

PM Acts 7:44-60 Against the temple

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[0 : 00] To provide some extra context for our service tonight!

Of blasphemy, of speaking against certain things. And if we needed a more Christmassy title for our service this evening, it would be Emmanuel Fulfilled.

We're going to be looking at the second half of Stephen's Defence, where we see how Christ fulfills all that the temple represented. But let's pick up the reading in Acts chapter 6.

We're just going to read a few verses here. Acts 6 from verse 8. And it's there that we read these words. And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.

Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the freedmen, as it was called, and of the Cyrenians and of the Alexandrians and those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen, but they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he was speaking.

[1 : 33] Then they secretly instigated men who said, We've heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God. And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council.

And they set up false witnesses. He said, This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place, and the law. For we've heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place, and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.

And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. And the high priest said, Are these things so?

And then Stephen replies at that point, and we'll take up the reading again, at verse 44, which is where we left off this morning.

Stephen says these words, Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it according to the pattern that he had seen.

[2 : 45] Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua, when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. And so it was until the days of David, who found favor in the sight of God, and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob.

But it was Solomon who built a house for him. 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? You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in hearts and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit.

As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered.

[3 : 47] You who received the law as delivered by angels, and did not keep it. Now when they heard these things, they were enraged.

And they ground their teeth at him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

And he said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. But they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and rushed together at him.

They cast him out of the city, and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments, at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

And falling to his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

[4 : 55] Amen. This is God's word. Let's come again in prayer before our Lord. Amen.

Well, let's turn back to Acts chapter 7, please. Acts chapter 8, verses 44 to the end. Acts chapter 7, verses 44 to the end.

And we see here Stephen continuing to defend himself by preaching a sermon as he explains his actions.

He's been accused, as we read, of blasphemy. He's been accused of speaking against everything that God had ordained for the right worship of the living and true God.

And instead of any other way of defending himself, he preaches, as it were, this sermon.

[6 : 06] And this morning, for a quick recap, the bulk of this sermon, he's been accused of speaking against Moses. Moses who brought the law. Moses who was the prophet who brought God's word to the people.

And he's been explaining, hasn't he, that far from saying anything against Moses, he's showing how those who have rejected Christ have fallen into the exact same error.

They've made the same mistake. They rejected Moses. And Moses, all along, was pointing towards one like him, who would come as a prophet, a true prophet.

And so in rejecting Christ, they've made, they've made an error. And we've been reminded that from the words that we read just before, the earlier part from chapter 6, we've been reminded that as he makes his defense, Stephen has something about his face which reflects, it's described as being like an angel.

There's something angelic about his face because he is in such a close communion with the Lord that his face reflects something, as it were, of heaven.

[7 : 40] And so he's been making this defense and it seems like a long-winded guided tour of Old Testament history unless we see these, the thread, the thrust of his argument that to reject Moses is an error.

And now he develops his argument further in the section that we read tonight to go on to speak about the temple. He's been accused of speaking against this holy place, against the Jewish temple.

but the temple was representing the dwelling of God with his people and that is as many of you know what the Emmanuel that classic passage that's read at Christmas time that speaks of Christ being our Emmanuel, our God with us and what these Jewish leaders have done is to reject the true Emmanuel because they haven't seen the true significance of what the temple was pointing towards.

Jesus. And so as we consider this passage tonight together I want you to try and hold two kind of overarching questions that I think will help us as we read this part of God's word and as we reflect on what it means.

because as we saw at the end of this chapter Stephen is stoned to death. It's the most extreme reaction anyone could have to a message that someone brings them.

[9 : 24] Stephen brings this message in the form of this sermon and he is stoned to death. So there's a very strong reaction and the two questions I want us to reflect on tonight are do we understand why there is such a strong reaction against what Stephen is saying and that's a kind of if you like in school terms that's like a comprehension question.

Do we understand why do they stone him? And the second question is one for us to really ponder and reflect on and that is to ask ourselves corporately as a fellowship of God's people and individually do we present a message that provokes a reaction?

Are we provoking a response in the way that we present the gospel? So holding those two questions in our minds we'll come to look more carefully at this passage to give a quick outline of what I hope to cover we'll look firstly at what the tabernacle and later the temple what that really signified and then we'll go on from there to see in what way that is fulfilled through the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and then in a kind of a parallel to what we looked at this morning we'll then try and further understand how the doctrine of union with Christ means that the church of God on earth really is the fulfilment of what the temple is pointing towards and what that might mean for us so that's an outline of where we're going let's look now at verse 44 our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness what is this tent of witness that Stephen is speaking about but I imagine most of

you have an idea of what that tent of witness is they're talking about what they called in the Old Testament the tabernacle a special tent and the reason it was a tent that they had in the wilderness was because it needed to be mobile didn't it because the people the children of Israel were on a journey they were leaving slavery in Egypt and they were on their way to the promised land and so they needed to have something mobile that could be taken down and put up as they moved their camp as they made progress on their journey and this was a special tent and it contained the Ark of the Covenant and it's called the tent of witness partly I believe because its very existence was a bearing testimony or bearing witness to the identity of the Israelites the Hebrew people this was something that we can read about we read about it in Exodus and Deuteronomy and elsewhere in the scriptures and in places like

Numbers we can read that this tent had people who were appointed specifically given the task of carrying the different parts of the tent of witness people whose job it was to assemble it to put it up people to take it down people to guard it people to march behind it and so if you were part of that community there's no way you could miss the importance and the significance whenever the camp was to move on this was the first thing to be taken down they marched behind it as they went and whenever the camp was to stop in a journey the first thing to do was to pitch this special tent containing as it did these extremely important articles it contained the main thing it contained of course is the

[13:52] Ark of the Covenant and inside the Ark of the Covenant there were a number of things there was a gold jar of manna air and staff that budded and importantly the two stone tablets containing the law that Moses received and these two stone tablets had been written by the finger of God and if we pause to think about it for a moment it's obvious isn't it that you couldn't possibly have just had articles like that written by the finger of God you couldn't have just said that they could have been put down on the ground just in the back corner in Moses tent it was obvious that there had to be somewhere special for something as special as that it was of tremendous importance and it bore witness to the fact that God had spoken to his people had given them a law that he was their

God and they were his people and that was what was in the very centre of their tent of their camp we read in Hebrews 9 these words the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary a tabernacle was set up in its first room where the lampstand and the table with its consecrated bread this was called the holy place behind the second curtain was a room called the most holy place which had the golden altar of incense and the gold covered ark of the covenant this ark contained the gold jar of manna ear and staff that had budded and the stone tablets of the covenant above the ark were the cherubim of the glory overshadowing the atonement cover and then the writer to the Hebrews adds this comment but we cannot discuss these things in detail now I sometimes wondered maybe if there was more time what might the writer of the Hebrews have said about these articles they were obviously of immense significance! and he says this comment we can't discuss that in detail now as if to say there's a lot to say about these these are really important but he must move on because something even more important than that has come and he wants us to see that despite the great significance and importance of the ark of the covenant and of the tabernacle of testimony the tent of testimony something more important had come verse 47 I want to draw your attention to that but it was Solomon who built a house for him we see that there's a tent of witness but Solomon builds a house what does that mean well one thing it points to is that this was a progressive revelation there were stages in what was happening here at one time they had the ark in a tent and then it was in a temple

Stephen's been accused of speaking against the temple and those who have accused him have in their minds up to a point a right to understanding that the temple is a building of immense importance and significance but they have forgotten that this is part of God's revelation that it's not static it used to be a tent now it's a temple there's a progress here and things can change and things do change as God reveals more and more of his plan it was never merely a symbolic thing the temple but it was never sufficient either on its own let's see what the writer to the Hebrews carries on to say he says when everything had been arranged like this the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry but only the high priest entered the inner room and that only once a year and never without blood which he offered for himself for the sins the people had committed in ignorance the

Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the most holy place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still functioning this is an illustration for the present time indicating

that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience!
[18 : 52] of ceremonial washings external regulations applying until the time of the new order so the temple was very significant but it was something that was passing away but the important point that Stephen brings before those who he's speaking to is that it was always known that this was never sufficient we sang from Psalm 90 that God would be our dwelling place and we've sung Psalm 61 let me dwell in your tent forever there's been this progressive revelation and it's obvious that because there's this progressive revelation that there's going to be a more full and final fulfillment of this as

God's promise to dwell amongst his people forever is truly fulfilled verse 48 yet the most high does not dwell in houses made by hands the temple was significant but it was never sufficient it was only ever pointing towards the one who would come and fulfill all that the temple signified almost certainly then what we see here is Stephen defending himself because he's been accused of speaking against the temple and probably what's in mind is that Stephen's been quoting Christ's own words that are recorded for us in John chapter 2 verse 19 you remember there that he says destroy this temple and I'll raise it again in three days and so we're moving on now to see how Christ is the fulfillment of the temple because you'll know if you know that part of scripture that the disciples realized that the temple he had spoken of was his body when he said when Christ said destroy this temple and I'll raise it again in three days this had been something deeply offensive to the Jewish leaders that heard it it seemed disrespectful it seemed arrogant but they didn't realize that the temple he'd spoken of was his body and that Christ was the fulfillment of all that the temple represented the temple represents a place where Christ will dwell permanently with his people and the Lord Jesus is the fulfillment of that as I say Isaiah says that

Christ will be called Emmanuel God with us God dwelling with his people let's read some more from Hebrews chapter 9 verse 11 but when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that's not made with human hands that is to say is not a part of this creation he did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves but he entered the most holy place once for all by his own blood thus obtaining eternal redemption the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so they're outwardly clean how much more then will the blood of Christ who through the eternal spirit offered himself unblemished to God cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death so that we may serve the living

God for this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant so you see that when Christ came he completely fulfilled everything that the temple was meant to do the temple was a place for worship it was a place to make sacrifices a place to come to try to obtain forgiveness for your sins a place where once forgiveness had been obtained you could enjoy fellowship and peace with God and Christ comes and in his body offers himself and so as the writer to the Hebrews is explaining to us here Christ is the fulfillment of all that the temple represented all of the atonement that was needed all of the sense and reality of God's presence with us is what

[24 : 18] Christ obtains for us that's the significance isn't it of the tearing of the curtain in the temple you remember at the crucifixion the temple curtain is torn and as Stephen makes his defense before these chief priests it's probably just a matter of weeks previous that this curtain inside the temple has been torn apart showing as the writer as the other parts of scripture show us that all that the temple represented was fading away and becoming obsolete it was becoming something that would deserve to be in a museum but as you may know from history it was in fact absolutely and completely destroyed in AD 70 so we've seen that we've seen what the temple was and we've seen that

Christ is the fulfillment of that temple but we also see in Stephen's defense here something of what it means that through union with Christ the church becomes the fulfillment of this dwelling place for God believers become the true temple of the living God 2 Corinthians 6 16 says that we are the temple of the living God the doctrine of union with Christ is a profound mystery there's an intimacy there that's a spiritual closeness that's hard to describe it's described in the Bible elsewhere as being like a marriage a marriage is a great mystery isn't it because in a faithful and true marriage two people become something new they become one new family a place at its best where there is unity and peace and safety and prosperity and our union with

Christ is like that and what we see in Stephen is a glimpse of what it's like in practice to have that union with the risen Lord Jesus because Stephen's earthly circumstances are as bad as they could be aren't they he's literally being stoned to death and yet he's given at that moment eyes to see and he sees into heaven as it were and there's great mystery here and we don't really know but I conceive of it as though just in that moment of intense persecution as Stephen is falling to his knees under a hail of stones he sees the heavens opened and the son of man standing at the right hand of God there's something profoundly moving about that it's as if the risen

Lord Jesus has risen to a standing position to welcome Stephen as the first true Christian martyr and this is something profoundly moving is it not this is what union with Christ can bring despite these circumstances Stephen has that communion with his saviour it's special isn't it we struggle we don't really have good analogies to describe what this is really like family is probably the best analogy I can think of I mock my brother gently from time to time but if anyone was to say something against him or to oppose him in a serious way

I would immediately jump to his defence and I would feel an attack on me as it were because he's part of my family and perhaps you know something of that yourselves how defensive we become if someone even offers a mild criticism of someone within our own family circle we will immediately jump into a defensive mode and that's what it's like to have union with Christ Christ jumps as it were instinctively to our defence and we ought to jump instinctively to his defence when we hear his name being maligned when we hear his gospel being mangled or misrepresented union with Christ so we'll come back for a moment to just sort of recap where we've been today and think over these things

[30 : 15] I said at the start that we would have these two overarching questions do we understand why Stephen is being stoned to death here and are we presenting a similarly provocative a similarly controversial message do we get a reaction from the gospel that we preach we've seen this morning how Moses has come and delivered the law he's been a prophet bringing God's word we've seen how that points to Christ how it's fulfilled in Christ and these men who rejected Moses should have listened and obeyed

Christ's words and so we have to think also now about this tabernacle this tent of witness this temple what is Stephen really saying about it well he's saying that if there's to be any real true atonement for our sin if we're to ever really worship the living God rightly if we're to ever have any sense of peace with the living God then that can only be found in Christ and no earthly temple or no other substitute will ever do and so that's why he gets this reaction he's saying that Christ is the only one who really fulfills

Christ is the prophet to whom we must listen he is the one who actually finally and fully brings God's word to us and he is the one who brings true atonement and true worship one of the things that strikes me most about this passage is how it ends so abruptly the first time you read it you must surely think it's strange that there's Stephen has been quite slow in a way if you read the whole chapter it's a very long chapter and he's gone through the great detail about Moses and now he's speaking about the temple and the chapter seems to kind of end a bit doesn't it sort of cut off and the commentators speculate that perhaps those in the Sanhedrin the ruling council have at this point almost made it impossible for him to carry on they're so riled by what he's saying that they begin to sort of heckle him they're angry and perhaps they're interrupting him it's as if they just can't bear for him to carry on because they see the direction of what he's saying they see that he is bringing before them

Christ who they have rejected as the son of God and it's hard isn't it for us to think of these events think of a group of men Snarl describes them as grinding their teeth they're really snarling at him and yet he is there with his face like the face of an angel and that's a really disturbing picture of what can so often be the case that confronted with irrefutable proof and undeniable evidence of the truth of the gospel many people snarl and reject with anger and with violence some people reject it in a really violent way other people in a really spiteful way others in a quiet way but still end up rejecting it and Stephen's sermon ends with these words this warning really you who received the law delivered by angels and did not keep it do you see that we can easily miss that warning for ourselves when we read this part of the Bible even all these years after these events we're still kind of shocked aren't we by the really extreme violence that these men perpetrated against Stephen and because our sympathy is with Stephen we tend to kind of other these men and we think of them as we kind of do what Stephen asks us not to do in a sense we kind of snarl back at

them through the ages as it were and see how bad they were and how wrong they were I want to suggest tonight that we instead of doing that should soberly reflect on the implications of what Stephen is actually saying here because these men at this point in history as we read in Acts 7 were the most spiritually privileged men on the planet they had the living oracles of God in their hands and they had been sent the fulfillment of that in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ they had lived to see what

[36 : 30] Stephen describes as the coming of the righteous one and yet they respond by hurling stones at him the point is this what kind of spiritual privilege do you enjoy tonight do you have access to the living oracles of God are you able to read it for yourself and understand it maybe you've been born in a Christian home has anyone ever explained the truth of the gospel to you you've heard the gospel being preached and each one of us must give an account on the last day Jesus says that to whom much is given much will be required and any who continue to reject Jesus despite these opportunities to repent will eventually know what scripture describes as a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living

God in the context of judgment well I could stop there but I don't want to because let's look at verse 58 before we leave this passage because that's the strangely the most encouraging verse for me in the whole chapter verse 58 tells us a little detail the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul earlier in Acts we read about Peter preaching a sermon and when Peter preaches his sermon 3,000 people become Christians at once I would hope that anyone who would try and preach wouldn't hesitate to give all they had to see anything even half as good as that reaction what a harvest of righteousness that was that day 3,000 souls and yet this sermon is preached and it's a great sermon it's a spirit filled sermon and every single person who heard it resisted the Holy

Spirit and this young man named Saul he resisted the Holy Spirit in a very public way he went on to persecute the church as you know leading to an outbreak of persecution against God's people many people lost their lives for naming the name of Christ and so this sermon seems to have been a complete and utter failure is there no no benefit at all from it well by God's grace we know don't we that Saul or Paul as we better know him was praise God not in the category of those who always resist the Holy Spirit as Stephen warns us and it's here that we see something that we call the economy of grace a sermon with no immediate converts which cost the preacher his life and led to a terrible outbreak of persecution becomes in time a gospel seed that still to this day bears fruit as the kingdom of

God grows and as people are added to it throughout the world and tonight we're here Gentile believers believers who in all probability trace our spiritual ancestry to this man at whose feet the witnesses laid their garments in the economy of grace nothing whatsoever is wasted no matter how much of a failure it may seem at the time no matter how small you may feel tonight nothing is ever wasted in God's economy of grace may the Lord strengthen our faith as we reflect further on his word