

I. Introduction

Good morning! The Lord spoke through the prophet in **Isaiah 66:1-2** and said, **“This is what the LORD says: ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?’ declares the LORD. ‘This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.’”** This Scripture captures three great foundational truths:

- (1) The Lord is the Creator God who made all things.
- (2) He is transcendent, existing above and beyond His creation.
- (3) He values those who humble themselves and honor Him.

The Lord invites all people into a loving relationship with Him. But how has mankind responded to the Lord's invitation? As we have seen the last few weeks, in his message before the Sanhedrin, Stephen reviewed the history of Israel, starting with Abraham and going on to speak of others, especially Joseph and Moses, whose lives and words spoke prophetically of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Today we will look at the rest of Stephen's message and we will see how Stephen turns the tables on the Sanhedrin. Stephen was dragged before the Sanhedrin so they could judge him, but now Stephen will show that they are the ones who are in danger of judgment.



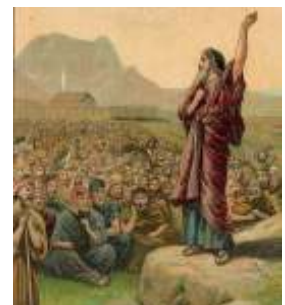
Let's begin with Acts 7:37-43.

II. Scripture Reading Acts 7:37-43, (NIV, 1984)

37 "This is that Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.' 38 He was in the assembly in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living words to pass on to us. 39 But our fathers refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. 40 They told Aaron, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt--we don't know what has happened to him!' 41 That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and held a celebration in honor of what their hands had made. 42 But God turned away and gave them over to the worship of the heavenly bodies. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets: 'Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the desert, O house of Israel? 43 You have lifted up the shrine of Molech and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship. Therefore I will send you into exile' beyond Babylon.

III. Teaching

Moses was both a prophetic model of Christ and also a prophet who spoke of Christ. Stephen reminds the Sanhedrin of the message of **Deuteronomy 18:15**, **“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.”** This verse clearly points to Jesus. But, although the Sanhedrin honored Moses with their words, they did not heed Moses' warning to listen. As a result, just as Moses was rejected by Israel, Jesus was rejected by the Sanhedrin.



Stephen emphasized that Israel rejected Moses even after Moses had led them out of Egypt and demonstrated through countless miracles that he was sent by God. Stephen reminds the Sanhedrin in **Acts 7:39**, **“But our fathers refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt.”** The people turned their hearts back to Egypt. They preferred the life of



a slave serving the Egyptians over a life of obedience and service to God.

This is a warning to the Sanhedrin and to us. In the Bible, Egypt is often used as a symbol of this world, and life in Egypt refers to life in this world as a slave to sin and death. As followers of Jesus, we want to be sure to guard our hearts so that our hearts are not tempted to turn back to the things of this world.

Stephen continues in **Acts 7:40**, **“They told Aaron, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt—we don't know what has happened to him!’”** The people said, **“Make us gods who will go before us.”** Think for a moment and I think you will see how ridiculous this request is. An idol can't go before anyone; you have to pick it up and carry it. Nothing made by the hands of man can contain any wisdom or power that man did not put into it. If you call something you made a god, then you are pretending that you yourself are an even greater god – one that has the power to make new gods! And if you bow before the image you made, you are really only worshipping your own cleverness.

We should never worship anything made by man. Man is not a god and nothing man makes can be a god either. But the people were blind to their own foolishness. And, in **Acts 7:41**, it tells us, **“That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and held a celebration in honor of what their hands had made.”** I think it is easy for us to see how foolish this was. The people had seen many amazing miracles of God done through Moses. But when Moses was gone to the top of Mount Sinai for a brief time to meet with the Lord, they turned to idol worship. If you go back and read Exodus 32, it tells us that the people were dancing and eating, having a big party, to celebrate their new, “god.”



It is easy to criticize those people, but what about us? The ancient people of Israel were neither the first nor the last to act foolishly by bowing down to idols. I won't ask you to raise your hands, but think for a moment. How many of us have bowed down to images made of wood, stone, or metal? How many of us have honored man and the work of his hands more than we have honored the Creator God who made the heavens and earth?

Even after believing in Jesus and receiving the truth of the Scriptures, our hearts are sometimes tempted to go back to Egypt, in other words, to return to a life of slavery to the ways of this world. In Japan, there are many idol statues just like the idols of Egypt. In America people are a little more subtle; it is very rare to see an American bow his or her head before a statue. But Americans also are often idol worshippers, bowing their hearts down before wealth, entertainment, sex, technology, fame, or even violence and war.

Another common form of idol worship is nature worship. In many times and places men and women have been tempted to worship the sun, the moon, the stars, or mountains or waterfalls. Even in the passage we just read, there is a reference to the, “star of your god, Rephan.” Rephan is a reference to the planet Jupiter, so this is an example of worshipping the lights in the night sky. But these are just things that God made; they have no life and no wisdom. They are not worthy of worship.

In every culture there is idol worship and we all face the temptation to return to our own Egypt. But we do not have to surrender to this temptation. We can resist temptation. One of the most effective ways to resist temptation is to focus on Jesus. **Hebrews 12:1-2** urges us, **“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”**

In his message, Stephen next reminds the Sanhedrin that Israel rebelled against God many times in their history, not just in the time of Moses. And in **Acts 7:43** Stephen uses a prophetic quote to remind them of the Babylonian exile. **“You have lifted up the shrine of Molech and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship. Therefore I will send you into exile' beyond Babylon.”**

The people of Israel continued to fall to the temptation of idol worship until the time of the Babylonian exile. The Old Testament prophets warned them again and again, but finally God brought judgment on their idol worship by allowing Nebuchadnezzar to conquer Jerusalem and take the people into captivity. In Babylon, the people of Israel finally abandoned the worship of statues and stars and called out to the true God, the God of Abraham, and He delivered them and allowed them to return to the land He had given them.



So the people of Israel were finally free of idol worship. Or were they? Since the Babylonian captivity, the Jewish people have been careful to avoid any worship of statues or nature. But the devil constantly looks for new ways to tempt the people of God to sin. And sometimes the devil finds the opportunity to tempt us to sin through religious pride which can also lead to a kind of idol worship.

In the wilderness, following the instructions given by the Lord, the tabernacle was built as a special place to meet with the Lord. The Lord had directed this and it was good and pleasing in His sight. Many years later, King David noticed that he lived in a magnificent palace, but that the house of the Lord was still only a tent. So David decided to build a temple for the Lord. However, the Lord stopped David, because David was a man of war. So, David made things ready for the construction of the temple, but David did not build it.



King Solomon, David's son, finally built the Lord's temple. In Solomon's time, Israel was extremely wealthy and Solomon built a magnificent temple. Unfortunately, Solomon had a weakness for women, and his many wives enticed Solomon to build temples for the false gods of the nations also. This became a snare to Israel and idol worship was not eliminated.



Solomon's temple remained until it was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. After that, the people went into exile in Babylon for seventy years. But after they returned, they built a new temple. However, at that time Israel was in poverty and the second temple was only a poor shadow of Solomon's magnificent temple.

Interestingly, it was King Herod, the same one who tried to have Jesus killed, who took an interest in restoring the temple to magnificence. King Herod was rich and he loved building things because it gave him a great reputation throughout the Roman Empire. Technically, King Herod's restoration of the temple was called a remodeling and not new construction. But, in fact, it was a new and amazing construction effort. This is the temple of the time of Jesus. The Sanhedrin, with the high priest, was in charge of the temple, and they were very proud of this. In fact, they valued the temple so highly, that the temple became like an idol to them.



In **Acts 6:13**, Stephen was accused like this, **"They produced false witnesses, who testified, 'This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law.'"** Stephen answered the charge regarding the law by showing that his preaching of Jesus as the Christ is in agreement with the Law of Moses. Now, Stephen will answer the charge regarding the holy place, which was the temple of which the Sanhedrin was so proud.

Let's read Acts 7:44-50.

IV. Scripture Reading Acts 7:44-50, (NIV, 1984)

44 "Our forefathers had the tabernacle of the Testimony with them in the desert. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. 45 Having received the tabernacle, our fathers under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, 46 who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. 47 But it was Solomon who built the house for him. 48 "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. 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 where will my resting place be? 50 Has not my hand made all these things?"

V. Teaching

Stephen acknowledged the history of the temple and did not dispute the Sanhedrin's conviction that King Herod's temple was a legitimate replacement of the temple Solomon built. But then, Stephen used a quote from Isaiah 66, which we read at the beginning of today's message to remind them that God does not really live in the temple, because God is the Creator of all and He does not live in houses built by men.

Do you see how Stephen refuted the accusations against him? The accusers claimed that Stephen had spoken against the temple and that this was blasphemy. But instead of arguing about what words had been spoken, Stephen answered with a far more powerful argument - God does not really live in the temple. Speaking against the temple cannot be blasphemy if God does not really live there.

Even more, by pointing out that the Creator God does not and cannot live in the temple, Stephen has exposed the sin of idol worship in the Sanhedrin, for the Sanhedrin placed such high value on the temple that they were treating it as an idol. The Sanhedrin sat in a magnificent room in the temple complex and wore beautiful robes. That by itself was not sin, but perhaps the wealth and honor that they received had become a trap for them. They became proud and fell into sin. Now, their spiritual pride and sin are exposed by Stephen's argument.



Whatever their errors, the members of the Sanhedrin knew the Scriptures very well, and they would certainly have seen the power of Stephen's argument immediately. The tables had been turned. They thought they were going to sit in judgment over Stephen with Moses as their authority. Instead, Stephen clearly demonstrated that Moses and the prophets were with him and that it was the Sanhedrin that was in danger of judgment under the Law of Moses.

Do you remember what Jesus said in **John 5:45-46**? **"But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me."** For the Sanhedrin, this word came true even as Stephen spoke. As a result, the Sanhedrin was enraged against Stephen, and Stephen abandoned the indirect approach. In the books of Moses, the people of Israel were often called stiff-necked and uncircumcised of heart. Now Stephen draws on these very words. **Acts 7:51, "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!"**

After this, the Sanhedrin abandoned all pretense of fair judgment and they refused to hear any more. Stephen was dragged out and stoned. But even as he was dying, Stephen showed that all of his words and actions were motivated by love and by the desire to see his accusers and the Sanhedrin saved. Once again, let's remember Stephen's last words from **Acts 7:60, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."**



VI. Conclusion

Stephen died as a martyr for Jesus and he died with the same loving attitude of Jesus. Stephen's faith and love are an inspiration to us. We would do well to imitate Stephen in these things. I also notice that even though Stephen was not one of the apostles or elders, he was able to give an amazingly powerful message to the Sanhedrin with no time to prepare. This is an inspiration and a challenge to us. We do not know when or where we might be called on to witness of the Lord, so we would do well to be prepared at all times. An important step for this is to read the whole Bible and prayerfully try to understand how it tells the story of Jesus in both the Old Testament and the New.

But perhaps the most important thing for us to receive from Stephen's message is that we all need to guard our hearts and lives against every form of idol worship. We should not imagine that we are wiser or

better than the Sanhedrin, instead we should realize that only by the grace of God are we able to avoid falling into the devil's traps. I pray that we will all draw near to Jesus in prayer, in study of the Word, and in our lifestyles. But most of all, I pray that the grace of our Lord Jesus would be poured out on us and on this city and nation.

Let's close with **Deuteronomy 10:14-16**, an exhortation given to Israel, but profitable for us also. **"To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the LORD set his affection on your forefathers and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations, as it is today. Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer."**

VII. Prayer