

## Acts Part 20 – The Martyrdom of Stephen

A sermon series by Pastor Byron Chesney Wednesday, February, 03, 2016

### † Acts 7:44-60

We left off from our studies last week after looking at a long narrative of the life of Moses that Stephen used to build his defense. We saw that he compared the Children of Israel and their rejection of Moses as their leader, not only once but twice, with the rejection of Jesus by their current day.

We also covered what sometimes becomes an issue with folks in verse 45 where it uses the name Jesus instead of Joshua and we talked about various forms of that name used in our King James Bible.

Tonight, with the help of the Lord I would like for us to finish out this chapter and look at the Martyrdom of Stephen.

44 Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as he had appointed, speaking unto Moses, that he should make it according to the fashion that he had seen. 45 Which also our fathers that came after brought in with Jesus into the possession of the Gentiles, whom God drove out before the face of our fathers, unto the days of David; 46 Who found favour before God, and desired to find a tabernacle for the God of Jacob. 47 But Solomon built him an house.

We covered verses 44-47 last week but for clarity sake I included them in our reading so we would not be taking Scripture out of context as we begin this study tonight. Stephen is going over how the Tabernacle in the wilderness started and how eventually things moved to the Temple that was built by Solomon. He did this of course as a rebuttal against their accusations that he had blasphemed the Temple in Jerusalem. He is showing that he has great respect of the Temple and realizes how important it is and that he was not blaspheming against it.

48 Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet, 49 Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? saith the Lord: or what is the place of my rest? 50 Hath not my hand made all these things?

Stephen used Old Testament Scripture to back up his claims about God not living in Temples. First he refers to what the Prophet Isaiah said in **Isaiah 66:1-2**: Thus saith the LORD, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me? and where is the place of my rest? 2 For all those things hath mine hand made, and all those things have been, saith the LORD: but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.

Then he refers to what Solomon said in **1 Kings 8:27**: But will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?

What Stephen just said in these verses reveals what he was trying to say in the first place, he wasn't blaspheming the Temple, but rather he was showing that God does not need a Temple made with hands because His throne is in Heaven. You cannot contain God in a man-made structure; He is too magnificent and glorious to be confined to a Temple. So if the Temple is destroyed it does not harm God one bit because He doesn't dwell there anyway. And, of course we know that it was just about 35 years later, in 70 AD, that the Temple was in fact destroyed.

51 Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye.

We have to wonder what happened between verses 50 and 51. Obviously something happened to cause Stephen to just abruptly stop preaching and go on the attack. The most probable thing that occurred was that the Jews did not accept what he had just said about the Temple not containing God. There was probably backlash from the Sanhedrin court when he made that statement; **Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands.**

First he calls them "**stiffnecked**". This word was used numerous times in the Old Testament against those that were disobedient and resistant to God's will. Most of time when you see that word it is the Lord himself using it about the Children of Israel and Moses relays God's message to them, and once it is from a letter written by King Hezekiah in reference to the rebellious Children of Israel. Let me give you a few verses:

**Exodus 32:9 (GOD)** And the LORD said unto Moses, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people:

**Exodus 33:3 (GOD)** Unto a land flowing with milk and honey: for I will not go up in the midst of thee; for thou art a stiffnecked people: lest I consume thee in the way.

**Exodus 33:5 (GOD)** For the LORD had said unto Moses, Say unto the children of Israel, Ye are a stiffnecked people: I will come up into the midst of thee in a moment, and consume thee: therefore now put off thy ornaments from thee, that I may know what to do unto thee.

**Exodus 34:9 (MOSES)** And he said, If now I have found grace in thy sight, O Lord, let my Lord, I pray thee, go among us; for it is a stiffnecked people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for thine inheritance.

**Deuteronomy 9:6 (MOSES)** Understand therefore, that the LORD thy God giveth thee not this good land to possess it for thy righteousness; for thou art a stiffnecked people.

**Deuteronomy 9:13 (MOSES)** Furthermore the LORD spake unto me, saying, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people:

**Deuteronomy 10:16 (MOSES)** Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked.

**2 Chronicles 30:8 (KING HEZEKIAH)** Now be ye not stiffnecked, as your fathers were, but yield yourselves unto the LORD, and enter into his sanctuary, which he hath sanctified for ever: and serve the LORD your God, that the fierceness of his wrath may turn away from you.

So, for Stephen to use that word in reference to the Sanhedrin court is a very strong thing for him to say. To be stiffnecked actually means; to be stubborn, obstinate, and headstrong. The term originated with men trying to break an Oxen but the Oxen's neck was so stiff and strong that they refused to allow the yoke to break them and they were unbroken. That is certainly a picture of these Jews. Despite the evidence before them they refuse to believe in the Messiah that was sent to save them. They remained stick necked and refused to bend.

If that wasn't bad enough he follows it up with the following statement: **and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye.** Circumcision was what the Jews recognized as their bond

between them and God. So to call someone “uncircumcised” is an insult to them and is usually said about the heathens. To be uncircumcised in heart and ears meant that they refused to listen to or to realize the truth. It meant that they were not being obedient to God.

And then he takes it one step further and says this: **ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye.** These Jews opposed the message which was brought to them by God through His holy Spirit. It is the same Spirit that led Moses and all of the Prophets of old which the Jews resisted. It is the same Spirit that led John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Apostles, but they resisted it.

My friend, to resist the Holy Spirit is one of the worst sins you can commit. If the lost person resists the Holy Spirit and His pleading for them to believe in Jesus, then they are damned. These religious leaders that Stephen was standing before had resisted the Holy Spirit and they stood there damned in their sins.

**52 Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers: 53 Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it.**

Then Stephen drives it home. He brings up the fact that the Jews have a history of rejecting and persecuting their own prophets. Men that God sent to warn them and instead of heeding the warning and repenting, they instead turned on their prophets and persecuted, imprisoned, derided, and murdered many of them.

Jesus also brings up that fact over in the Gospel of Matthew when he was pronouncing all of the “Woes” on the Scribes and Pharisees. Turn with me to:

**Matthew 23:29-39**

**29 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous,**

**30 And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.**

**31 Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets.**

**32 Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers.**

**33 Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?**

**34 Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city:**

**35 That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar.**

**36 Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation.**

**37 O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!**

**38 Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.**

**39 For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.**

So these men have a long history of persecuting the prophets and Stephen throws that fact in their face and that was the last straw for them.

**54 When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth.**

This isn't the only time we've read in the Bible where these guys were “cut to the heart.” If you remember when we studied in Chapter 5 and they had arrested Peter and John for preaching in the Temple and Peter let the council have it too, the Bible says this: **Acts 5:33: When they heard that, they were cut to the heart, and took counsel to slay them. 34 Then stood there up one in the council, a Pharisee, named Gamaliel, a doctor of the law, had in reputation among all the people, and commanded to put the apostles forth a little space;**

So these guys can't handle the truth. When the truth hits them and cuts them to the heart, their reaction is to strike out and kill. Gamaliel stopped them from killing Peter and John but no one is going to stop them from killing Stephen.

“and they gnashed on him with their teeth.” This little phrase is used numerous times in the Bible, even going back as far as the Book of Job where it says: **Job 16:9 He teareth me in his wrath, who hateth me: he gnasheth upon me with his teeth; mine enemy sharpeneth his eyes upon me.**

Jesus refers to gnashing of teeth 7 different times in the Gospels when he is speaking about hell. Mat 8:12; Mat 13:42, Mat 13:50; Mat 22:13; Mat 24:51; Mat 25:30; Luk 13:28.

Gnashing of teeth is a description usually used of wild animals ferociously attacking their enemy. It means they were filled with violent rage and ran on him like a pack of wild animals. My friend, that's what is going to be taking place in hell too.

**55 But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, 56 And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.**

Alright so we get to this famous line in the Bible where it says that Stephen looked into heaven and saw Jesus **STANDING** on the right hand of God. So the question that everyone wants to ask is, “**why is Jesus standing and not sitting?**”

Let's discuss this briefly. First of all we know that once Christ ascended into Heaven that he took His rightful position at the right hand of God the Father to act as mediator between God and man. **1 Timothy 2:5 For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;**

But we also see in Scripture that Jesus is typically **seated** at the right hand of God and **not standing**:

**Matthew 26:64: Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.**

**Mark 16:19: So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God.**

**Ephesians 1:19-20: And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, 20 Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places,**

**Hebrews 8:1:** Now of the things which we have spoken this is the sum: We have such an high priest, who is **set on the right hand** of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens;

**Hebrews 10:12:** But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, **sat down on the right hand** of God;

**Hebrews 12:2:** Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, **and is set down at the right hand** of the throne of God.

So, why did Stephen see Jesus standing instead of sitting? First I want to give you some men's opinions on this subject:

**Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary:** Why "*standing*," and not *sitting*, the posture in which the glorified Savior is elsewhere represented? Clearly, to express the eager interest with which He watched from the skies the scene in that council chamber, and the full tide of His Spirit which He was at that moment engaged in pouring into the heart of His heroic witness, till it beamed in radiance from his very countenance.

**Robert Hawker's Poor Man Commentary:** And I beg him not to overlook the Lord's posture of standing; as if in readiness, both to receive Stephen to his arms, and to execute judgment upon his enemies. And I request the Reader the rather to notice this posture of the Lord Jesus, because, as far as I recollect, after the ascension of Jesus he is always spoken of as sitting, to receive his people, and to behold the destruction of his foes

**John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible: and Jesus standing on the right hand of God;** of that glory which was a Symbol of him: Jesus being risen from the dead, and ascended on high, was set at the right hand of God, in human nature, and so was visible to the corporeal eye of Stephen; whose visual faculty was so extraordinarily enlarged and assisted, as to reach the body of Christ in the third heavens; where he was seen by him standing, to denote his readiness to assist him, and his indignation at his enemies.

**John Piper – The Death of a Spirit-Filled Man (sermon)** ...not only did the Holy Spirit turn the hour of death into a revelation of the glory of God and of Jesus, he also showed Stephen that the reason Jesus was standing, and not sitting (as it says in verse 55), was to welcome his servant home. So death serves the dying saint not only as a window to see glory, but also as a doorway to enter glory—not only a window to see Jesus, but also a doorway to join him.

The truth is we could guess and wonder about it until we reach Heaven. The Bible does not come out and just say; "the reason Jesus was standing and not sitting was....) but we have curious minds and want to try and figure out a reason why.

Let me tell you why I believe Jesus is standing and not sitting when Stephen sees him. First of all Stephen said he saw the "**Son of man**." This is the most common title for Jesus. In fact, Jesus refers to himself as that more than any other title. If I am not mistaken he calls himself that 82 times in the Gospels.

Over in the Book of Daniel chapter 7, in Daniel's dream and visions we read this: **Daniel 7:13-14:** I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like **the Son of man** came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought

him near before him. 14 And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.

We understand Daniel's vision of being about the future times and the Son of man is referring to the Messiah, Jesus Christ. We see that he was given dominion over all of the kingdom, people, nations, and languages. God has given Jesus the power to rule and reign over men and the power to judge man. The Bible says in **John 5:22:** For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son:

The Prophet Isaiah writes: **Isaiah 26:21:** For, behold, the LORD cometh out of his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity: the earth also shall disclose her blood, and shall no more cover her slain.

Then in the Psalms we read this: **Psalms 109:30-31:** I will greatly praise the LORD with my mouth; yea, I will praise him among the multitude. 31 **For he shall stand at the right hand of the poor**, to save him from those that condemn his soul.

So based upon my understanding of Scripture and the role of Jesus, I see two things here: 1. Jesus is standing in judgement of Stephen's accusers, and Jesus is standing welcoming Stephen into his heavenly home. He could have very well have remained seated and done the same thing but if one of your Children was being wrongfully persecuted and they were giving their life would you remain seated???

**57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord,**

The pack of wild animals begin descending upon their prey. They refuse to listen to him anymore and begin yelling and running upon him.

**58 And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.**

Stephen was stoned according to the law of blasphemy. **Leviticus 24:16:** And he that blasphemeth the name of the LORD, he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him: as well the stranger, as he that is born in the land, when he blasphemeth the name of the LORD, shall be put to death.

Then we are introduced to Saul of Tarsus, later best known as the Apostle Paul. They took off their outer garments in order to be freer to run upon Stephen and carry out their dirty deeds. They laid them down at Saul's feet as a sign that he was trusted. Though it calls him a "young man," it is believed that Saul was anywhere between 30 and 40 years old.

**59 And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. 60 And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.**

And the life of Stephen ends. He forever went down in history as being the first Christian martyr. What a testimony! His prayer that their sins not be laid to their charge is reminiscent of our Lord dying on the cross and asking the Father to forgive them for they know not what they do.

† All Scripture from the Authorized King James Version