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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
August 24, 2014
11th Sunday after Pentecost

Scripture Lessons: Deuteronomy 32:1-9 Matthew 23:34-39

Hymns: 235:1-4; 215; 410; 413:5,6 (248:1-3)

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Acts 7:54-60

When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. 55 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, 56 and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; 58 and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

(NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth.
Amen.

In Christ Jesus, dear fellow Redeemed.

INTRO: *A Good Day to Die!*

That is a quote from some old western movie from years and years ago, but it is also a quote from one of my friends as he was mocking my nervousness at the thought of the rapids and waterfalls and daring portages that lay before us on a wilderness canoe trip in Canada. We had experienced a pretty challenging first day on the river as we rose early on the second morning my friend, and guide Jim came over to me and Denise and clapped his hand down on my shoulder and said, “Ahh, Bart, my friend, it is a good day to die!” Of course with his experience and knowledge of the river he was confident that we were not in any great danger. It was just my fear and trepidation at the thought of what lay ahead that prompted his exclamation. It became a joke between us at the beginning of several other canoe outings, but could there ever be any truth in that statement. Can it ever be a good day to die?

Our text is the account of a child of God, a highly respected believer facing death, what many would surely consider a horrible death, for the sake of Jesus and the true Christian faith. In the end of Stephen’s life we see

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THEME: Stephen’s Example of Faithful Discipleship.

It all began with Stephen --

I. Testifying to Our Hope.

Stephen was one of the seven deacons selected to help administer the charitable gifts to the widows and orphans and poor in the congregation in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit was with him, and he was very active in testifying to the truth of Jesus Christ. The religious scholars among the Jews were not able to defeat the wisdom and the Spirit by which Stephen spoke, so they determined to defeat Stephen and silence him with lies and deceit. They induced others to bring false charges of blasphemy against Stephen.

Stephen made a clear and bold defense before the Sanhedrin, the same council that had condemned Jesus and pressured Pilate to crucify Him. Stephen began with a review of the history of God working among the people of Israel. He concluded with a scathing condemnation of the Jews' rejection of Jesus as the Christ. What Stephen said cut to their hearts. They felt the guilt of their sin, and it made them angry. They would not hear and repent. Instead "they gnashed at him with their teeth." Their furor was quickly boiling over out of control. That is when Stephen was granted a very special vision of that glory which is reserved of us in heaven, the glory of seeing the Lord Jesus in His glory and majesty.

Acts 7:55-56 "*Stephen, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, 56 and said, 'Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' "*

What he saw was more than simply seeing a picture of that glory which is the Lord's. He saw our hope of eternal life. Remember that this is a great and wonderful thing that we possess -- this hope of seeing and even dwelling in the presence of the glory of God and our Savior Jesus Christ. Some might scoff declaring that we can't know what will happen after this life is over, that our hope is "pie in the sky" wishing for something better than this hard life. The Apostle Paul presents what it means to have hope, and the glory of our hope in –

Romans 8. 23-25 Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. 24 For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.

Stephen got to see it right before it was given to him! And yes, even while we endure the tribulations and persecutions that come in this life we possess that hope of the redemption of our bodies. We shall be glorified together with the Lord. We shall be in His presence, basking in His glory forevermore. We have this hope because we possess the "**down-payment**" on this final redemption. The Spirit lives within our hearts, having made us new creatures,

and having cleansed our consciences, restoring to our hearts that peace with God which surpasses understanding.

Stephen's testimony was delivered under the duress of persecution. We see that this does not destroy our faith, or our hope for eternal life. Not at all. Again Paul wrote about this in his epistle to the Romans.

Romans 5:1-5 Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and **rejoice in hope of the glory of God.** 3 And not only that, but we also **glory in tribulations**, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; 4 and perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 Now **hope does not disappoint**, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Our hope is not based on our strength, or even on the fact that the world opposes and would suppress the truth of Christ. No, it is founded upon the grace that is ours in Christ. We have been justified, we have peace with God, and these blessings are ours through our Lord Jesus Christ. He suffered for us, and so if we suffer some inconvenience, or even more severe tribulation of persecution, we shall glory in those tribulations, praising God that we also have been found worthy to suffer for His name. It all draws us deeper into that hope which the Lord has instilled in our hearts, just as He did with Stephen.

That hope remained strong within Stephen while –

II. Facing the World's Rage.

Acts 7: 57-58 Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; 58 and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

The Jewish council was more than a little put out, they were in a blind rage. It wasn't Stephen's fault. He didn't bring it upon himself. He told them the truth. The Lord Jesus was their Savior, but they wanted nothing to do Jesus, or with Stephen!

It was a mad rush of angry men who came upon Stephen and dragged him from the council chambers out of the city, and there they stoned him. And, oh yes, we are introduced to another man at this event. A young man named Saul, who was about to do his utmost to purge the Jewish people of any and all who called upon the name of Jesus. This young man named Saul who would later confess to be chief among sinners, would be the Apostle Paul who would proclaim the Lord's praises, and declare that hope of everlasting life that we have in Jesus' name. Saul collected the coats of those who wouldn't be hindered by their outer garments as they took aim at Stephen with the rocks that would take Stephen's temporal, mortal life.

Are we ready to face that kind of rage for the truth of Jesus? We don't see such hostility here, not yet, but such persecution is becoming increasingly common once more around the world. There are dreadful persecutions going on in northern Africa where hundreds of young girls were kidnapped and subjected to terrible ordeals because they were Christian children. A woman there was also condemn to death (though later pardoned) for converting to Christianity. In Iraq where, yes they tell us ISIS is killing many Muslims also, but this extreme Muslim group has sworn to effect the annihilation of all those who profess faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Thousands have died. In India Christianity is actively opposed. In China Christians are imprisoned at times. No, we have not suffered such hostility. We do however receive harsh criticism, and are labelled as bigots and hatemongers by many in society around us, many who desire to intimidate us into silence. We should not consider it some strange thing, as Peter teaches us.

1 Peter 4:12-14 Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; 13 but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. 14 If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

We learn from Stephen's example of faithful discipleship. He did not allow nervousness or fear and trepidation silence him. We see Stephen --

III. Dying a Blessed Death.

Acts 7: 59-60 And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

A blessed death? How can there be such a thing as a blessed death? How could anyone describe the horrible and painful death that Stephen endured a blessed death? What does the record reveal? He died in true faith. Stephen died surrendering his spirit to his Redeemer Lord. Stephen was not embittered towards those who were throwing stones at him, throwing the stones that hurt him, that would take his life. Stephen died with a prayer on his lips which mimicked the words of Jesus on the cross "**Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.**" He prayed for his enemies. The evidence is clear. Stephen died with his faith in Christ not only intact, but as healthy as ever.

Once again it was that same man who looked on with approval as Stephen was stoned that wrote the definitive words of faith about living and dying for the Lord, the lesson presented for us by Stephen's life and death. Paul wrote to the Roman:

Romans 14:7-9 For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. 8 For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

We are bought and paid for! And that is no slam on who we are! Indeed it is a matter of the grace of God in our lives. We are the redeemed souls purchased and won by the innocent sufferings and death of Jesus. We live to the Lord, to the praise of His glory! If we die, WHEN we die, we die unto the Lord. We die with the full confidence that we shall be received by the Lord into heavenly glory. This puts all things into perspective, including any

tribulation or persecution we may endure in this life. By the grace of God we possess the same faith that led Stephen to die a blessed death. We possess in our hearts the same Spirit of our God, who is the first-fruits of our eternal salvation.

Of course I still feel the same weakness of my flesh that caused my friend to tease me so many years ago on that canoe trip. And I am also weak in my faith life. Too often I feel fear and trepidation at what lies before me, before us all. I'm pretty sure I'm not alone in that. But spiritual strength in facing tribulation, pain, and death is not drawn from my will, or my flesh. It comes to you and me from the Holy Spirit working in our hearts through the gospel, through the message of Jesus' love for us. Jesus says to us in --

Revelation 2:10 Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

We should expect trouble in this life, including trouble because we hold to the truth of God's word. Have no fear.

TLH 262:3 "Though devils all the world should fill all eager to devour us, We tremble not we fear no ill, They shall not overpower us. This world's prince may still Scowl fierce as He will, He can harm us none. He's judged, the deed is done. One little word can fell him."

Stay faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful all the way through this life. Yes, stay faithful, stay in that precious Word of the gospel until that day when the Lord calls us home. Stay faithful unto death, and the Lord Himself will give you that crown of life. That is what Stephen showed us, according to the grace that was given him. That is the same grace God has given us through faith in Christ Jesus.

AMEN.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.