

The House of God

Acts 7:44-50

I have already devoted five sermons to Stephen's defense against those who would kill him, and after today, there will still be one more next week, the personal rebuke calling the Jewish leaders to repentance beginning in,

v.51 "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you."

With those strong words of rebuke, it is obvious why Stephen became the first Christian martyr, being put to death by his enemies. But before we look at that rebuke, we will study today the climax of his argument that we have been focused upon throughout chapter 7. I have noted these past weeks that Stephen's approach would be labelled now as "biblical theology," or "redemptive-historical theology," referring to the process of studying the theology of the Bible as it unfolds in the course of history, especially with regard to the study of the Old Testament. By contrast, I have noted that systematic theology is the study of the whole Bible, divided up into categories or subjects, such as the chapters in our Westminster Confession of Faith. But so-called "biblical theology" is the study of that same theology, with a consecutive, historical summary and approach. And it is in that history, the history of God's people of the Old Covenant, through that history, that the great doctrines of salvation and deliverance are presented to us.

It is this redemptive-historical approach to the study of the Bible that enables us rightly to understand the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, allowing us to understand the meaning of all the symbols, types, and shadows of the Old Testament. Our Confession of Faith refers to those symbols as "types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all

foresignifying Christ to come." We have further explanation of those old testament ordinances in,

Heb. 8:3 "For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices. Therefore it is necessary that this One also have something to offer. 4 For if He were on earth, He would not be a priest, since there are priests who offer the gifts according to the law; 5 who serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, "See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain." 6 But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises."

We see the limitations of those shadows with the words of, Heb. 9:6 "Now when these things had been thus prepared, the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. 7 But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people's sins committed in ignorance; 8 the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing. 9 It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience— 10 concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation."

Thus a time of change would come, and it did come with the incarnation of Jesus. The insufficiency of those old covenant shadows is clearly expressed in the words of,

Heb. 10:1 "For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make

those who approach perfect.”

Thus Paul would later write to the Colossians,

Col. 2:16 “So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, 17 which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.”

So the Old Testament is full of shadows, and while the shadows are not an end in themselves, while they accomplish nothing themselves, still they point to something that is true and real, the substance. They point to Jesus. They point to the gospel, reflecting the truth of the gospel just as my shadow reflected by the sun upon the ground reflects my real person and existence. In other words, in the unfolding of Old Testament history, as I have so frequently quoted in the past few weeks,

Gal. 3:8 “...the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.” 9 So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.”

So this outworking of biblical theology is a declaration of the gospel, and Stephen certainly means it to be such as he proclaims that gospel to the unbelieving Jews of his day. Remember the focus from last week, when Stephen rebukes those unbelieving Jews for their rejection of Jesus, the prophet like unto Moses. Stephen declares to them that “God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven,” verse 42. God gave them over to their sin of unbelief, and Stephen is urging them to turn back, to repent. Thus he proclaims to them the truths of the gospel. So let me identify...

I. THE GOSPEL BLESSING OF OLD TESTAMENT SHADOWS.

v.44 “Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the

wilderness, as He appointed, instructing Moses to make it according to the pattern that he had seen, 45 which our fathers, having received it in turn, also brought with Joshua into the land possessed by the Gentiles, whom God drove out before the face of our fathers until the days of David, 46 who found favor before God and asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob. 47 But Solomon built Him a house.”

And so we have,

A. An old testament pattern of the glory of God’s presence.

“Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as He appointed.” The tabernacle of witness was the outward representation of God’s presence, the glory of that presence of God. The tabernacle was the place where God met with his people! And there are chapters upon chapters in the Old Testament describing and defining that pattern, including chapters 25-50 of the book of Exodus. And all of that detailed description serves this great purpose, to show us just how it would be that God would dwell with his people. God would live with his people, blessing them with the blessing of his presence!

The tabernacle was the place on earth where God dwelt, where he met with his people. It was the outward symbol of his very presence, and thus, all the emphasis is upon its glory. The people of God were instructed to build a glorious tabernacle, “the tabernacle of witness.” God was with them, in that shadow of type we simply call “the tabernacle.”

Let me show just how clearly that tabernacle represents heaven itself, which in one sense, can be defined as the presence of God. John writes in,

Rev. 15:5 “After these things I looked, and behold, the temple

of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven was opened. 6 And out of the temple came the seven angels having the seven plagues, clothed in pure bright linen, and having their chests girded with golden bands. 7 Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives forever and ever. 8 The temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from His power, and no one was able to enter the temple till the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.”

Those words refer back to,

Ex. 38:21 “This is the inventory of the tabernacle, the tabernacle of the Testimony, which was counted according to the commandment of Moses, for the service of the Levites, by the hand of Ithamar, son of Aaron the priest.”

The tabernacle of the Testimony, the tent of witness, “our fathers had [that] in the wilderness.” They had a piece of heaven on earth, the dwelling place of their God. They had an outward pattern, a type, of the glory of God’s presence! The conclusion of that pattern as it is written in Scripture is found in,

Ex. 40:34 “Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. 35 And Moses was not able to enter the tabernacle of meeting, because the cloud rested above it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. 36 Whenever the cloud was taken up from above the tabernacle, the children of Israel would go onward in all their journeys. 37 But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not journey till the day that it was taken up. 38 For the cloud of the LORD was above the tabernacle by day, and fire was over it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys.”

Here is what the relationship between God and his people

looked like in the shadows of the Old Testament,

2 Chron. 5:13 “...indeed it came to pass, when the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the LORD, and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music, and praised the LORD, saying: “For He is good, For His mercy endures forever,” that the house, the house of the LORD, was filled with a cloud, 14 so that the priests could not continue ministering because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of God.”

“The house of the LORD, was filled with a cloud.” The glory of God’s presence was evident and obvious. That’s that Old Testament shadow, proclaiming clearly the greatest blessing of the gospel itself, God is with us! Or, in Hebrew, Immanuel. The Old Testament people of God had that blessing, in the outward form and shadow of the tabernacle. And, continues Stephen, they also had,

B. An old testament pattern of the deliverance of God’s people.

Deliverance has been a common theme in this chapter in Acts, especially with reference to Moses. So here is the pattern, the shadow, the type of that deliverance we now simply call “salvation.”

v.45 “...[the tabernacle] which our fathers, having received it in turn, also brought with Joshua into the land possessed by the Gentiles, whom God drove out before the face of our fathers until the days of David, 46 who found favor before God...”

When God brought his people into the promised land of Canaan, he went with them! They brought the tabernacle with them. Joshua was their leader then, and God drove out the people so that his people would possess and inherit the land,

“until the days of David.” Thus they had the tabernacle of God’s presence, the temporary tent, until the day, beginning with David’s leadership, when the permanent temple was finally built and established.

God delivered them. God saved them. And so God says to his people at Mount Sinai,

Ex. 20:2 “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”

More fully,

Deut. 7:6 “For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. 7 The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; 8 but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. 9 “Therefore know that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments.”

Thus, with the tabernacle and then with the permanent temple, we see clearly,

C. An old testament manifestation of God’s dwelling place.

To read all of verse 46, referring to David,

v.46 “...who found favor before God and asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob. 47 But Solomon built Him a house.”

A temple. A permanent structure. And yet, here is the main point of all of this, this whole chapter so far—all of that history is a pattern of the work of God to redeem his people, to save them. All off these events of history are types, prophetic pictures of that which is real, going back to,

Heb. 9: 9 “[The temple] was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience— 10 concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation.”

The temple itself was symbolic for the present time. It was a type. A pattern, revealed in history. It was the gospel preached beforehand. And so, with Stephen’s defense here in Acts 7, we come to recognize,

II. THE GOSPEL MEANING OF THE OLD TESTAMENT SHADOWS.

What did the temple mean? What did it represent? “Solomon built him a house,” we read in verse 47. “However”, as verse 48 begins Stephen’s explanation. Solomon built him a house, a temple, however, there is something you need to know about that. There is something you need to understand. The physical house, the actual temple, is not what matters. It is only the outward shadow and type of the actual reality. And Stephen expresses that so well, so clearly.

v.48 “However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands...”

Stephen point is simple. The significance of the Old Testament shadows is in what they represent. The importance of the temple is not in the physical brick and mortar and all the other materials with which it was built. The importance of the temple, and of all the Old Testament shadows and types, is the reality

which they represent, namely the presence of God.

I want to speak about the new testament fulfillment and meaning of those shadows, but I don't imply by that God's people of the old testament didn't understand the true meaning. They certainly did. Even Solomon, the builder of the great temple, said this at the dedication of that temple.

1 Kings 8:27 "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built! 28 Yet regard the prayer of Your servant and his supplication, O LORD my God, and listen to the cry and the prayer which Your servant is praying before You today: 29 that Your eyes may be open toward this temple night and day, toward the place of which You said, My name shall be there,' that You may hear the prayer which Your servant makes toward this place. 30 And may You hear the supplication of Your servant and of Your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. Hear in heaven Your dwelling place; and when You hear, forgive."

And so Stephen proclaims,

A. The new testament fulfillment of God's dwelling place.

v.48 "However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says: 49 'Heaven is My throne, And earth is My footstool. What house will you build for Me? says the LORD, Or what is the place of My rest? 50 Has My hand not made all these things?'"

The presence of God is in heaven. It is the definition of heaven. "Heaven is My throne," says God. And earth is my footstool, my creation, says God, that which I have created by my own power. Stephen is quoting from the prophet Isaiah, and his quotation from chapter 61 continues with reference to the grace of

God's love shown to those who come to him with broken and contrite hearts.

Is. 66:1 "Thus says the LORD: "Heaven is My throne, And earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? 2 For all those things My hand has made, And all those things exist," Says the LORD. "But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, And who trembles at My word."

So the glory of the temple is not in the outward form of the building, but rather that glory is in the covenant people of God who assemble themselves together in humble reliance upon the grace of God to forgive them their sin. God's place of rest, to use Isaiah's words, is with his people, those who are of a contrite spirit! Similarly, Isaiah declares,

Is. 57:15 "For thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, With him who has a contrite and humble spirit, To revive the spirit of the humble, And to revive the heart of the contrite ones."

So what is the new testament fulfillment of the old testament temple? What does that old testament shadow and type represent? Where does God dwell now, in the reality of our new testament existence? We don't have to wonder, for we have inspired revelation for our instruction.

Eph. 2:19 "Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit."

We are that temple, we the church! We are fitted together, we

grow into a holy temple in the Lord. We now “are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”

2 Cor. 6:16 “For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people.”

That’s Stephen’s message. That is the gospel message. No longer does a physical building called a temple have any significance. It is the church of true believers who are the fulfillment of what that old testament temple represented. And those true believers are those who come to God with a broken and contrite spirit, those who tremble in respect and honor for God’s word.

Let me emphasize again, the saints of the old testament understood that. Remember David’s words in Psalm 51 when he confesses his terrible sin,

Ps. 51:15 “O Lord, open my lips, And my mouth shall show forth Your praise. 16 For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart —These, O God, You will not despise.”

Psalm 34:18 “The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, And saves such as have a contrite spirit.”

So we come to God to worship today in spirit and in truth. Not according to the shadows and types of the old testament, but according to what those shadows and types represented, namely the true reality and experience of faith and repentance, in spirit and in truth. And, therefore, here is Stephen’s final point before his words of rebuke to the unbelieving Jews who sought to kill him. The conclusion of Stephen’s sermon, if you want to call it that, is,

B. The new testament condemnation of those who reject God by clinging to empty shadows.

That is the emphasis of that quote from Isaiah 66, repeated in our text,

v.48 “However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says: 49 ‘Heaven is My throne, And earth is My footstool. What house will you build for Me? says the LORD, Or what is the place of My rest? 50 Has My hand not made all these things?’”

“What house will you build for Me?” It’s all mine, says the Lord. Everything is mine. Do you think you can build me a house and think that is all that you need to do? Or, in Stephen’s context, do you think you can cling to those outward shadows and expect to find favor with God? Do you think you can continue on with that merely external shadow of old testament ceremonial worship and miss altogether what really matters? According Hebrews 9:9, those external shadows of the Old Testament are “symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience.” They are “concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation.”

Again, Stephen quotes from Isaiah 66, and that prophecy continue with this condemnation of those who do, indeed, reject God, by clinging to empty shadows.

Isaiah 66:3 “He who kills a bull is as if he slays a man; He who sacrifices a lamb, as if he breaks a dog’s neck; He who offers a grain offering, as if he offers swine’s blood; He who burns incense, as if he blesses an idol. Just as they have chosen their own ways, And their soul delights in their abominations, 4 So will I choose their delusions, And bring their fears on them; Because, when I called, no one answered, When I spoke they did not hear;

But they did evil before My eyes, And chose that in which I do not delight.”

They clung to the outward shadows of ceremonial religion, but “they have chosen their own ways.” They delight “in their abominations.” God’s judgment is unmistakable, for God says, “When I called, no one answered, When I spoke they did not hear; But they did evil before My eyes, And chose that in which I do not delight.”

That’s why Stephen declares,
v.51 “You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears!
You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you.”

These words have clear application for all of us today, not only with reference to the danger of the continuation of old testament shadows and types, but to the danger that we all face, the danger of substituting for the true worship of God from our hearts a cheap alternative—mere outward forms and presence, putting on a show outwardly and thinking that God will be well pleased by your show of religion. Thus the warning of the prophet is still relevant for us today.

Micah 6:6 “With what shall I come before the LORD, And bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, With calves a year old? 7 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, Ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? 8 He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?”

Psalms 51:17 “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart—These, O God, You will not despise.”