

21 March 2010

## The Sheer Impossibility of Confining the God of Glory

Reading: Acts 6:8-15; 7:54-8:1; 8:4

This morning, we are about to see two very different pictures of God. We shall see the God of human religion and the God of divine revelation. And there is a difference, a huge difference! The difference is so great that it impacts the way we think and the way we live. We need to ask ourselves: **Is our God the expansive God of Scripture or is he the confined god of our own limitation?**

We have no time to waste, so let's get right to it.

### I. A WATERSHED MOMENT

We have reached a watershed moment in the forward march of the church. From the beginning of the Book of Acts, Luke has plunged us into the dynamic activity of the church in the power of the Spirit. We don't have much time to catch our breath as we are transported from one dramatic scene to another. It is an exciting story.

But we have seen an ominous, dark cloud on the horizon. It has drawn closer and more menacing as the apostles are imprisoned, interrogated, threatened and flogged. Yet this cloud cannot block out the radiant light of the sun. The church marches on. More and more people embrace the gospel. Its members cannot and will not be silenced. All this is about to change, or so it would seem.

Matters come to a head as a result of the powerful ministry of a man whom we know only as Stephen.

A. He is the first-mentioned of the seven men whom the church elected to oversee the distribution of food among its needy widows. Luke describes him as a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. It soon becomes obvious why he is commended so highly. As far as we know, up to this point, only the apostles had performed miracles. But Luke tells us that Stephen was full of God's grace and power and "did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people." In addition, his mind was obviously soaked in the Old Testament, so he would have explained to his compatriots how Jesus had fulfilled messianic prophecy.

There was a synagogue in the city known as the Synagogue of the Freedmen. Its members were drawn from Jews who had returned to Jerusalem from important intellectual centres in the empire like Alexandria and Cilicia. Perhaps Stephen himself had attended this synagogue. They were devout and well educated and fancied their chances in a public debate with Stephen. But they got more than they bargained for. *“They could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.”*

- B. There was only one thing for it: they resorted to a smear campaign, accusing Stephen of blasphemy. By secretly persuading some men to say that they had actually heard Stephen saying things against Moses and against God, they could portray him as a sacrilegious troublemaker. So they dragged him before the Sanhedrin, unceremoniously bundled him into the meeting and produced false witnesses who twisted his words and testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”
- C. Luke comments that, “All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.” This does not mean that he had a sweet and sanctimonious expression on his face. It means that his face was radiant and shone as if it was emitting special light. How appropriate! When Moses came down the mountain after meeting with God, his face was aglow. Stephen is being falsely accused of speaking against Moses and his face shines just as Moses’ face had done.
- D. Silence came over the assembly and the high priest asked him, “Are these charges true?”

## II. A MASTERPIECE OF A SERMON

In response, Stephen delivers what, to my mind, is the most outstanding sermon in the entire Book of Acts.

- A. Luke sees this address as extremely important. He is an intentional writer and selects very carefully what he will include and what he will omit. He devotes only 10 verses to Paul’s masterful speech on the Areopagus, in Athens. So important is Peter’s epoch-making sermon on the Day of Pentecost that he devoted 22 verses to it. But he devotes no fewer than 52 verses to Stephen’s address here.

- B. George Bernard Shaw describes Stephen as “a quite intolerable young speaker” and “a tactless and conceited bore.” He says, “Stephen delivered an oration to the Council in which he inflicted on them a tedious sketch of the history of Israel, with which they were presumably as well acquainted as he.”<sup>1</sup> But Shaw could not see the forest for the trees. Brilliant man though he was, his reaction shows that he just didn’t get it.
- C. On the surface of things, this is an account of the history of Israel from Abraham to Solomon. Factually and historically the members of the Sanhedrin could not fault it. I think they listened so patiently because they probably thought that the longer Stephen talked the more he was likely to incriminate himself. But as we listen to it we see its magnificence.

I shall simply highlight the key theme and the four main ideas of this great sermon. (I suggest that you read it at your leisure).

### III. FIRST, THE KEY: “THE GOD OF GLORY”

Stephen commences respectfully: “Brothers and fathers, listen to me!”

- A. His opening phrase provides an important key to the entire address: “*The God of glory* appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia.”
1. This is a most unusual way of describing God. Many compound names are used to convey God’s character.<sup>2</sup> But only once in the Old Testament is he described as “the God of glory” (Psa. 29:3). In Ephesians 1, Paul refers to God as “the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory” (Eph 1:17). Why then does Stephen choose, at this point, to refer to God as the God of glory?
  2. Well, the term, “glory” is full of significance.
    - You may remember that on Mount Sinai Moses asked the LORD to show him his glory. God told him that it was impossible for him to see his glory fully and survive. But, said God, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you . . .

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<sup>1</sup>John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: To the Ends of the Earth*. The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 129.

<sup>2</sup>Yahweh is the “personal” covenant name by which he made himself known to his people. This name is sometimes used in conjunction with other words to specify a particular aspect of his character, e. g. Yahweh Yireh (Jehovah Jireh), The LORD who provides. The word El (for God) is also linked to words like Olam, Elyon and Shaddai, to depict important attributes of God.

. . . When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen” (Ex. 33:18-23). Yet, even after catching a glimpse, as it were, of God’s glory, Moses’ face was so radiant that the Israelites were afraid to come near him (Ex. 34:29-30).

- Later, when the tabernacle was completed, a cloud covered it and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle, so much so that Moses could not enter (Ex 40: 34-35).
- Years later when King Solomon dedicated the temple, the glory of the LORD filled the temple and “the priests could not enter the temple of the LORD because the glory of the LORD filled it.” The Israelites knelt on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshipped and gave thanks to the LORD.” (2 Chron 7:1-3).
- Then, in the fullness of time, John was able to write. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). So, we could go on: it is a thrilling study.
- To get to the heart of the matter, I think it is fair to say that two ideas are associated with God’s glory. The Old Testament word rendered “glory” comes from a Hebrew root meaning “heavy” or “weighty.” Perhaps the word, “gravitas” is appropriate. We are thinking of the opposite of “lightweight.” The word “dignity” also comes to mind. When God’s glory is manifested, there is an appropriate spiritual density, or “weightiness,” in the atmosphere. In his presence we can only feel a sense of awe (Eccl. 5:1-7).

The other idea is that of brilliant light or splendor and majesty. Resplendent light radiates from the very being of God. Indeed, “he alone is immortal and lives in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:16; cf. Matt. 17:2; 2 Pet. 1:17-18; 2 Cor. 3: 7, 11; 4:6; Rev. 1:16).

- B. By describing God as “the God of Glory,” Stephen gives us the clue to the meaning of his address.

Remember the accusation that they brought against him. He incessantly speaks against Moses and against God, against the law and this holy place. So, we can now follow four key emphases of his sermon.

1. **The God of Glory makes himself known when and where he pleases.** Look how much took place outside the “Holy Land!”
- He is the God who appears to Abram and calls him *while he is still in Mesopotamia* (modern-day Iraq by the way) living in an idolatrous context.
  - He is the God who promises to bless Abram’s descendants even when he doesn’t have any.
  - He is the God who gives the land on oath to Abram but does not allow him to own even a square foot of ground in it.
  - He is the God who tells Abraham that for four hundred years his descendants will be strangers in another country.
  - He is the God who appears to Moses at Mt Sinai, *in Arab territory*, manifests his presence there at the burning bush and says to Moses: “Take off your sandals. The place where you are standing is holy ground.” There was nothing special about the bush or the ground other than the fact that God chose to manifest his presence there. As F. F. Bruce notes: “That spot of Gentile territory was ‘holy ground’ for the sole reason that God manifested himself to Moses there. No place on earth possesses innate sanctity of its own.”<sup>3</sup>

We cannot miss it. He is the God who appears, speaks, sends and promises. He is the God of glory and *the God of Glory manifests himself when and where he pleases*. Do not restrict him or confine him; do not make him into a national or a tribal or a denominational or even a purely personal deity.

Isn’t that good news for us? He is there in the vagaries of your circumstances and the darkness of your trial. No territory on earth is out of bounds to him. He is with you in the Mesopotamia of your confusion and the Egypt of your trial. He is with you in the Midian of your frustration and in the Canaan of as-yet-unfulfilled promises.

Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your presence?

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<sup>3</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, rev. ed. The New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 141.

If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
 if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.  
 If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
 if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
 even there your hand will guide me,  
 your right hand will hold me fast (Psa 139:7-10).

*The God of glory makes himself known where and when he pleases.* He did all this prior to the construction of the temple. He did so outside the boundaries of Israel. This leads us to the second emphasis or theme.

**2. The God of Glory cannot be confined in any way.** Think about his relationship with the temple.

- Remember, one of the main accusations against Stephen was that he was committing sacrilege by speaking against the temple. Here is where a significant shift had taken place. It was *they* who had gotten things back to front. They tended to see God in relation to the temple rather than the temple in relation to God.

- When David wanted to build a temple God said to him,

“Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent for my dwelling. Wherever I moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’” (2 Sam 7:5-7)

David’s intentions were good. He wanted to build a house for God, but God declared that he would build (establish) a house (dynasty) for David (2 Sam. 7:11).

- When Solomon did build a temple, he got his perspective right and prayed, “Will God really dwell on earth with men? The heavens, even the highest heavens cannot contain you. How much less this temple that I have built?” (2 Ch. 6:18)
- But the tendency was to identify God with his temple in such a way as limit him to it. When the first temple was still standing many of the Israelites

thought in was indestructible because it was God's house. If God dwelt in the temple, neither the Babylonians nor anyone else could destroy it. To disabuse them, God gave Ezekiel a vision. He saw the glory of the LORD in the temple. He saw it rise and move to the threshold of the sanctuary, where it paused momentarily. It then rose from above the threshold and stopped above the angelic messengers whom God had sent, and came to rest at the east gate of the temple. The LORD'S glory then moved from the east gate and paused above the Mount of Olives to the east of the city, before moving off (Ezek 10:3-4, 18-19; 11:22-23).

- Stephen did not quote Solomon's words, nor did he refer to this vision from the Prophet Ezekiel. But he did assert that the Most High does not live in houses made by men. And he did quote God's words in Isaiah:

‘Heaven is my throne,  
and the earth is my footstool.  
What kind of house will you build for me?’ says the Lord,  
‘Or where will my resting place be?  
Has not my hand made all things?’ (Is 66:1-2)

Can you see what had happened here? By a subtle shift, they had done the utterly absurd. They had imprisoned God within his temple. God had not chosen to manifest his presence there because he was looking for accommodation. The temple was for our benefit not for his. *The God of glory cannot be confined in any way!*

Again, this has to be good news. Wherever we meet as God's people, we are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3: 16; 6: 19-20; Eph 2:19-22). The God of glory, who cannot be confined in any way, chooses to meet with us. What potential there is! We have experienced something of his presence and his glory, but there is more. Yes there is more for us in the future when we ourselves are glorified. Then, “by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control he will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” Then “we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is” (Phil 3:21; 1 John 3:2). But even now, there is more available to us than we have ever experienced. We can contemplate and reflect the Lord's glory as “*we are transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory . . . . For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ*” (2 Cor 3:18; 4:6).

Thank God for what we have already experienced. But there is more. *We have to do with the God of glory, and he cannot be confined in any way!*

There is another important emphasis in Stephen's sermon.

### 3. The God of Glory overrules human rejection to bring about his gracious purpose.

- Just look at the way Stephen recounts the story of *Joseph*. He was rejected by his own brothers, but God made him a ruler over Egypt and the palace of Pharaoh (7:9-10). Rejected but subsequently exalted! Through him God provides salvation from starvation for his own brothers as well as for the Egyptians. It is early in his address, so he does not push the parallel too much. But *hello!* Does this ring a bell? Can we think of anyone else who was rejected as a result of the jealousy of his brethren but was subsequently exalted to a position of honor and became their Savior? (Mark 15:10; Acts 2:36; 4:10-12)
- But when he comes to *Moses*, he is quite pointed: "This is the same Moses," he said, "whom they had rejected with the words, 'Who made you ruler and judge?' But he had been sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself." And lest there be any doubt that he is likening Moses to Jesus, he adds, "This is that Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people'" (7:35-37).
- Isn't that precisely what the apostles had been saying about Jesus? "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead . . . . Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah" (Acts 2:23-24, 36).
- Right through Scripture we see God at work in this way. When it came to the most important events in human history, he brought about his gracious purpose by overruling human evil in order to bring about good. He does it with Joseph; he does it with Moses; he does it with Esther; he does it with heathen nations and kings, and he does it in respect of his own Son.

I don't know how many times I have had someone tell me about a set of circumstances that seemed anything but good, but through which God brought about a great result. That should hardly surprise us. God used

human rebellion at its worst to bring about suffering at its most dreadful in order to effect a salvation that is greater than we can imagine. That is what the God of glory is like!

It may be that you not in too good a place at the moment. You cannot see what good can possibly come out of your situation. Ah, but the God of glory is always working to bring good ends out of bad situations. “In everything God works for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). He did so in respect of his own Son. And he hasn’t changed.

Then, most amazing of all,

#### **4. The God of Glory is more interested in having a real relationship with us than in our practice of religion.**

- By this time, the gloves are truly off. The temperature in the room has risen. I don’t know whether Stephen knew where things were headed when he started, but as the sermon progresses, he seems to sense what his role was as God’s messenger. He issues a stinging prophetic indictment, unlike anything we have heard from the apostles.

“You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it” (7:51-53).

- We must see the progression here. The apostles had stated clearly that the leaders had not only failed to recognize the Messiah, but were culpable for his brutal and shameful execution. Yet forgiveness was available to them. They could repent or they could intensify their opposition. They had already hardened their hearts. The Sanhedrin had seen and heard enough. Their problem was not lack of evidence but hardness of heart. In a sense, the dye was already cast.
- They were so incensed by his indictment that they gnashed their teeth, snarling like wild animals. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of

God. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

That was the last straw. They would have understood the claim that was contained in that statement. They didn’t want to hear another word. They covered their ears, and yelled at the top of their voices. That explosive scene is a graphic epitome of their persistent attitude. They had been blocking their ears and yelling as loud as they could all along. In a violent frenzy, they gave vent to the resolute rebellion of their hearts. Sooner or later, there had to be a Stephen!

They were not supposed to execute anyone without the permission of the Roman Prefect. But they acted on instinct. So outrageous was his accusation and so blasphemous his statement that they acted in unison. They charged at him like men possessed, dragged him out of the city and stoned him. But as they were stoning him, Stephen was serene. He prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

Stoning was not pleasant. Stones and rocks of various sizes were used. You felt their impact for some time before succumbing to the bombardment. But Luke tells us that Stephen “fell asleep.”

- Luke conveys something of the sadness with which his death was greeted in the early church. Godly men buried Stephen and “mourned deeply for him” (8:2). The unthinkable had happened! Yes, the apostles had been in trouble, but God had protected them. You can understand why they would have assumed that a man of such promise, so godly, so knowledgeable, and so wise would also be spared. Presumably he was still young and had many good years of ministry ahead of him. And now, he’s dead. Had something gone wrong with the script? What a huge setback for the church!
- Something bigger is afoot when the God of glory is at work. Standing to one side was *another* young man. Presumably he had heard every word of that sermon. He may well have been a member of the Synagogue of the Freedmen since he was from Cilicia. Here was a man who had religion and had it in a big way. “Circumcised the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, in regard to the law, a Pharisee . . . as for legalistic righteousness, blameless” (Phil 3:5-6). The witnesses were placing their outer garments at his feet. Saul of Tarsus was giving approval to Stephen’s death.

- The contrast between the two men was immense. Saul had religion, but he had no peace, no real joy, and no love. He had as much religion as one could get, but, at the time, he had no relationship with God. Stephen died a painful death but he saw his living Lord, prayed for his executioners, and committed his spirit to his Savior and fell asleep.
- I have a feeling that Saul could not get that scene out of his mind. When he could not sleep at night, that scene and that face would appear before him.
- Years later, he would address a violent mob that was as intent on his blood as he had been on Stephen's. Significantly he referred to this very incident and his complicity in it. He told his compatriots who were now out for *his* blood, that when the blood of Stephen, the Lord's martyr was shed, he had stood there giving his approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him (22:20).
- St Augustine commented on that prayer of Stephen: "*Si Stephanus non orasset, Ecclesia Paulum non haberet.*" (If Stephen had not prayed, the Church would not have had Paul). Someone paraphrased that statement: "The church owes Paul to that prayer of Stephen."

## Conclusion

We have here a clash between two very different kinds of religion and indeed between two very different concepts of God. Significantly, these two men used the same Bible and shared the same national history. Saul's God was, however a god of regulations and requirements, a god whose favor you had to earn. How different is the God of glory. He manifests his presence where and when he pleases. He cannot be confined in any way. He transcends our understanding and yet he makes himself known to us. Instead of abandoning us and letting us take the consequences of our actions, he works in history, overruling our rebellion to bring about his gracious purpose. And he is unimpressed with a religion of mere rules. Most amazing of all, the God of glory wants a relationship with us.