2006-12-16 Acts 6:9-15 "Stephen" Jerry Arnold

"…oh Heavenly Father, we ask for miracles to take place and for lives to be changed. We ask this in Jesus Name, Amen."

Jim and Susan were a delightful couple. My wife and I enjoyed sweet fellowship with them. They were very enthusiastic about God; found a blessing related to God in almost every experience in life. And so they were fun to be with. They were easy to laugh, so we had lots of laughter and we were encouraging one another in the Lord. We lived in a different state than where we live now, and what happen is a phone call one day, changed it all. Jim got a phone call and he was offered a position, a very nice position in another state. And so they prayed about it, felt it was God's leading. They sold everything they had in that state, and they moved to another state. And things went well for about 6 months.

Something happened in the company and they had to downsize, and that nice job was gone. And they moved there because of the salary he was given, they bought a larger home than they ever lived in, and they had some of the debts associated with it. And now all of a sudden, not only did he not have that good paying job, he was scraping and scrapping, they were doing everything they could to find work anywhere and try to peace together enough money to provide for the family.

We saw them 10 months after he lost his job. And this vibrant, buoyant, enthusiastic and exciting couple was so beat down; it was hard to recognize that they were the same individuals. Now they looked the same physically but they didn't have that bright smile, that perkiness, they just were carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders. And they were very, very discouraged. "Where is God" was the question on their hearts. "Where is God? Why is this happening to us?" They were on the verge of bankruptcy, loosing everything. Life was miserable for them. Ten months of this and they were grind down to nothing. Where is God?

It was very telling, the depth of their pain, when Susan made this statement, and I will never forget it. She said, "You know, we are the children of God. I would never treat my children this way." And she added, "I wouldn't treat a dog this way." Where is God? That's a good question. I'd like to study that with you today. Please turn in your Bibles to Acts chapter 6. Where is God?

We are continuing our series in the Book of Acts. Last week we read the first part of chapter 6, how they appointed 7 men to help distribute the needs for people, and we are beginning to talk specifically about one of those individuals today, his name is Stephen. The story is found in Acts 6 verses 8-15. "And Stephen, full of faith and power did great wonders and signs among the people. Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. Then they secretly induced men to say, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.' And they stirred up the people, the elders,

and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us." And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel."

Stephen, it's a Greek name, it comes from the word, "Stephanos" which is a laurel wreath of victory, a crown of victory. When somebody won the Olympics back in Greece, they were given the "Stephanos," the laurel wreath of victory. So Stephen is a crown, it's a crown of victory. It says in verse 8 that he was full of faith and power. Some of your Bibles will say, "…full of grace and power." He is an amazing individual and it says that he did wonders and signs among the people.

One of the things you may want to know is that this is the first time in the Book of Acts that it says, signs and wonders were done by someone other than the 12 apostles. So that ministry has now bubbled over into other individuals as well. It is church tradition taught to us from years past. People who were close to it started the story and it's come down to us down through the years that Stephen was one of the 70 that followed Jesus. Do you remember the story; Luke records it in Luke chapter 10. Jesus send out the 70, sent them out by twos and He said, "I am sending you like lambs out among the wolfs. Go to houses and see if there is a son of peace there, you'll know if there is one when you offer peace. If they receive you, then stay there and share. If they don't receive you, then leave and shake the dust off from your clothing and go on your way."

Stephen may have been one of those 70. It's an interesting story because they come back all excited and they said, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name." And Jesus said, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven, but hay fellows, don't let that be your joy. Let your joy be that your name is written in the books of heaven." You know - just a little sidebar comment brothers and sisters. Some of us may feel like, "Well, we've never done anything great for God and maybe nothing great at all ever." And you know our lives may seem like they are insignificant. And we don't have a Stephanos for all these great things we are doing. I got good news for you. Have Jesus as your Savior, have your names written in the books of heaven! That's the number 1 thing; everything is down hill from there. And all of us today can be thrilled by knowing, no matter what happens, "Hey my name is written in heaven."

So Stephen is a servant of God. It says in chapter 6 verse 5: "…and the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit…" He is a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. He is a relatively young Christian. In fact, all of them are young Christians. Jesus did not begin His public ministry until 7 years prior to this story. Jesus went to heaven about 3 and half years before this. At some time, Stephen started following Christ, maybe 5 or 6 years prior to this story taking place. So he is a young Christian, but he is filled with faith and power. He loves the Lord with all of his heart, and he serves Him.

In verse 9 it identifies some interesting characters. It says, "Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedman (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those form Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen." Before we identify those different areas and what the "Freedman" was and all that, notice they come to him disputing. The situation is such that Stephen is working signs and wonders in the name of the Lord, and these folks come to him. He doesn't go to them, he is not seeking an argument, he is not seeking a confrontation, he is just sharing the gospel with whoever will hear it. Great signs and wonders are being done and these men come to him to have a dispute. They are called folks from the Synagogue of the Freedman.

In about 60 BC a lot of the Hebrew slaves were set free from their slavery. And they were called, "Freedman." Their descendants were called, "Freedman." They lived in the varying cities around the Mediterranean area, and they were freed from their slavery. Many of them had to pay a high price for it, but they were freed. And so their descendants are freedman as well. And they had a synagogue in Jerusalem where these freedmen worshiped. So when they would travel in from out of town, there they were. Or if they lived there permanently, that's where they would go gather. They had quite a bond. They were the Hellenist Jews that we had read about last week. They had their Greek influence; they weren't raised there in the Hebrew environment. They had this powerful synagogue and they come and talk to Stephen.

You know about Cyrene, Simon was from Cyrene. Cyrene is a city in North Africa. Simon came and ultimately carried the cross of Jesus. Alexandria also was in Egypt, and then you have Cilicia. And Cilicia becomes very interesting to us as we read ahead in the story. Now let me ask you something? Who writes the Book of Acts? Luke does! How does he know the story? It's not going to be told to him by Stephen. Stephen will be dead by the end of this story. How does he know about it?

We have a clue. Look at Acts chapter 21 please. Keep your hand here though because we are coming right back. Acts chapter 21 verse 39, one simple text, it says: "…Paul said, "I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city; I implore you, permit me to speak to the people."" Saul as he was called in chapter 7 of Acts was born in Cilicia in the city of Tarsus. He was from the tribe of Benjamin. He was named after the first king of Israel. He is here. He is one of these men who come and dispute with Stephen. They know each other. They all know each other. This is where Stephen worships. And Stephen has caught the contagion of Christianity, he can't stop sharing it, and his friends are angered at him, they come and they dispute with him. And what is fascinating is that Saul is known as the brightest and the best. He was the top student of Gamaliel himself, and he came. He could get nowhere with Stephen because Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit. Isn't it amazing what God can do with an individual?

They could get nowhere with him. They were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. So you have an introduction here of Saul into the story of Acts. Well, verse 10 says this: "And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke." So here is what they do, verse 11, "Then they secretly induced men to say 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.'" They instigated and

instructed men to lie. Lie about him. Verse 12 says, "…and they stirred up the people." Now this is new because prior to this every time we read in the Book of Acts when persecution started, the leadership was afraid to follow through with it because the church was in favor of the people. Things have turned now. They were able to turn the people against them. And it goes on in verse 12 to say, "…and they came upon him," (Stephen), "…seized him and brought him to the council."

Now they've taken him to court. They brought him in front of the Sanhedrin. So here we have 3 steps. They induced people to lie, they stirred up the people into a riotous atmosphere, and they bring them to court. Why do they do this? Because they can't win the argument against him! Now this is an amazing thing to me. Listen carefully please. These are all religious people. They are all trying to serve God. They all believe they are serving God. They are all concerned about how to serve God. This is a religious issue with religious people. But did you notice this? They are using a demonic means to a supposedly Godly end. They are saying, "The end justifies the means." I am telling you brothers and sisters that is wrong, it is always wrong, it is never right.

God does not bless a demonic means to a supposed Godly end. He never blesses that. And it is ripping homes apart right now. There are people in marriage who are using ungodly means to a supposed Godly end, which would be oneness. It's not going to happen! You have to walk with God all along the way. You need to be praying, you need to be humble before Him, and when situations appear in the home, the workplace, the church, wherever, God only blesses a Godly means to deal with it. Criticism is not a Godly method.

You know, I have two conference presidents in my family, all by marriage. So if you like them, fine. I am related to them. If you don't like them, I am really not related to them. My daughter married a young man, his father is a conference president, and my wife's sister is married to a conference president. So they are not blood relatives of mine, but if you like them, yeah, I am related to them. And I am going to talk to these guys. I have a plan. You see in church, it's amazing how an ungodly means sometimes is used for a supposed Godly end. People get in roil, start becoming critical. And the next thing you know, the pastor and his family are uprooting, packing their bags and headed down the road.

Here is my solution to the conference presidents. If somebody calls complaining about the pastor, the conference president should say this: "I will come on one condition. If I come and discover that you are the problem, then you have to pack up your family and you have to move." I think it's only fair. Ungodly means to a supposed Godly end! Brothers and sisters, God is more concerned about the process than He is where you end up because the process is God's product. Let me give you a solid illustration of that.

We are building a building. You know what? Jesus may come before that building is ever erected. I hope He does. I hope He does. So what's the important thing? That we get a building built or that every step along the way we are walking with Jesus Christ. In your homes brothers and sisters, in tensions of relationships, you cannot have a Godly result

by acting like a devil trying to get it. Do you understand what I am saying? Enough of that, all right, let's go on.

So Stephen is brought in and he is on trial. Well what's the issue? Verse 13 of chapter 6: "They also set up false witnesses who said, 'This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the custom which Moses delivered to us.'" What's the issue? The issue is the temple, "this holy place." Stephen is being misrepresented here. It's true that the temple is not as important as they think it is, but there is a great exaggeration going on. But why are they so sensitive about it?

The answer is in the question. "Where is God?" Where did those religious people think God was? In the temple! That's where you went to be with God. You went to the temple. So if the temple was destroyed, you are going to lose out on God. You can't have God without a temple. And this Christianity was a threat of the temple, and consequently a threat to the presence of God. Now in verse 15 it says, "They saw Stephen's face as a face of an angel." Now this is amazing because you'll see God pulling out all the stops so that those individuals can find salvation. Because I'll tell you, very few of us could be videotaped in a skirmish like this, where you are on trial and you are being tried by people who've been paid to lie about you. And if they videoed our face, it's not likely that we would look like angel. I know I wouldn't. But he did.

But what's even more amazing than he looks like an angel, is thinking about what God is doing here! He is being attacked because apparently he doesn't respect Moses. And if you would turn in your Bibles, we are not going to go there, but I will give you the place. If you turn to Exodus 34 verses 29 and 30, you discover that the second time Moses came down from mountain with the Ten Commandments; you know the first time they had to be broken because the covenant was shattered by the golden calf experience. And God said to the people, "That's it, you go on without Me. I am not going with you." And they begged Him to go, and they repented. And God said, "Okay, but certain conditions…"

So Moses went back into the mountain, comes back down; he's been up there 40 days without food or water, miraculously sustained in the presence of God. That's when he said, "Can I see you?" And God said, "Nobody sees my face but you can see My back," and so Moses saw that and Moses comes down, and it says, "When the people saw him they were afraid because his face was glowing." He has this divine, radiating glow about him.

Now isn't it fascinating that Stephen, on trial, for disregarding Moses, has the same thing going on? You see, not only is God trying to win them; I think God has a little bit of a sense of humor too. It's amazing! So there he is on trial. Look at verse 1 of chapter 7. Stephen will be asked a question. "Then the high priest said, "Are these things so?"" Basically, "Are you taking God away from us?" The whole issue is, 'where is God?' And Stephen throughout chapter 7 is going to deal with answering that question. Now I encourage you to read chapter 7. We will not read in its entirety. We are going to read a few verses.

There are 4 illustrations that Stephen is going to give demonstrating the answer to the question, "Where is God?" You find it in chapter 7 verse 2, the first one. "And he said, 'Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran." Where is God? He is in Mesopotamia with Abraham. Where is God? He is in Haran with Abraham. Where is God? He is in Canaan with Abraham. Where is God? He is in Egypt with Abraham, then He is back in Canaan again with Abraham. Where is God? He is wherever Abraham was going, God was with Him.

Then the next illustration he gives is Joseph. Chapter 7 verse 9. "And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt. But God was with him." Where is God? He is with Joseph in Egypt. God is with Joseph in Egypt. Then, he gives an illustration of Moses, verse 20. Chapter 7 verse 20: "At this time Moses was born…" And he goes on and gives the story of Moses trying to deliver people with his own hands, and how he had to go to Midian. Verse 29: "Then, at this saying, Moses fled and became a dweller in the land of Midian, where he had two sons." Verse 30, "And when forty years had passed, and Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire in a bush, in the wilderness of Mount Sinai. When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he drew near to observe, the voice of the Lord came to him, "saying, 'I am the God of your fathers- the God of Abraham, The God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses trembled and dared not look. Then the Lord said to him, 'Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.'" Where is God? He is in Midian with Moses, and God says, "That place is holy" because He was there. Where is God?

Now notice, the next illustration that Stephen gives is about Solomon and David. Oh, let's start in verse 45, kind of mid sentence: "…which our fathers, having received it in turn, also brought with Joshua into the land possessed by the Gentiles, whom God drove out before the face of our fathers until the days of David," talking about the tabernacle. "…and David found favor before God and asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob. But Solomon built Him a house." Where is God? If we stopped reading right there, what would the answer be? Solomon's temple, that's where God is. "…however," Stephen says in verse 48, "…the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says: *'Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. What house will you build for Me says the Lord, or what is the place of My rest? Has My hand not made all these things?"*

Where is God? He is with His people! He is in Mesopotamia, He is in Haran, He is in Canaan, He is in Egypt, He is in the land of Midian, He cannot be confined to a temple. The earth, the whole earth is like a footstool to God. Where is He? He is reigning over all that there is. Where is God? Stephen has made it pretty clear; you can't confine God to a temple, to a place.

Then he changes gears in verse 51. He is going to start preaching. He says in verse 51: "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One," that's Jesus. "…of whom you

now have become the betrayers and murders, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it." "When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." He sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Now notice this, "…and said, 'Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!'"

Not only is this a powerful picture, it's an unusual one. Most of the times in the scriptures when God is pictured, He is seated. In fact, we are told "Jesus went and sat at the right hand of God." He is standing! Where is God? Well Jesus is standing. Why is He standing in this picture? Jesus knows what is about to take place. Stephen will soon become the very first Christian martyr, and Jesus is standing there by his side, ready to support and strengthen him. And if we really believe that when you are dead, you know nothing, the next thing Stephen knows, he is going to be in heaven, Jesus is welcoming him into eternity. He is standing there, standing by to be with His servant.

You know the picture of God standing is so rare. We can look at just a couple real quick. Keep you hand here and turn to Genesis 28. In Genesis 28 you have the story of Jacob. Jacob had deceived his father, he is running, hi is on the run, running for his life, he is filled with remorse and he is camping out. This is probably the second night of his journey, and he lays down; we come to verse 12. Genesis 28 verse 12: "Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it." Jesus would later talk about this dream and identify Himself as the ladder. "And behold the Lord stood above it and said: "I am the Lord God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants."

There you have a man discouraged, beat down, repentant and sorry for his life. And when he dreams, he sees Jesus standing at the door of heaven, there, ready to receive him. And Jacob gave his heart to the Lord right then, and made a promise that he would serve Him all of his days.

You go to 1st Samuel chapter 3; another interesting story, a young boy Samuel in the temple, lying in the room sleeping. In a jessant room is Eli. And Samuel keeps hearing his name called, and thinks that it is Eli calling him. We'll pick it up in verse 7. First Samuel 3 verse 7 it says: "Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord," at this time Samuel does not know the Lord. "…nor was the word of the Lord yet revealed to him. And the Lord called Samuel again the third time. So he arose and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you did call me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord had called the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and it shall be, if He calls you, that you must say, 'Speak, Lord, for Your servant hears.' So Samuel went and lay down in his place."

Now notice verse 10, this is an amazing text. "Then the Lord came and stood and called as at other times…" Where is Jesus in this picture? Right next to the bed! He is standing there, "Samuel, Samuel." "Speak Lord, for your servant hears." Jesus stands when a soul is about to be saved. Jesus rises up to intercede on behalf of any who pray in His name.

You come back to the Book of Acts, and Stephen sees Jesus standing; standing on his behalf in heaven. “I see the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

In verse 57 it says, Acts 7 verse 57, “They cried with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of young man named Saul. And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Jesus said the same thing, “Into Thy hands I command my spirit.” Jesus said that on Calvary. In verse 60 it says, “Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin.” Jesus said the same thing. “Father forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing.” “And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”

What a gentle way to describe being a martyr for God. He fell asleep; Jesus standing right beside him. Well, that’s nice for them, what about for us? Look at Matthew 28 please. Matthew 28 verse 20. One of the last things, it is the last thing that Matthew records Jesus saying before He went to heaven. He says, “Teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Where is God? Where is God? He is with you. He journeys with you through life. He stands by you through life. He is with you during financial problems; He is with you if you can’t afford to have the children in school and you need to come to the church for help He is with you. He is with you with a loss of work, the possibility of losing a home. He is with you in the journeys of life. He is with you during the family stresses in the relationships. He is with you during the physical stresses and the health issues. He is with you when there are losses. Tomorrow I will conduct 2 funerals for families in this church. David Haynes’ mother will be buried, and Jo Troxel’s husband, Merlin will have his memorial service. God is with those families during their time of loss.

He is with those whose faith is struggling. He does not cast you off. You have spiritual issues with God, God stands by you. He never leaves you; He is with you right now! Where is God? He is with you.

Jim and Susan were desperate. They had reached the bottom. They had no idea how life can be so hard. And their questions for God were those hard ones. Where are you God? Why are you allowing this? It went on for at least two more months, and then they caught a break. Little by little they began to dig out of the trouble they were in. It took a long time, but they dug out. If you were to see them today, they would say that was the hardest year of their life. They don’t want to do it again. But yet, they wouldn’t trade it for anything they ever had. Because during that year they learned things about themselves and they learned things about God. In fact, they didn’t know it at the time, but when they look back they realized. God was standing beside them through the whole experience.

There is one more picture in the Bible that shows Jesus standing. It’s found in the Book of Revelation, and it’s specific to our day and to our experience. In Revelation chapter 3, Jesus is standing at the door of the heart of the church of Laodicea, and He is knocking. And He is saying, “Let me in, and I’ll sup with you. We can fellowship together, and I’ll get you through life.” Where is God? He is right here brothers and sisters. He is in your

life. He journeys with you. You don't come here to be with God. Yes you do, excuse me, but this isn't the only place. He is with you on your way here. And He is with you when you leave. He is with you in your homes. He is with you in your workplace. He is with you all through your life. He doesn't forsake you. He stands with you.

And today I am wondering if you want to stand with Him? Maybe you've never accepted Jesus, and it's time. Or maybe you have, but you realize you've been using demonic means to a supposed Godly end, and that's got to change. And you need a closer walk with Him. So if you want to accept Christ or you want to be closer to Christ, I am going to ask you to stand.

"Father in Heaven thank you, oh thank you dear God that You are with us in our journey called life. Thank you that Jesus is so willing to come into our hearts and we ask Him in now. Teach us to be like Him we pray in His name, Amen."