

## Martyrdom

Acts 7:54 – 8:3, June 27, 2010

Trinity Sunday IV

Beloved of the Lord.....When we look at the brutal death of Stephen, we tend to see only the earthly side of things. We see an end, not a beginning. When we think of John the Baptist who was beheaded, or those saints in the days of Rome who were burned as lamps for the games, or torn apart by wild beasts, our flesh and our heart fail us. We all wonder, would I confess Christ to the bitter end? If the enemy put a sword to my throat, would I deny my own Savior, who did not deny me? Jesus said, “Whosoever denies Me before men, Him will I deny before My Father which is in heaven.” Concerning persecution we should note and understand two crucial things: FIRST, persecution will indeed come to us and it cannot be avoided for Jesus said, “If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you.” “Marvel not my brethren, if the world hate you.” God does not want us to be surprised when it happens. But the SECOND point regarding persecution is this: God will always give us the strength needed to endure whatever persecution He allows. He does not give a martyr's death to all, but only some, but if He permits it to come to us, He will give us the faith to endure. “Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid of them: for the LORD thy God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.” Deut. 31 “Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid: for the LORD JEHOVAH is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation.” Is. 12

There can be no doubt, God granted Stephen the faith to endure his trial. The Bible says, “Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.” God gave Stephen special gifts. But more importantly, Stephen was able to wisely quote the Scripture, that the unbelieving Jews “were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.” Out of hatred for Christ and the Gospel, Stephen was brought before the Jewish Sanhedrin, the same whited sepulchres who judged and condemned Jesus to death, though He rose again the third day. Standing before God's enemies Stephen preached a bold sermon, convincing them that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the Christ, the promised Messiah of old. Stephen reached the grand climax saying, “Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost, as your fathers did, so do ye!” Which of the prophets didn't your fathers kill before the coming of the Just One, Christ? Then when Christ came, you betrayed and murdered Him yourself! You have not kept God's law at all!

With such words the men flew into a blind rage! The truth of God's Word cut their heart in two and they could no longer bear to hear WHAT THEY KNEW WAS ABSOLUTELY TRUE! They flew upon him like wild animals, biting and tearing at him with their teeth in

uncontrollable anger. Wherever the Gospel is preached, Satan rages like an animal against it. Sinful men would rather kill the messenger than hear the message. God's law reveals only the darkness of our sin. Jesus said, “Every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved.” When the law is preached, God is saying, “I know well all the evil you have done, and even the worst deed you have committed in the dark is visible in My sight. I also know well how you will do everything to cover it up and hide it from men, but it cannot be hidden from me, ‘for there is nothing covered that shall not be revealed, neither hid that shall not be known.’ You might escape the judgment of men, but no man can escape My judgment.” It is then the height of folly when men in the stubbornness of heart refuse to get down on their hands and knees before God and confess to God what God already knows to be true. The hardest thing in all the world to say is, “God you are right, and I am wrong. Please, for Jesus' sake, have mercy upon me.”

Stephen was able to endure a martyr's death only because through Christ death had lost its sting. Jesus through the Word had revealed to Stephen's heart, just why He, the Just One came to earth. Jesus came not to condemn the world, but save it. God “made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.” God is not only just, but merciful. Hence God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were all one in the desire of their heart, to rescue and save all mankind from sin. This is why Jesus came, died, and suffered. That He might give His life a ransom in exchange for our soul. On the cross Jesus was our Substitute, suffering all that we deserved, “that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.” Those who confess their sins to God and put their trust in Jesus will not be disappointed for our gracious Lord has said, “Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out.” There is indeed complete and full forgiveness for our every sin of murder and hatred of heart. But it is only through Jesus our Savior from all sin.

I am convinced that if Stephen had been allowed to preach a little longer, we would've heard that glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ. But God allowed Stephen a martyr's death, only so his short life in this vale of tears would be ended, and he would begin his life everlasting. While our flesh may cringe at the thought of Stephen's death, in the midst of it all Stephen by faith saw through death to the life everlasting which awaited him. And so even when the enemies were crying with a loud voice, stopping their ears, and stoning him, Stephen seems oblivious to it all. He sees nothing, hears nothing, but “Behold I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God”. Jesus was waiting for him. Why indeed should Stephen be afraid? Oh how his heart must have been nigh lifted out of his body as his soul yearned to be there with Jesus. At long last the moment of death came and the Bible says “he fell

asleep.” “I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him.” I Thess. 4 Like the thief on the cross, Stephen’s soul immediately ascended into heaven. The proof of a soul’s immediate entrance into heaven is taught not only by this example of Stephen, but by Jesus in Luke 20 who says, “Neither can they die any more: for they are equal unto the angels; and are the children of God, being the children of the resurrection. Now that the dead are raised, even Moses shewed at the bush, when he calleth the Lord the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. For he is not a God of the dead, but of the living: for all live unto him.” Like Stephen, the arms of your Savior are also open for you dear believer. Faith can see what Stephen saw.

Faith then is like the eagle’s eye which pierces beyond the grave and sees Christ and life everlasting waiting. WE WILL BE “delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.” There are many saints there even now who have been given the white robes of His righteousness, shining in the brightness of God’s glory, without a care, worry, or trouble, without any bodily sickness or disease, without even one tear. Yet because we are here below in the midst of our bloody battle, and they above well know God’s jealous love for all His suffering children, their cry goes out to Lord “saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they *were*, should be fulfilled” Rev. 6. Here “God speaks with his saints like a father who has many children, and to the one who comes in from the field and asks him to pass him the food, he answers: Your food is ready, but wait for your brothers, so that they sit together with you are the table and all eat and drink with one another” (Augustine). Thus it is always God’s mercy through Christ which prevents, spares, and holds back His rod of judgment. That Last Day will not come until the Lord by the Gospel has converted and brought our last brother home.

What good comes from persecution? One purpose is the spreading of the Gospel. When Saul went to persecute the Church of God, the saints were scattered, hence the Gospel was carried to the four corners of the earth. But why does God sometimes allow the sword to hurt His own children? It is so they by their own blood can water the seeds of the Gospel. “The most powerful missionary sermons were held upon the scaffold and funeral pyres of the world. The blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church” (Gosswein). When the ungodly see these children of God do not fear the sword, yet in the midst of death they pray, “Lord lay not this sin to their charge”, some stubborn hearts will finally be broken, and

the love of Christ will fill their soul. There are accounts in the days of Rome, when the saints were given to death by the lions, some Romans soliders were converted by their example and the Word they spoke. There were even saints who would sing hymns of praise to God in the midst of that bloody Coliseum, as the lions rushed upon them. How quickly they entered heaven! A martyrs death is a Gospel sermon in itself. Saul was there at the stoning of Stephen, even consenting to the death, but Saul also heard those divine words of forgiveness, “Lord lay not this sin to their charge”, and later by the power of the Gospel Word stubborn Saul became believing Paul and believing Paul later wrote, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? *shall* tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

I read long ago that Luther was in some ways sad that he never suffered a martyr’s death. He concluded his life was not worthy of such an honor for Christ’s name. God doesn’t require all to be martyrs, but He does earnestly warns all kto be prepared for it. As for the strength needed to endure, remember He will not allow such a test, unless we are able to bear it, thus if He allows it, He will give us the strength to bear. Our strength to bear dear Christian is always found in Jesus who said, “I will never leave thee nor forsake thee”. “Fear not, only believe.” Jesus said, “Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God? But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows.” “Whosoever shall confess me before men, him shall the Son of man also confess before the angels of God.” Stephen confessed Christ before men, and he is now with the Son of Man in heaven. Jesus is waiting there for you too dear believer, and His love for you is no less than His love for Stephen, “for the blood of Jesus Christ His son cleanses us from all sin.” A martyrs death is a blessed death. It is in no way the end, but the beginning of life everlasting. Amen.