

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

Title: Beyond Death

Lesson: Acts 7:55-60

⁵⁵ 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. ⁵⁶ "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." ⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Today's lesson is about the death of Stephen. After the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the early church was formed and Stephen became its first martyr. Through his righteous death, we will learn about what the Christian faith is. Stephen's death does not just remain in the past as a story or history, but it will continue to enlighten us about what the Christian faith is in the past, present, and future.

Acts chapter 7 describes in great detail the situation in which Stephen is martyred. Stephen was one of the seven leaders chosen from the early church. Acts describes him as follows: "Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people." (Acts 6:8)

When Jesus was crucified, His disciples fled and scattered. However, as they personally experienced Jesus' resurrection, they developed a deeper and stronger faith that could not be shaken. They formed the early church, gathering people together and bringing them to spiritual rebirth through repentance in Christ.

As the teachings of the early church expanded, tensions and conflicts between early church Christians and Jews escalated. Due to the growth of the early church, Jews felt a threat, and Jewish leaders at the time continued to devise schemes to thwart the increase and momentum of Christians.

Not long ago, when Jesus was arrested and crucified, they all fled and denied their faith. However, after experiencing Christ's resurrection, they were completely transformed. They became witnesses to the risen Lord. Despite continued hindrance and conspiracy from Jewish leaders, Christians, including Jesus' disciples, were no longer cowardly. Early church Christians continued to confess

their faith in Christ, received a new mission, and advanced for the sake of spreading the gospel.

In this situation, the Jews confronted Stephen and engaged him in argument, but they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. Acts 6:10 says, "But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke." Then the Jewish leaders hired people to accuse Stephen of blasphemy against Moses and God. In other words, they claimed that he had spoken against the Holy One and deserved to be sentenced to death.

Stephen gave a speech in court before he was executed, which is found in Acts chapter 7. He talked about the history of the Jewish people and accused them of not listening to God's prophets and crucifying Jesus. He pointed out that they were not following the law they had received.

Stephen didn't intend to embarrass them. Instead, he wanted to encourage them to open their hearts and accept Jesus Christ's salvation.

However, contrary to Stephen's intentions, the Jews in the court became even more angry and lost their self-control after hearing his testimony about the resurrection of Jesus.

Stephen was in danger of dying when the people at the trial started throwing stones at him after he spoke about Jesus' resurrection. Saul was also there and agreed with stoning him. The people were very angry, and it turned violent, just like when Jesus was arrested and condemned to the cross.

Stephen may have sensed the threat of death from the Jewish leaders since he began disputing with them. He would have known that he would soon die if he did not deny Jesus. Even in court, he would have known that he would soon be killed by the Jewish leaders who were full of life. If he were an ordinary person, he might have denied his faith or changed his claims early on. However, Stephen had faith in the world after death through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and this faith enabled him to confess his belief in Christ even in the face of mortal danger. Stephen followed Jesus in his life, as well as in his confession.

Jesus said these words to the soldiers who were executing him on the cross: "Father, forgive them..." (Luke 23:34). And before Jesus breathed his last, he prayed, "Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit" (23:46), entrusting his soul to God.

Stephen also followed the way of Jesus. Just before he died, Stephen prayed to God, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59), and even in his last moment, he knelt down and prayed, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (7:60). Stephen was a disciple of Christ who put his faith into practice in his life.

Even when Stephen was in mortal danger, he kept looking at Jesus: ⁵⁵“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. ⁵⁶“Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.””

Faith is about what we look to. Those who trust in money will rely on it and seek to solve their problems with it in times of crisis. However, Stephen believed in Christ and in His resurrection. That is why, even in the face of death, he looked to Jesus Christ. What we look to determines what you do. Stephen was a child of God on this earth and belonged to the kingdom of God.

Stephen was able to face death without fear because he had confidence in the resurrection. He saw "beyond death." From the moment he accepted Jesus as the Christ, his gaze was fixed on "beyond death." He did not shy away from death, nor did he show cowardice in the face of death, but rather he accepted death with dignity. He sought to follow the path of Jesus Christ who obeyed God's will even unto death. Stephen's death was a righteous one, a martyrdom for the sake of the gospel. Stephen was able to die for Jesus Christ because he believed in the resurrection, he believed in life beyond death.

Amazingly, with the death of Stephen, the course of the church's history was dramatically altered. Acts 8:1 says: “On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.”

Stephen's death was like a trigger that caused the message of hope and salvation to spread more actively. The Jews who killed Stephen kept threatening the Christians, but their actions actually helped the Christian faith to spread even faster, not only in Jerusalem but also in Judea, Samaria, and other places. So, Stephen's death was not pointless.

Friends, how should we receive the story of Stephen's martyrdom? Should we simply accept it as a part of the history of the early church or as just one story among many? Is the world we live in vastly different from the world in which Stephen lived?

The world in which Stephen lived was a time of persecution against Christians, with anger and violence rampant. Of course, in the society we live in today, there is no longer religious persecution. However, if we see Stephen's death as violence against a minority by those in power, what if we look at it from this perspective? If we view Stephen's death from this perspective, the world in which he lived and the world we live in are not significantly different.

About 3 years ago, a convenience store employee in Minneapolis called 911 and reported that George Floyd had bought cigarettes with a counterfeit \$20 bill. Soon after, the police arrested George. He was unconscious and pinned down by three police officers, and showed no signs of life.

About two years ago, there was a shooting at a spa in Atlanta committed by a man. As a result of the shooting, eight people died, six of whom were Asians, and four of the six were Koreans. It was a tragedy that occurred after an increase in hate crimes against Asians in the United States since the start of the pandemic.

We keep hearing news stories that are stained with violence against various groups of people, such as the homeless, children, elderly, and those with different sexual identities, as well as shootings and domestic violence.

Friends, how should we look at the violence and tragedies that are happening in our society today, along with Stephen's death? As Christians, how can we comfort the victims and their families? These are very difficult questions. However, as Christians, we cannot stand by or be indifferent to the tragedies and violence that our neighbors are experiencing.

When tragic events occur and continue to occur in our society, we pray that God will be with them, suffer with them, and continue to be with them. We pray that their suffering and sorrow in this life will be transformed into the joy of resurrection through Christ. As Christians, we believe in the resurrection after death, like Stephen, and we pray to listen, help, love, forgive, and live for the cries of others on this earth. Amen.