

Acts 7:55-60 ⁵⁵ But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" ⁵⁷ But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. ⁵⁸ Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.

"Seeing and Hearing"

The account of the martyrdom of Stephen is something we rarely hear read in church. If we were Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, or Orthodox we would hear it once a year on the festival of Saint Stephen. Most Presbyterian churches follow the lectionary, which is a three year program for reading through the Bible in Sunday worship. In the lectionary the account of Stephen's death occurs only once every three years. Then, the likelihood of there ever being a sermon preached about Stephen gets severely diminished when you consider it must compete for the preacher's attention against John 14's, "In my Father's house there are many rooms" and Jesus saying, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life". In my opinion this is not a very fitting remembrance for the first person to die for being a disciple of Jesus. I'm going to step out on a limb here and say that we can not even begin to understand what Jesus meant when he said "In my Father's house there are many rooms" and "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life" without having considered the death of Stephen.

When I sat down this week to try to come up with a sermon (and believe me it was a labour this week) I kept coming back to Stephen and the contrast in faith between Stephen, the disciple, filled with the Holy Spirit gazing into heaven seeing Jesus standing at the right hand of God and this mob led by the temple authorities, scribes, and elders of the people covering their ears as they rushed upon him to kill him. Stephen saw the Truth while the temple authorities covered their ears to keep from hearing it.

Stephen was what we call a Hellenist Jew, which means he was of a Jew of Greek descent rather than of Hebrew descent. At some point in his life either he or his family converted to Judaism, but not being of Hebrew blood meant that they were always a bit outcast among the Jews. Hellenist Jews more readily converted to Christ than did the Hebrew Jews because the early church was more hospitable to them. Because the Hellenist Jews were not so welcomed in the Hebrew Jewish communities they remained very influenced by Greek culture.

So, in Greek culture seeing was more important than hearing. In the Greek language they had only two words that we translate as hearing and a whole handful of words for seeing. In verses 55 and 56 six where the act of seeing happens twice there are actually two Greek words. In verse 55 the word which the NIV simply translates as "looked up to heaven" in Greek has a fuller meaning of "gazed at" or "stared intently at". It's the idea of perceiving more than what is actually there to see. Luke tends to use the word for when people are

seeing things as they are in the kingdom of God. For example, earlier in Acts Peter and John walked into temple and there was a man lame from birth lying there begging. Peter "looked intently" at him and told the man, "I don't have any money, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth the Christ stand up and walk." He jumped up and followed them into the temple praising God. Paul did the same thing in the town of Lystra. Paul looked intently at him and saw that he had faith to be healed. So, Paul told him to stand up on his feet which had been crippled from birth. He did. Finally, when Stephen began to address the temple authorities here, they "looked intently" at him and saw that he had the face of an angel, a messenger from God. Even after seeing him as a messenger from God they still killed him.

So, Stephen is here looking intently into heaven seeing the Kingdom of God coming on earth. Filled with the Holy Spirit he sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God. The right hand of God or any royal authority for that matter is a position of authority. The person standing at the right hand of God is the one through whom the power or authority of God is at work. Seeing this, Stephen says to the mob, "Look (or in KJV Behold), I see the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." It was common knowledge that Jesus nearly always referred to himself as the Son of Man. To the Jews that was an Old Testament reference which meant he was the one sent by God to be their Messiah. Stephen says "I see heaven opened and Jesus is standing in the place of the one who has authority to carry out the will of God."

The word Stephen uses for "seeing" here in Greek is *theoreo*. Its is a derivative of *theos* which is the Greek word for God. It has the basic meaning of "seeing things as God sees them". Stephen to saying, "I see things as God sees them and what I see is Jesus standing in the midst of the Glory of God at his right hand, Jesus whom they called a blasphemer and crucified...well, that was too much for the temple authorities to take. So they covered their ears and with a loud shout mobbed him, dragged him out in the street and stoned him.

Let's talk Hebrew culture for a moment. In the Hebrew world hearing is more important than seeing. Hearing isn't just hearing sounds. It means to comprehend and to act accordingly. To hear, trust, and obey. They were also quite suspicious of anything seen. If a person had a vision then it needed to be tested against the revealed word of God. But...if these temple authorities would've had their God-ears on when Stephen described what he was seeing they would have torn their robes and wailed in repentance. Instead, they stoned the messenger of God as if he were a blasphemer.

To start putting the point to this, we have really to take to heart that this was an in-house people-of-God matter. Regardless of what you want to think about the Jewish and Christian religions today, as far as the New Testament is concerned both Jews and Christians are all part of the same faith. In fact, in New Testament times Christians were really just a heretical sect of the larger Jewish faith. Stephen was not martyred because of religious persecution. His death was not anything like...well, let's say Muslims killing Christians (which incidentally is the most predominant cause of Christian martyrdom today) nor of "atheist communists" persecuting the church (as happens today in North Korea and in China)....Stephen's death was people of God killing people of God. His death

was the result of religious people who thought they knew the truth and their abuse of those whom they think don't know the Truth.

Long story short, we have to be very careful about saying that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life without having first examined how we can make our own beliefs about what is the Way, the Truth, and the Life be the means by which we plug our ears and stone those who have seen the Truth. The temple authorities simply believed that God was nothing more than a promise keeping righteous judge who would deliver them from oppression those of his people who lived most in accordance with the rules. Stephen on the other hand was wrestling with how it was that he was filled with the Holy Spirit and could see (understand) the relationship that God the Son has with God the Father. Stephen's death came as the of a conflict between those who think they know God and those who actually do. Stephen, in the Holy Spirit, knew God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When the religious authorities heard the Truth that Stephen saw they killed him and did so because he did not fit into their idolatrous image of God as being a righteous judge.

Asking the question "which is your God" is a bit premature. In the coming weeks we will be exploring the True Christian faith as being a participation in the relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as opposed to being simply about God rewarding the moral who believe the right things about Jesus. I won't ask that question, I will simply note that our sin driven tendency is towards placing our faith in God as best as we can conceive God rather than in who God really is as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The direct result of that is that if Stephen were around today, we'd find our own equivalent to stoning him. We truly would and that might be why we so infrequently hear about his martyrdom. Amen.