

Jesus – to the End
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Acts 7:54-60
Easter 7 B

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Our Lord Jesus has left us.

No, not really. That's a nasty way to get your attention, I know. But he does no longer walk the earth visibly as a human. His time of humiliation is over, his time of exultation has come. He has ascended and taken his place in heaven at the right hand of God the Father. Yes, I know this is nothing new to any of us. This is exactly how things have been for our entire lives. This took place thousands of years ago. Nevertheless, our recent celebration of the Ascension gives us a reason to look at this again. A chance to remind ourselves what life is truly like for God's people in the era of our ascended Lord.

As we ought to be well aware, Jesus did not return to heaven in order to leave us here by ourselves. We are not left behind as orphans, simply waiting for the day when Jesus will bring us up to him. Rather, Jesus promised that even as he was no longer visible to us, he would be with us, to the very end of the age. In fact, when he ascended he was given authority by the Father over absolutely everything, over every name and title and throne that exists. Our Lord Jesus ascended to take his rightful place as ruler of this world. And we are promised that he is ruling this world for one singular purpose, to benefit the Church of believers. His purpose in ruling, the guiding factor in all he does is to care for those who trust in him and to do everything possible to add to their numbers.

In this state of exultation, Jesus carries out his three great offices for our benefit. Each one is a source of hope and comfort and help to us. Remember those three? Jesus is Prophet, Priest and King. King we already covered. That is his ruling activity over this world for our benefit. As Prophet, Jesus spreads the word of God. In fact he is the Word of God made flesh, and so he is here sharing himself whenever his word is shared. And finally as Priest he is the intercessor, the go-between for us and the Father. His sacrifice made it possible for us to approach the Father in prayer, and day and night he never ceases to pray to the Father on our behalf. We see him begin this work in our gospel today and the writer to the Hebrews elaborates on his priestly work further in our epistle. But rather than simply talk about his promises and talk about the works he does for us now in the abstract, instead let's look at an example of what this means for us in our lives as Christians. Let's look at an early Christian and see how Jesus has kept his promise to be present and guide and protect his people. <read text: Acts 7:54-60>.

The world would read this account and scoff. Good work there, God, protecting your people. See there he is, up in heaven and he just looks on as this guy is stoned to death for daring to believe in you. And this speaks to a much larger question we sometimes have when it comes to our relationship with God as Christians. We read so many accounts in the Bible of God delivering his people. Of rescuing them from certain death by miraculous means. They trusted God to protect them and he did! Great! Fantastic! But what of those he didn't rescue? For every one account of someone who was safeguarded from certain death the pages of scripture and history are littered with hundreds of bodies of those who died because they would not renounce the true God. Put to death because they would rather die than deny their God. They stood firm on their faith in the Lord, just like the ones who were rescued...and they died.

Why?

Was their faith not enough to save them? Were they not a proper believer that God refused to protect them? Had they offended him in some unknown way that he had to let this happen to them? Of course not. To stand up for Jesus when faced with certain death is one of the ultimate tests of faith. And there is no longer punishment for sins, or Jesus didn't pay for them on the cross. Even those who die in faith not knowing their end is coming don't die because of something they did wrong or their own lack of faith. So what then...is God not keeping his promises to guard and keep us? To be with us always? Is he failing to rule properly if his people are being put to death like this? We know the answer to these questions is a firm, "No!" But that does not keep the doubts from rising in our minds when faced with these situations. We see the pain believers endure and we doubt or even forget that God is still keeping his promises in the face of these trials.

So let's look again at Stephen and see that God did not fail Stephen. God kept every promise made to him.

You see, Stephen had been doing great work for the Lord. He had been blessed with wisdom and power from God. He was able to speak well on behalf of the Lord Jesus and he was allowed to perform miracles. But the Jews refused to hear his message or acknowledge what he did so they seized him and brought him before the ruling body with trumped up charges not unlike what they had done to Jesus not so long ago. And so Stephen stands before these men who will either free him or condemn him. He stands there to answer the lies spoken about him. And his answer has nothing to do with himself. Instead, Stephen recounts for them the history of the Israelite nation from Abraham through Moses and

Joshua, reminding them of all God did for their people and how many times along the way the people rebelled and tried to abandon God.

And Stephen finishes his speech with nothing short of scathing accusation. He calls those present no better than the rebels in the desert, he tells them point blank that they betrayed and murdered the Son of God. Their response, which we read, is hardly surprising. We often act the same way. We don't like being told we're wrong. We don't like being confronted with our mistakes and failures. Often when we are faced with them, we respond by lashing out at the messenger. Doesn't matter that it was our fault. Doesn't matter that they're actually right. Doesn't even matter if they're pointing it out to try and help us. How dare they suggest that we are less than perfect? How dare they presume to embarrass us with our failure? And though we may not pick up stones to show our displeasure, the anger that burns in our hearts is no different to God than the reaction of these men who heard Stephen speak God's Law.

This is the old nature burning within us. That's not you. You are the better you that God has made you. The you that is like Stephen. Stephen told his accusers the truth of their sin that they might understand and repent. That they might turn to Jesus and be saved. He could've kept quiet, knowing that in the end he would go to heaven and they would go to hell. He could've kept quiet because he could've easily guessed their reaction. But it didn't matter whether they would listen or not, his love for God, created by the same Holy Spirit that has come to you, his love for God compelled him to tell these men the truth. And even as he died, he asked God to forgive these men their fault. And should they allow God to forgive them, forgiveness would be theirs.

Even for a man who kept watch over the cloaks while the rest did their dirty work. Saul, whom we know more commonly by his Roman name, Paul, would be forgiven. We aren't told about the rest of the crowd, but Saul would come to know Jesus. Not right now. Not by Stephen's witness alone, but it would happen. This man, who hated Jesus so much that he wanted this witness to Jesus stoned to death in mob-justice, this man would be changed by the power of the Holy Spirit and become perhaps the most well-known evangelist for the gospel in the history of the world. This is the transformation that happens within us when we are brought to know and trust Jesus. This is the change that the Holy Spirit works in our hearts through the law and the gospel message.

I bring this up because only by understanding how miraculously powerful the gift of faith is can we really understand Stephen's situation here. Here he was, hauled out of town, pelted with rocks as the ferocity of the crowd hit a fever pitch, and what question was not on his lips? Why won't you help me, God? Where are you, God? Why do you hate me, God? None of that. Jesus, the great prophet, priest and king, the God-made-man, was doing for Stephen exactly as he promised. The witness Stephen made by his life and death was necessary for the sake of others. The death, though painful, was inconsequential. Stephen was encouraged and strengthened by being given a vision of the glory that waited for him, a picture that we can now carry with us as we walk this life and when we face our own death.

Stephen, bludgeoned to death by rocks, was content. The Lord had decided that his work here was over. And now he would go to be with his God. "**Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,**" he said. And then he fell asleep. Where was God when Stephen was being stoned to death? God was right there. He didn't protect Stephen from the stones and the pain for a few minutes. Instead he took Stephen away from all sin and all pain forever. He completed his promise to Stephen. And Stephen, though wise and useful to the body of believers, did not complain that he should be allowed to stay and do more. He didn't yell out that he wasn't done here. God had decided it was time to leave and go somewhere better. That was enough for Stephen. Whatever work God wanted done in the world had been getting done long before Stephen was born, and God could manage to continue doing it without him long after he was gone.

Stephen was able to do this not because he was superhuman. Not because he was given some magic of God that you don't have. Stephen was able to do this because he kept his eyes on Jesus. It is Jesus who died for us. It is Jesus who rose for us. It is Jesus who ascended to heaven to look after us. It is Jesus who promises us his care. It is Jesus who comes to us as the Word of God and builds our trust in him. Jesus. Jesus. Only Jesus. We have much to do in this life. We have many responsibilities and tasks. We have many pains and difficulties that we face. But don't let any of that take your eyes off Jesus, even for a second. He is our guide as we carry out our tasks. It is his strength and comfort and promises that carry us through the difficulty. We cannot do this ourselves. We need Jesus, from now to the end.

And in Jesus, there is no real end. Stephen did not die, he fell asleep. He will wake on the last day. You will not die. Someday the Lord will decide you have done enough, and you will fall asleep. It may be sudden. It may be painful. But that short pain will mean the end of all pain forever. It will mean the peace of freedom from sin forever. It will mean being with Jesus forever. You will fall asleep. But you will wake up on the last day. And you will be with Jesus – in a life that has no end. Amen.