precious to you, let me urge you to pray and to think and study the Bible and use all the other means that God has provided to nurture the relationship with God that is the heart of the most profound joy and satisfaction we can know.

Now I want to take this temple theme one step further. The NT also talks about the NT church as a temple of God. Jesus is the fulfillment of the temple, but so is the church. The main idea here is that the church is the dwelling place of God. Paul speaks of this in Ephesians 2:20-22. He writes that the church is “build on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” The church is the dwelling place of God and Jesus is the cornerstone. That means that Jesus and his people together are the dwelling place of God.

This is a precious truth. The church as the temple of God. God dwells with his people. He does this by being present in the Holy Spirit on the basis of Jesus’ saving work for his people so that Jesus is the cornerstone. The idea of the church as the temple of God means that God is present with his people. The church is his dwelling place.

Now God can be present in a number of different ways according to Scripture. One of the things that Scripture teaches is that God is present everywhere. In Psalm 139:7 David writes, “Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence. If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol you are there.” God is everywhere. He is present in every square inch of his universe. He is always present everywhere.

However, God is present with his people in a different way than simply by means of his being present everywhere. Listen to how God speaks to his people in Isaiah 43:2, “When you pass through the waters, I will

be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame will not consume you.”

Here God’s presence means that his people will not be harmed. If God is with his people he protects them. They can be threatened by danger, but God’s presence with them means that nothing can harm them.

The idea of God’s presence with his people goes all the way back to God’s purpose in creating human beings in the first place. God created us in his image so that we could be in relationship with him. The idea of presence, when it involves people, has to do with much more than simply sharing the same space. It has to do with relational closeness. You can be with other people on a bus, but you are not really with them in any other way than physical proximity. Or two friends can be together on the same bus. They are with each other in a way the other riders of the bus are not with them.

So when God is said to be with his people, it involves relational closeness. God is personally present with his people. There is a togetherness. There is fellowship. God and his people have a relationship. They speak to one another. They listen to one another. There is an emotional relational connectedness.

This is all very important for our whole way of understanding life in this world. God is a personal God. That means he can be with other persons with a personal presence. The three persons of the Trinity have always been with each other eternally. And when God created man he designed us as persons with whom he might dwell. This is one of the implications of the fact that we are made in the image of God. And we see this happening in the story of creation. The creation story reveals God as the mighty creator of heaven and earth who created everything simply by speaking. But it also shows us that this great and glorious creator-God was present with the human beings that he had made. God did not only create Adam; he spoke to him. He was present with him.

This is unspeakably significant. The creation story reveals God both as higher and greater than any created thing because he is the creator. But it also shows him as very interested and involved in his creation and particularly the human beings created in his image. It reveals God as a God who interacts with Adam and later Adam and Eve. The creation story shows God involved with man. He gives man a task. He invites man to enjoy the beautiful garden home that he has created. He creates woman and brings her to the man. He institutes marriage.

One of the things that is not obvious, but what biblical scholars have discovered is that the garden of Eden is a pre-fall version of the temple. The meaning of the temple in the Bible is that it is the place where God dwells among his people. There are indications in the creation story that the garden of Eden was understood to be a garden temple. It was the place where God dwelt with man. Then you have at the end of the biblical story, the new heavens and the new earth described as the place where God dwells with man. Revelation 21:3 says,

“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.’”

So the idea of God dwelling with man is integral to the biblical story. The great God of heaven and earth designed the creation as a temple - as a place where he and humanity could dwell together. This is the point of the creation. The relationship between God and man is the point of the creation. From the very beginning God intended to be involved with the human race – to relate to people – to be present with them – to dwell among them and to enjoy relating to them and have them enjoy relating to him.

Of course, that close relationship with God was broken because of sin, but the story told in the Bible which culminates in Jesus is about how that fellowship is restored and the idea of Jesus and his people as the temple of God is one of the ways that this idea is expressed.

We do not know how much of this Stephen understood. But this is where the temple theme in the Bible leads. The church as the temple of God which is ultimately fulfilled in the new creation. “Behold the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.”

Clearly this should be important to us. Clearly it is important to God – to dwell with us. It is important to God because he is a God who delights to bless and there is no greater blessing than to be with God – to be in his presence. But it is also clear that God takes pleasure in being with his people. That is an awesome thing.

And the way of blessing for us is to live our lives in such a way that prioritizes the gift of God’s presence. We experience God’s presence when we think of God, when we worship him, when we listen to his word, when we assemble before him, when we pray, and when we seek to please him. To enjoy the blessing of the presence of God it is necessary to live with the awareness of God’s presence and thus also of God’s delight in spending time with his people. This is a way of being in the world – living consciously of the presence of God. And that is an anticipation of what we will enjoy in perfection in the new heavens and the new earth.