

FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS

A LOOK AT THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Acts 6:8: – 8:1

We have problems with the story of Stephen – problems because we know that this is an important story – Stephen after all is the first recorded Christian martyr – and yet when we read this passage, we find it difficult to understand why it's there. Stephen is supposedly giving an account of his faith, which so infuriates the authorities that they kill him, and yet all that we see, upon first reading, is a rather lengthy and seemingly tedious history lesson that bears little relationship to our faith. He doesn't even mention Jesus until verse 52, and then not by name. So what is going on here?

To begin, we read that Stephen, having been appointed a deacon, has clearly extended his brief to include miracles and preaching. He was a man of great wisdom and spiritual authority. He is arrested on charges on blasphemy, having spoken against Moses and God by denying the full significance of the temple and the law – the two main pillars of Judaism.

Stephen is asked to account for himself, and launches into a long historical narrative. But what he is doing is demonstrating that he has a huge respect for Moses and God, and that it is the new Christian church which, in actual fact is standing firm in the received teaching of the Old Testament by seeing Jesus as the fulfilment of the temple and the law.

Stephen selects his examples well. The whole story of scripture is God's initiative. God has been at work, in the history of Israel, preparing the entire world to receive His glory.

Stephen and the temple.

Stephen takes four major epochs from Hebrew history and demonstrates how they point to the coming of the Messiah. In none of these eras was God's presence limited to a particular place. Rather, he was a God on the move, calling His people to fresh adventures, and directing them as they moved.

1) Abraham. The sign of the promise.

It was to Abraham that God promised to be with the nation. It is also with Abraham that the story begins of how the world is to be set right. God is the God of glory. He covenanted with Abraham to be with the people. Abraham covenanted fidelity to God. Significantly, it was in Mesopotamia that God first spoke to Abraham (certainly not confined to the temple). God's promise is to be with His people, wherever they are.

2) Joseph God the rescuer

The scene shifts to Egypt. Stephen mentions Egypt six times in seven verses. He clearly has a point to make. Not only did God take his people to Egypt, but He spoke to them there, and used it as part of His purpose. Joseph was used by God to rescue his people, and stands in line as a forebear of Jesus, the Messiah.

3) Moses The fulfiller of promise

In this long account of Moses' career, we see that God is present with the people in Egypt, in Midian, and in the wilderness. The ground at the burning bush is described as 'holy'. The message is clear – wherever God is, is holy. He had seen His people's oppression and groaning. Moses foretells the coming of a prophet like him (Deut 18:15). But the nation refused to obey God (a dig at his present accusers). The lesson of Moses is that God is everywhere, and the 'holy place' is wherever God may be.

4) David and Solomon The sign of God with us.

Stephen traces the development of tabernacle, until the building of a permanent temple by Solomon. Whilst respected these edifices, he quoted the prophet Isaiah who reminds us that God does not live in buildings made by men. 'Heaven is my throne and earth my footstall.'

The God of Israel is a pilgrim God, not restricted to a single place. The God of glory appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia, He was with Joseph in Egypt, with Moses in Midian, and even when the nation was established in the Promised Land, God does not live in houses made by men. God's presence cannot be localized. His only home on earth is with his people. He has pledged to be their God. Therefore, where they are, so He will be also.

Stephen and the Law.

Stephen also demonstrates that the authorities, far from upholding the law, have showed disrespect for the law of Moses. It is they who are blaspheming, not him. Their blasphemy is a failure to acknowledge the Holy Spirit, and to see Jesus as the fulfilment of the law and prophets. He claims a deep respect for Moses, and says that his accusers are just like their forefathers – resisting the Holy Spirit and

persecuting the prophets. They are guilty of resisting the Holy Spirit, the Messiah, and the law.

Stephen is asserting that Jesus has come to fulfil the law and replace the temple.

Needless to say, Stephen's conclusions were not well received by the Sanhedrin, and he pays the price of ultimate sacrifice for his stand. But at this point, a new character enters the scene. The murderers 'laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.' It is here that we witness the first occasion upon Paul himself heard a Christian interpretation of the Scriptures. Stephen provides the introduction of Paul to Christian theology – an act which is to be of huge significance to the entire history of the church.

With this story of Stephen, we embark upon the beginnings of stage two of the church's story. The stage is being set for the advance of Christianity out of Jerusalem, away from the temple, into 'all the world'.