

having brought the history up to date, Stephen reminded the Sanhedrin of what they had done to Jesus. Jesus rebuked the Jewish leaders that they were just like their fathers who persecuted the prophets. Their fathers killed the prophets. They built the tombs for the prophets, stating that if it had been them they would not have killed the prophets, but they did persecute and kill the prophets that God had sent to them: John the Baptist, Jesus, the apostles and Stephen (Matthew 23:29-32). Moses was rejected by the people. Samuel was rejected as judge when the people asked for a king. David was rejected as king and prophet under the rebellion of Absalom. Jeremiah was persecuted for warning that Jerusalem would fall. Stephen's words reveal that men naturally oppose the purposes of God. God's ways are not our ways, but are mysterious and difficult to comprehend (Romans 11:33-36). However, we think that God should do things our way. Whenever God does things that are not the way we expect, and especially if our circumstances cause us discomfort, our immediate and natural response is that something is wrong with God. We fail to see how God could possibly bring good out of a situation that causes us discomfort. So easily we forget the example of Joseph through whom God brought salvation for his family. For as long as we persist in viewing life from our limited perspective, we will continue to question the goodness of God. However, when we pause and consider the promises of God looking beyond our circumstances, then we will begin following the examples of Abraham, Joseph, Moses and Jesus.

Saturday, November 12, 2011

Daily theme: Men oppose testimony with persecution.

Questions

Read Acts 7:54-60

1. How would the Jews have justified their treatment of Stephen?
2. How did God confirm the truthfulness of Stephen?

Consider

Since the Jewish leaders were deceived, they viewed Stephen as a heretic. Paul wrote the Corinthians that Satan blinded the eyes of those who do not believe so that they cannot see the truth (2 Corinthians 4:4). Before the Jews, Paul declared that he persecuted the followers of Jesus with great zeal for God (Acts 22:3-5). Before Agrippa Paul described his actions against Jesus followers as being furiously enraged (Acts 26:9-11). When a Christian faces blind rage, there is nothing to do but follow the example of Stephen and turn all attention to Jesus. As Stephen had with his words, in death Stephen would testify to the truth of Jesus through how he died. There wasn't anything Stephen could say or do to change the minds of the Jews. All he could do was look up to gain strength from Jesus. Jesus honored his focus with opening his eyes to see heaven opened. God encouraged Stephen with a glimpse into heaven, where he saw Jesus standing, not sitting, at the right hand of God the Father. As they killed Stephen by stoning him, Stephen called out to Jesus asking to forgive their ignorance. His action revealed the grace that the Holy Spirit gives in such moments. Like Jesus had interceded for his executioners, so also Stephen prayed that God would forgive those who were taking his life. Stephen's example causes us to reflect on how we might respond in a similar situation. What would it take to get ready?

Truth led to the first martyr.

Acts 7:1-60

Sermon Series: You will be my witnesses.

Devotional Notes November 7-12, 2011

Monday, November 7, 2011

Daily theme: The people of God have their roots in Abraham.

Questions

Read Acts 7:1-8; Romans 4:9-17

1. Why would Stephen begin his defense with mention of Abraham?
2. How is Abraham relevant to non-Jewish Christians?

Consider

Stephen was accused of speaking blasphemy against Moses and God (Acts 6:11), that he spoke against the temple and the law (Acts 6:13). However Stephen began his defense speaking of Abraham. The thrust of the attack against Stephen was he had abandoned the historic Jewish traditions in his proclamation of Jesus. By beginning his defense with mention of Abraham, Stephen demonstrated that he was firmly within the historic traditions of the Jewish people. By quoting the blessings and promises given to Abraham, Stephen demonstrated his agreement with the accepted history of Israel. His detractors could not argue with him at this point, because they honored and loved their national and spiritual history. Four different times, Paul made the case for the relevance of Abraham to the Gentile believer (Romans 4, 9, 11, Galatians 3). The thrust of Paul's argument is that salvation can never come through the law (following rules), because Abraham was saved from his sin by his faith in the promises of God 430 years before God gave the law to Moses. If salvation came only through following rules, then Abraham could not have been saved and delivered from his sin. However since God declared Abraham righteous in his sight, then salvation comes through faith in God's promises and not through following rules. Since Abraham was forgiven from his sin because he believed the promise of God, then he also is the father of us who are Gentile believers. Paul's argument takes on added importance, because all of us struggle not to slip into rule-based Christianity. Reflect on ways that you've seen how you may have slipped into a rule-based Christianity.

Tuesday, November 8, 2011

Daily theme: Limited salvation came through Joseph; ultimate salvation comes through Jesus.

Questions

Read Acts 7:9-16

1. How did God provide salvation through Joseph?
2. In what ways are Joseph and Jesus similar?

Consider

Through Stephen's mention of Joseph, our salvation in Jesus was foreshadowed. After Jacob died, Joseph's brothers became fearful of Joseph, that he might exact revenge for their mistreatment of him. Joseph reassured them explaining that

although they did mistreat him and desired to take his life, God used their actions to provide salvation for them (Genesis 50:20). Through Joseph we see another example of God's grace, as he uses human evil to accomplish his purposes. Joseph represents an excellent example for us as we interpret the circumstances of our life. We need to learn to see what God is accomplishing rather than focus on the motives of men. Men's motives are always skewed, but God's motives are always toward ultimate good and salvation. As we examine Joseph's life, there are some similarities with Jesus. Both of their lives were prophetically predicted. Joseph's dreams revealed what would take place in his life. Many prophecies declared what would take place in Jesus' life as well. As Joseph's brothers conspired against him and actually thought they had killed him, Jesus' countrymen conspired against him and succeeded in killing him. Figuratively Joseph rose from the dead when he was discovered alive, ruling Egypt from the right hand of Pharaoh. Jesus did rise from the dead and all authority has been given to him as he waits for the establishment of his kingdom at the right hand of the Father in Heaven. Joseph provided salvation for his family, all those who traveled from Canaan to Egypt. Jesus provided salvation to all those who call upon his name. As you read Old Testament history do not think that it is only history of Israel, but look for glimpses of Jesus and the gospel in the lives of those described.

Wednesday, November 9, 2011

Daily theme: Deliverance came first through Moses, then through Jesus.

Questions

Read Acts 7:17-43

1. Why did Stephen take so much time speaking about Moses?
2. In what ways did Moses foreshadow Jesus?

Consider

In a sense Stephen's defense up to this point was preliminary. The Jews had not accused him of speaking against either Abraham or Joseph, but his reference to Abraham and Joseph demonstrated that he held to the orthodox history of Israel, the establishment and salvation of his nation. Joseph also served as a historical introduction to Moses the deliverer. Since Moses and the law was one of the major accusations against him, it follows that Stephen would spend more time addressing Moses. In his discourse Stephen gave Moses as much honor as his Jewish accusers and judges did. Moses also foreshadowed Jesus. Stephen declared that Moses was rejected as a deliverer; Jesus was the stone that the builder rejected, but became the capstone. God heard the cries of the people in Egypt and sent Moses to deliver them from their slavery. Since God loved the world gave his Son, Jesus to save the world to give himself as ransom for many, so that they would be free (John 3:16; Mark 10:45; Galatians 5:1). Moses did signs and wonders in Egypt to demonstrate that he was sent from God to provide deliverance. Jesus did signs and wonders that confirmed his message that he was from the Father. Moses was considered a great prophet who gave to the people the law, but God revealed to him that God would raise up another prophet, who would bring grace and truth to men (Deuteronomy 18:15; John 1:17). The people in the wilderness rejected the true God and Moses as their leader when they made the golden calf and worshiped it. The Jews rejected Jesus as their Messiah so that they could still follow their father Satan (John 8:42-44). Like Joseph, the account of Moses gives us additional insight into Jesus.

Thursday, November 10, 2011

Daily theme: The tabernacle/temple was a pattern of what existed in heaven.

Questions

Read Acts 7:44-50

1. If God does not dwell in buildings made by men, why did God direct Moses to construct the tabernacle?
2. What was the point of always taking the tabernacle with them in the wilderness and in the promised land?

Consider

Stephen's quote of Isaiah 66:1-2 is curious in light of his discourse on the tabernacle and temple. After declaring that Moses built the tabernacle according to the pattern God had given him on the mountain and that Solomon built the temple for God, Stephen declared that God does not dwell in buildings constructed by humans. Stephen helps us understand the true purpose of the tabernacle. The tabernacle and later the temple were foreshadows of the ministry of Jesus. Although the presence of God was associated with the tabernacle and the temple, neither were his permanent dwelling. The tabernacle provided a picture of what Jesus would do in heaven when he died on the cross. As a priest enters into the tabernacle many times to offer blood sacrifices atonement, Jesus would enter into the temple of heaven once to make sacrifice to do away with sin forever (Hebrews 9:11-14). The tabernacle and later the temple served as a repeated object lesson to reveal to us what Jesus would do in heaven. When God revealed the tabernacle and its furnishings to Moses, the people were still in the desert. They would wander around for 40 years. Later they would enter into the promised land and conquer it. The tabernacle served as visual reference point to indicate the presence of God with them. They were not alone, wherever they went the presence of God would dwell with them. In the New Testament this same word is used in John 1:14 when we read that the Word (Jesus) became flesh and dwelt (tabernacle) among us. In Jesus we see a fulfillment of the presence of God with men. The same concept is presented in Revelation 21, where we read that the tabernacle of God is among men and he will dwell (tabernacle) with them (Revelation 21:3). The picture presented during the wandering in the wilderness and the conquest of the land is that God's presence went with them wherever they went. In the person of the Holy Spirit the presence of God dwells with us wherever we may go.

Friday, November 11, 2011

Daily theme: Those who resist the Holy Spirit respond violently.

Questions

Read Acts 7:51-53

1. What did Stephen mean by their always resisting the Holy Spirit?
2. Why do men oppose those who speak for God?

Consider

The men to whom Stephen spoke had a track record of resisting the Holy Spirit. They declared that the Holy Spirit was Satan when they concluded that Jesus healed by the power of Beelzebub (Matthew 12:22-32). They opposed the Holy Spirit when they tried to intimidate the apostles into being quiet about Jesus (Acts 5:28). They got irate when the apostles declared that they would not comply. After