

Heaven Is My Throne
SERMON
By
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TEXT: Acts 7:44-53

PROP: Because God is infinite and omnipotent we must not be stiff-necked and behave as the heathen do but tremble at the word of God.

Acts 7:44-53 (ESV) – 44 “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. **45** Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, **46** who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. **47** But it was Solomon who built a house for him. **48** Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, **49** “ ‘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? **50** Did not my hand make all these things?’ **51** “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. **52** 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, **53** you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

Stephen was chosen as one of seven deacons to assist the apostles in their ministry to the church in Jerusalem. It is said of Stephen that he was a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Great wonders and signs were done by him such that he attracted the criticism of a certain group of men known as Freedmen, Jews that were freed from slavery. They accused Stephen of blasphemy against Moses and God. Why these men should do this no one knows. It certainly is not blasphemy to speak out against nominalism and superficiality as the prophets often did. But then they stoned the prophets as well. The charge of blasphemy was obviously groundless but it made no difference. Neither did Stephen speak against the temple as such, merely stating that God was not confined to an earthly building and the rabbis of Israel all agreed with this. Yet Stephen was apprehended and brought before the Sanhedrin to answer this frivolous charge.

The real blasphemy against Moses and God issued from these Freedmen. To be unwilling to examine the truth and to oppose Stephen because he was connected with Jesus was to be stiff-necked and rebellious. The attitude of these

Jews toward Stephen is typical of the attitude of pagan religions toward Jesus and his church even in our own times. Their hearts were blinded to the truth by the prince of this world, Satan. Christians send missionaries to preach the gospel and call people to repentance. But pagan religions must resort to force to spread their gospel. Paul writes,

Romans 10:14-17 (ESV) – **14** How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? **15** And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” **16** But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” **17** So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

God raises up missionaries and sends them as he wills to the heathen nations of the earth and the Holy Spirit changes enemies of God into willing and faithful subjects of the King. It is not the sword that drives people to their knees before Christ the Lord but faith comes by hearing the word of God. Islam has no missionaries. People claim to be Muslim because to do otherwise would mean loss of employment or death. This was the dilemma that Stephen faced. Recant his faith in Christ and live or preach the gospel and die.

The high priest asked Steven if the charges were correct. Did he speak blasphemous words against Moses and God? Did he speak against the temple and the law? Was it true that Jesus of Nazareth would destroy the temple and change the customs Moses set forth? As we read his defense we find that Stephen did not answer the charges directly. Instead he rehearses the history of Israel and the constant rebellion of Israel against God. He begins with the life of Abraham. The reason why Abraham left Mesopotamia was not that he had come up with a new God concept or a novel twist of theology. To the contrary, the God of glory appeared to him. The appearance of God was so compelling that Abraham left all that he had in Ur and moved west to Haran. God appeared to him again and promised him a son and the possession of land in Canaan. God covenanted with Abraham to bless him and his children after him in a way that no other nation was blessed. He covenanted to be a God to Abraham and to his descendants after him. As a sign and seal of the covenant of grace Abraham was circumcised along with all the males in his household. And God was faithful in that he continued the covenant promises to Isaac and to Jacob and his twelve sons.

But Jacob's sons rebelled and sent Joseph in slavery to Egypt. God remained faithful to his promise and elevated Joseph to great power and influence. Throughout the great famine God provided Jacob and his sons with food and lodgings through Joseph. Thus the covenant line of Christ continued but in time a Pharaoh who did not know Joseph rose to power and oppressed Israel because they had become too numerous. Again God delivered Israel, this time through Moses whom he prepared and educated in the very court of Pharaoh. Again God appeared to reveal himself to Moses in the burning bush. God whose covenant name, YAHWEH means the existing one, identified himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and at this Moses trembled. Do we tremble when we consider YAHWEH as he is revealed to us in the Bible? Do we see his glory in his moral goodness, his delightful name, and his awesome sovereignty and tremble? Perhaps we have not considered God this way. Perhaps our knowledge of God is nominal or superficial because it is not informed as it should be from the word of God. Then too, perhaps we haven't confessed our sin and come to Christ for forgiveness and grace.

God saved Israel from their bondage in Egypt but time and time again as they traveled through the desert they complained and rebelled. When they complained, God gave them water and food. When they rebelled, God punished them but brought them back into his favor and the covenant line of Christ continued. Is this the way we are? When God tests us to see if we will live by everything that comes from the mouth of God, do we pass the test? Israel did not and I am afraid we do not pass the test either. We simply will not live according to God's law. Israel grumbled and complained and would not enter Canaan to take it. They constantly rebelled against God in the face of incredible miracles that God performed for their great benefit. God singled them out to set his love on them but they rebelled. No one else anywhere in the world had the living oracles of God. To whom else did God reveal himself? No one! Just Israel, yet they forsook him and were unfaithful to him. They made idols for themselves and worshipped these false gods instead of the gracious YAHWEH. Along with YAHWEH, they worshipped the sun, moon and stars. Along with YAHWEH, they worshipped Moloch and Remphan. Yet in all this God did not utterly forsake them but was faithful to his covenant promises. We read;

2 Timothy 2:11-13 (ESV) – 11 The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; **12** if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; **13** if we are faithless, he remains faithful— for he cannot deny himself.

Why should God do this for his people? Why should God set his love on these people? What a horrible religion, this worship of Moloch. The idol was a hollow iron image which was heated until the outstretched hands were red hot. They burned their children as sacrifices. These were not Taliban Muslim terrorists. These were God's own people to whom fellowship and revelation was given and to no others. Israel, God's own people, worshipped abominations. They worshipped idols that were said to be filthy and detestable yet God in his mercy continued the covenant of grace through them and revealed himself to them in the Tabernacle of witness.

What an extraordinary witness to God's presence with his people and his saving grace. The Ark of the Covenant in the holy of holies contained the Ten Commandments written on stone, the bowl of Manna and Aaron's rod that budded. The Ten Commandments symbolized our inability to keep and outright refusal to keep the law of God thus establishing our sin. The bowl of Manna symbolized our failure to live by everything that proceeds from the mouth of God. And the rod of Aaron symbolized our rebellion against the authority of God. On Yom Kippur the high priest would sprinkle blood on the lid of the Ark to make an atonement for the sins of God's people. The Hebrew word *kippur* means *covering* so we understand therefore that the priest covered our sins from the sight of God with the blood of the sacrifice and God was present in the glory cloud that stood over the holy of holies. But the witness of the Tabernacle goes far deeper. The lid of the golden box known as the Ark of the Covenant was termed the Mercy Seat or Propitiation. We read;

Romans 3:21-26 (ESV) – 21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it– **22** the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: **23** for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, **24** and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, **25** whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. **26** It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Clearly the blood of Christ covers our sin, we who by faith belong to Jesus just as the blood of the sacrifice covered the sins of believing Israel. The *Kippur* or atonement was made for the sins of Israel alone and no one else, just as the Kippur effected by death of Christ was intended for his people alone. Furthermore we see that all the parts of the tabernacle directly symbolize this marvelous grace

of God in Jesus Christ. David prayed for a permanent dwelling place for God and Solomon his son built the beautiful temple following the same pattern that Moses used in constructing the Tabernacle in the wilderness. But over the years Israel lost sight of the meaning and purpose of the temple. They lost sight of the meaning of the sacrifice and the atonement for their sins. They would not see that the sacrifices made for the sins of Israel depended on and were based on the sacrifice of Jesus the Messiah. The efficacy of the blood of the sacrifice depended entirely on the shedding of the blood of Christ and as Stephen points out so forcefully, they betrayed and murdered the Just One through whose blood alone they were saved.

The attention of Israel was drawn to the beauty and the gold of the temple just as ours is often drawn to the beauty of a great cathedral or the excitement of music used in the liturgy. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for secularizing the temple. We read,

Matthew 23:16-22 (ESV) – 16 “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ **17** You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? **18** And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’ **19** You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? **20** So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. **21** And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. **22** And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

Like these Pharisees we lose sight of the True and Living God. We forget that he is infinite, eternal and unchangeable in all his attributes and we move toward a nominal faith. Being a Christian in name only is to believe in a false God and this was the position of these Freedmen and the Jewish leaders who put Stephen to death. They were Jews in name only. Nominalism, materialism, secularism and pluralism are the false gods of the society in which we live and these “isms” can and do affect the church of Christ. All too often we behave just as these Jews did regarding Stephen. We may not resort to such violence but any tendency toward these pagan ideas is displeasing to God. The effect on our relationship to Yahweh God is the same as these Jews when they stoned Stephen. We find our social and ethical values in something loosely defined as patriotism or social compassion. Not that such things are bad or wrong in themselves, but if they serve to diminish our love for God and his Christ they move us toward nominal superficial faith. In this way we move closer and closer

to the very paganism that underlies the terrorist atrocities we have recently witnessed. Nominalism is sin and so is relativism.

To be a Christian in name only as we are when we pray to an ecumenical god for his blessing is sin. To believe that truth is relative as we do when we worship YAHWEH and Allah together is sin. YAHWEH and Allah cannot both be the true and Living God. They are very different. YAHWEH is Triune and Allah is not. The true God consists of three persons the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and these three are one God, the same in substance and equal in power and glory. Allah is said to be one god and Muhammad is his prophet but Islam believes that Jesus was just another prophet like Muhammad and they do not believe in the Holy Spirit as a separate and distinct person in the Godhead. “No one comes to the Father except by me”, said Jesus. When we call upon God for help in these trying times we had better not come on the basis of our human accomplishments and social position as so many do. God will not hear such prayers and our sins remain un-forgiven.

The Jews made a beautiful temple for YAHWEH and bid him to come and dwell there. But Stephan reminds his hearers that God does not need their beautiful temple in Acts 7:49-50 where he cites:

Isaiah 66:1-2 (ESV) – 1 Thus says the Lord: “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest? **2** All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the Lord. **But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.**

If we would please God we must look to the God who made the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. If we would please God we must confess with our mouths that Jesus is YAHWEH and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead. If we would please God we must humble ourselves before him, confess our sin, and tremble at his word. We must submit to his authority. Do we tremble at the word of God? Do we even read it and study it? Do we really know that we stand before the infinitely powerful God and will give to him an account of our deeds done in the flesh. We read,

Hebrews 4:12-13 (ESV) – 12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. **13** And no creature is hidden from his sight, **but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.**

Stephen rebuked the unbelief of his Jewish hearers. When they ran at him to stone him to death we read of Stephen,

Acts 7:55-56 (ESV) – 55 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. **56** And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

When we think of Jesus do we think of him as this Son of Man. Stephen saw Jesus in all his glory. As he was about to enter into the presence of God he saw what Moses longed to see but could not. Moses saw the glory of God in his goodness, his name YAHWEH, and his sovereignty, which to see aright is to taste the richness of God’s mercy and love that is beyond all description. But Stephen saw the glory of God. He saw Jesus, the Son of Man standing at God’s right hand. When these irrational rebellious men heard this from the lips of Stephen;

Acts 7:57-60 (ESV) – 57 “--they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. **58** Then 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. **59** And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” **60** 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.”

This is the way pagan people treat the Lord Jesus Christ. They hated Stephen because he loved Jesus and they will hate us as well when we confess our own love for Jesus. We are reminded of the behavior of these same men when Jesus stood before them. Speaking to Jesus the high priest said,

Matthew 26:63-65 (ESV) – 63 “-- “I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” **64** Jesus said to him, “You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” **65** Then the high priest tore his robes and said, “He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy.”

A short while later they cried out, “Crucify him! Crucify him! This is the great Son of Man spoken of by Daniel the prophet who said,

Daniel 7:13-14 (ESV) – 13 “I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. **14** And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him;

his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

Is this the Jesus that we see? Is this the God that we worship and to whom we pray? Let us not be nominal or superficial in our confession of faith which is sin but let us confess that Jesus is YAHWEH to the glory of God the Father and to the praise of God the Holy Spirit. Would God that we all would commit ourselves more fully and more faithfully to the Triune God of the Bible and love him with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our strength.