

New Year's Day Service

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] On Sunday morning, we were reflecting on Psalm 66 and the need for us as believers to echo the invitation extended by the psalmist to all with ears to hear and eyes to see, come and see what God has done. We find these words in that psalm. And as the psalmist extended that invitation, so we too are to extend that invitation to one another and indeed to others.

Come and see what God has done. And my hope for each of us and for Bonacord as a congregation is that in 2020, this year will be one in which God's people delight not only in seeing and in rejoicing what God has done in history, but also what God is doing and what God will do in the here and now, in and through His people in this city and beyond. A desire to see God at work is a worthy and a spiritual desire with which to begin the new year. But there is, I think, a greater sight to behold, to see God, to see the glory of God, to see Jesus. Now, in fairness, we ought not to make an unwarranted or too great a distinction between seeing what God has done and seeing God. We can, in a real sense, see God in and through His works. We're intended to see God and to discover who God is and what God is like through His works. And so, the distinction is one we need to be a little bit careful with.

But I think we can aspire to see God, to witness something of the glory of God, to see Jesus. And I want to reflect on this aspiration in the light of what we have read about Stephen as he died a martyr's death in Jerusalem some 2,000 years ago. We read there in chapter 7 in the account of Stephen's death, we read that Stephen saw the glory of God. But Stephen saw the glory of God.

What I want us to do this morning is to respond to Stephen's invitation. Let's call it his New Year invitation. Now, what am I talking about when I speak about Stephen's invitation? Well, what does Stephen say as the skies unroll and reveal the glory of God? What is his first word? You can find it yourselves.

There in verse 55 and 56. In verse 55, we have described what happened. And then in 56, we have Stephen's first word, having witnessed what he was enabled to see. And what is his first word? Well, it's there at the very beginning of verse 56. Look, look. It's a word of invitation. He is inviting others to look and to behold that which he is seeing. Look, he said, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. Have you ever thought about what Stephen had in mind as he issued this invitation? Imagine if you can't Stephen in the circumstances in which he finds himself surrounded by a very hostile audience or gathering. What did he have in mind when he cried out, look. Was he directing the invitation to those who were there about to stone him? Was he directing the invitation to the high priest and to the Sanhedrin?

[3 : 47] Did anybody look? Did anybody on that occasion respond to the invitation? Look, he said. I think not. We're told rather in the following verse that they covered their ears. They weren't able to cover their eyes because they had business to attend to, to stone Stephen. But it's very clear that they had no time to give any thought to what Stephen was saying other than to condemn him for his words. I wonder what about Saul? What about this young man we're told of with a pile of coats at his feet? Did he look? When Stephen cried out, look, did he look? Well, even if they had looked up to heaven, they would have seen nothing. Was this then a wasted invitation? I trust not. I want us this morning to appropriate Stephen's invitation for ourselves.

And I've no doubt that Stephen would approve. He would gladly repeat the invitation, look and see with me the glory of God. But as I suggest that we can take that invitation for ourselves this morning, am I being just a little bit naive? If we were to exit the building and look up to heaven, I can't imagine there would be any surprises for us. It would look just the same as it always looks. The manner in which we need to respond to Stephen's invitation to look is to listen to his testimony. We can see what he saw through his eyes as we examine the account of his heavenly vision that we have read, that we have here before us. A vision that was perhaps recorded by that young man with a pile of coats at his feet.

Somebody must have recorded what was said. Somebody must have been taking note. Perhaps it was the one who stood there approving of their killing of him. We don't know, but it may be that he was the one who kept the record of this vision that Stephen enjoyed. Now there are three questions that I want us to explore and answer as we take this invitation and respond to it. I want us to first of all ask, how did he see? Then we'll move on and ask and try and answer, what did he see? And then finally, what did he say to the one he saw? That last one's a bit of a tongue twister. What did he say to the one he saw? How did he see? What did he see? And what did he say to the one he saw? So let's start with that first question. How did he see? And what I mean by this question is, how was he able to see what he saw?

Now I've already suggested that if others had looked up to heaven, they would have seen nothing. So how was Stephen able to see what others failed to see? Let me suggest from the text a two-fold answer. First of all, he was filled with God, and then also he was focused on God. And these two, of course, very much go together. He was filled with God, and he was focused on God. First of all, he was filled with God. And we're told this explicitly in verse 55, but Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God. Why was Stephen able to see what he saw? Well, because he was full of the Holy Spirit. The others around him were not filled with the Spirit. They could not see what he saw. They did not have that spiritual vision that he had. He was able to see because he was filled with God.

As we read the passage, I think it seems fair to understand this as a particular experience of God's presence granted to Stephen at the moment of his martyr's death. In that sense, it was an extraordinary sense and experience of God's presence through the indwelling of God's Spirit.

[8 : 08] That said, we can't view this, what is said of Stephen here, we can't view this in isolation from what we have already been told of Stephen. In the previous chapter, let's just notice a couple of things that are said as Stephen has described. In chapter 6 and in verse 5, we read, they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. Then a couple of verses on, in verse 8, we read of Stephen that he was a man full of God's grace and power. So Stephen was, in a sense, all the time a man full of the Holy Spirit. That is how he is described. In his day-to-day service of God and God's people, as he waited on tables and fed the widows, he was a man full of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the meaning of this expression, to be full of the Holy Spirit, is in part explained to us by the other language used to describe Stephen. To be full of the Holy Spirit is to be full of faith and grace and power. It is the Holy Spirit who fills us with faith and grace and power.

Stephen was able to see the glory of God because he was filled with God. And nothing has changed. You will see God in the measure that you are full of God. We will see God in this year that has begun, in the measure and with the clarity that is afforded by one who is filled with God.

But we have also said that another part of the answer to the question, how was he able to see what he saw, is that he was focused on God. We are told in the passage that Stephen looked up to heaven, there in verse 55, but Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God. He looked up to heaven. Now it may be, and I think it's reasonable to imagine that Stephen did literally or spatially look up. His head rose, his eyes looked up to heaven, to the skies.

But the key truth being communicated in this language is that he looked to God. His focus and attention was on God. Now it is the case that God granted to Stephen this extraordinary experience, this extraordinary vision, manifestation of his glory. But Stephen still had to do the looking.

God granted the vision. God enabled him to see, but Stephen had to look. He was a man filled with God, and he was a man focused on God. Now it may seem such an obvious truth, and yet it is worth stressing, you won't see God if you don't look for and to God. In this year that has begun, we would all do well to spend a little more time looking upwards to heaven, to look up and indeed to look around and see the glory of God. See all that God has done and is doing and to see God.

[11 : 28] How or why did Stephen see the glory of God? Well, because he was filled with God and because he was focused on God. But let's move on to the second question. The second question is, what did he see?

Well, we're told, he saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. That is Luke's account of what he saw. He saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

What does it mean to say that Stephen saw the glory of God? That expression is itself rich with possibilities of explanation and exploration. There is so much that could be said in answering that question. What do we understand by the glory of God? But I think we can answer the question in part by listening to the opening words of Stephen's defense before the Sanhedrin. Just at the beginning of the chapter, there in chapter 7, when Stephen begins his defense, we read from the end of his defense.

But if we turn to the beginning of the chapter, we read the beginning of his defense. In verse 2, we read to this, he replied, brothers and fathers, listen to me, the God of glory appeared to our father Abraham. And although this is somewhat reducing all that could be said, I think there is truth in this statement. To see the glory of God is to see the God of glory. Stephen is speaking about the God of glory. And when he lifted up his eyes to heaven, he saw the glory of God. He saw the God of glory. God is a spirit. God is invisible. And yet God reveals himself in the display of his glory.

But we're also told that Stephen saw Jesus. 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. And again, in a very real sense, in seeing Jesus, he sees the glory of God. What does John tell us in the opening chapter of his gospel?

[13 : 41] The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory. The glory of the one and only son who came from the father, full of grace and truth. In seeing Jesus, he saw the glory of God.

Stephen saw the glory of God and he saw Jesus, but we can explore what he saw further as we consider what he saw. And for this, we'll focus on Stephen's own testimony. In verse 56, Luke, he said, and what Stephen says is almost identical to what Luke says in describing the event, but he does use slightly different language, particularly in speaking about Jesus. Verse 56, Luke, he said, Luke, Stephen said, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. This vision of Jesus reveals to Stephen and to each of us two big truths concerning Jesus and his present activity in our favor. In the language that Stephen employs, in what Stephen sees, he sees Jesus as king of the universe and his people. Let's think about these two truths concerning Jesus that we find in this vision that Stephen witnessed.

First of all, Jesus as king of the universe. Stephen speaks of Jesus as the Son of Man. When Luke is describing the event, he simply calls him Jesus. But when Stephen speaks, he identifies Jesus as the Son of Man. Now, why is this significant? Why is it significant that Stephen should, when he sees Jesus, should identify him as the Son of Man?

Now, again, there's much we could say about the Son of Man, but let me just limit myself to this. To speak of Jesus as the Son of Man directs our attention to Daniel's vision that we read, a vision that pointed to the coming of Messiah.

And listen again to how Daniel describes what he saw in his vision. In my vision at night, I looked, and there before me was one like a Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven.

[16 : 11] He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory, and sovereign power. All nations and peoples, every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away.

And his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. The Son of Man is a title that points to Jesus as king, ruling over an everlasting dominion that will never be destroyed.

Stephen, in identifying Jesus as the Son of Man, even at the point of his death, makes clear that the Jesus that he is seeing is the one who rules over all.

Let's just think about the contrast between the earthly scene and the heavenly scene that are placed side by side in our account. There on earth, Stephen was being killed by earthly powers, by earthly kings, if you wish.

But his Jesus rules from heaven. His body was being destroyed by human hands. But he belongs to a kingdom that will never be destroyed.

[17 : 24] So even as the stones came down upon him, even as earthly powers decided to destroy him, to kill him, he was able to see a greater king who rules over all, even at the very point of his own death.

Nobody else could see that, but Stephen could see that. And how we need to see Jesus as the one who rules over all. We can see very clearly those who oppose God and his word and his purposes.

And they seem so powerful. They seem to have the final word. And yet with Stephen, we need to see beyond them and to see the one who is ruling and governing.

The one to whom has been given every power and all dominion and authority. May we, in this year, in 2020, evermore see Jesus as the one who rules over all.

The one whose rule is just and perfect and gracious. He sees Jesus. And he sees Jesus as king. But he also sees Jesus as the advocate of and for his people.

[18 : 43] Why is Jesus standing at the right hand of God? That's how he is described by Stephen. I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

Are we to draw anything from his posture? Some would say yes and some would say no. Some say it's a matter indifferent, whether he's standing or sitting. But let me suggest that his posture is significant.

We know, of course, that on other occasions, Jesus is described as seated at the right hand of God. And maybe that's the kind of expression we more ordinarily use.

Remember Paul, when he was writing to the church in Colossae and encouraging them, and indeed an encouragement that's appropriate for us this morning, set your heart on things above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

So sometimes Jesus is described as seated, but on this occasion, he is explicitly described as standing at the right hand of God.

[19 : 43] And so again, I ask the question, is Jesus' posture significant? And I think it is. Let me explain by inviting you to compare and contrast the two scenes.

We've already done that as we've thought about earthly kings or authorities killing Stephen and a greater king overruling that whole scene.

Well, again, let's compare the two scenes that we have as we think about Jesus as the advocate of his people. On earth, there in Jerusalem, the high priest stands in judgment over Stephen.

At the very beginning of the chapter, we're told it's the high priest who asked Stephen to respond to the charges. There in verse 1 of chapter 7, And then the high priest asked Stephen, Are these charges true?

And so it's the high priest who is in charge of this court case of the Sanhedrin. He's presiding over the whole business.

[20 : 44] There he is. In the earthly scene, there's a high priest, and he's doing his job as he sees it. But as Stephen presents his defense, a defense that if the high priest had taken seriously and carefully, he would have determined was an altogether worthy defense, one that would have cast aside all the false accusations.

The high priest, as he listens to Stephen, as the one who is described in the passage, though we didn't read that part, as the one whose face was like the face of an angel, as he listens to Stephen, the high priest, like the others, was filled with murderous fury and orders, or at least acquiesces in the slaughter of Stephen.

Again, there's some debate as to how the death of Stephen comes about. We know that the Jews didn't have the authority to carry out the death penalty. That becomes very clear in the death of Jesus.

And so how is it that here Stephen is stoned? And some suggest, well, what happened is that mob rule kind of overtook the events. And that may be true. But it's also true that it is the high priest who is presiding.

And if he didn't actually order the death of Stephen, he certainly acquiesced in the death of Stephen, and he certainly would have had the power to have stopped it had he so wished.

[22 : 08] And so there we have it, the earthly scene, a high priest presiding over this courtroom and coming to a judgment or coming to a determination that leads to the death of Stephen. But let's compare that with the scene in heaven that Stephen sees.

You see, in heaven, another high priest stands at the right hand of God in judgment. He also hears the words of Stephen and comes to an altogether different judgment.

Jesus stands in Stephen's defense. On earth, nobody stood up for Stephen. On earth, nobody said, No, this man is innocent. On earth, nobody said, No, don't stone this innocent man.

On earth, everybody was silent. The high priest who should have been the one securing justice acquiesced in his death. But in heaven, there is another high priest, and he stands in defense of Stephen.

He advocates for Stephen. In the heavenly courtroom, there is another high priest, and Stephen knows whose judgment really matters.

[23 : 22] You know, when the high priest who he was speaking before comes to his judgment, Stephen knows that in heaven there is another high priest, and his judgment is a different one, and it's only his judgment that really matters, and he embraces death in that confidence.

May we, in this year, in 2020, evermore see Jesus as our advocate, as our great high priest, as the one in whom we stand, and through whom we approach the throne of God.

Because that is who he is. He is our advocate. He is our great high priest. We're reminded of the words that we find in the letter to the Hebrews, in Hebrews chapter 7, and from verse 24.

But because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore, he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

Such a high priest truly meets our need, one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.

[24 : 40] And so when Stephen sees heaven open, and he sees the Son of Man at the right hand of God, he sees Jesus as King over all, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, but he also sees his own high priest, his own advocate before the Father.

But finally, we have a third question we want to pose and answer more briefly. What did he say to the one he saw? He saw the Son of Man. He saw Jesus.

What did he say to the one he saw? Well, we have it there for us in the passage. In verse 59, while they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, Lord Jesus.

Very explicitly we're told that he's addressing these words to Jesus. Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And then in verse 60, Lord, do not hold this sin against them.

There are two things that he says to Jesus. Receive my spirit, and do not hold this sin against them. Now, it's often highlighted, and rightly so, how these words of Stephen echo the words of Jesus as he died on the cross.

[25 : 50] In Luke 23, in Luke's account, we have these two words from the cross of Jesus. Luke 23 and verse 34, Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.

Not the exact same words, but exactly the same sentiment. But then in Luke 23, verse 46, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. They're almost the words, are word for word.

What Stephen says to Jesus, the one he saw, reveals truth about both Jesus and Stephen. Let's just think about those two things.

The word that he directs to Jesus reveals truth about Jesus, and also about Stephen. First of all, what does it tell us about Jesus? Well, perhaps quite a lot, but one thing I want to draw out.

As Jesus died, he asked God the Father to forgive those who were doing what they were doing. He asked God the Father to receive him. As Stephen died, he asked Jesus, God the Son, to forgive those who were stoning him, and to receive his spirit.

[27 : 03] And the implication is clear. Jesus enjoys the same prerogatives as God the Father, for he is God. But the words, the petitions of Stephen, also tell us a great deal about Stephen, about any man or woman filled with the Spirit of God.

First of all, it demonstrates to us, it reveals to us, that Stephen trusted in and loved Jesus. He knew that the one he loved would indeed receive his spirit.

When he prays, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit, he doesn't do so with any sense of uncertainty, with any sense of doubt as to whether that is what would happen. He knows that Jesus will receive his spirit, for his trust in Jesus is clear.

His faith is deep. And so he knows, and so he knows, that the one he trusts in, will receive him. And so he prays, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

But of course, the other thing, that the words of Stephen, tell us about Stephen, is it tells us about Stephen's care, and love for his enemies. Lord, do not hold this sin against them.

[28 : 15] Even as the stones crushed his bones, and the rocks split his skull, Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, lovingly intercedes for his executioners.

And I think this is a scene as remarkable as the open heaven. You know, we read this passage, and we think, oh, isn't that remarkable? Heaven opened. And of course, it is remarkable, but Stephen uttering these words is on a par.

That he, in those circumstances, would pray in this way, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. As we, in 2020, see Jesus, and as we speak to Jesus, may our words be marked by a deepening trust in him, and a growing love for our enemies.

As we intercede for them, that they might come to know Jesus, and that their sins, as ours, might be forgiven.

Stephen saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. So let's commit to praying for one another, that in 2020, we too might see the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

[29 : 36] And may we all, day by day, respond to Stephen's invitation to look and see. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word.

We thank you for that spiritual insight where we can see the big picture. We thank you that that ultimate reality that Stephen was able to witness remains true for us, that Jesus stands at your right hand as King over the universe, as our great High Priest interceding for us.

And as we acknowledge that, and as we lay hold of that, then our concern as to the actions and the judgments of earthly rulers and judges, though not a matter indifferent to us, takes its proper place.

Help us as we live on earth to ever see what is going on in heaven, and indeed in earth from heaven.

Heavenly Father, we do pray that in this year we would be, men and women, ever more filled with God, ever more focused on you, that we might see you more clearly, that we might see Jesus more clearly, that we might become more like him, as Stephen became like his Savior, that our trust in Jesus would be a deepening one, that our love for our enemies would be an ever more genuine one.

[31 : 07] And we pray all of these things in Jesus' name. Amen.