



Easter 5 (A)

May 3, 2026

[RCL] Acts 7:55-60, Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16, 1 Peter 2:2-10, John 14:1-14

Opening Prayer |

Almighty God, whom truly to know is everlasting life: Grant us so perfectly to know your Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life, that we may steadfastly follow his steps in the way that leads to eternal life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Context |

Luke's Acts of the Apostles tells the story of the birth of the Christian movement following Christ's resurrection from the dead. Intertwined in this account of the birth of the church is the story of Stephen, and Acts 7:55-60 serves as the climax of his story.

It appears as if Luke has been extra careful to characterize Stephen in a positive light. As the church began to grow, more leaders were needed. The apostles chose individuals to help with the care of those in need, and we read earlier in Acts that Stephen was selected to assist with this need. Stephen was selected by the apostles because he was "of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" and "full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:3,5). After being commissioned by the apostles, Stephen is described as "full of grace and power" and a worker of "great wonders and signs among the people" (6:8). Additionally, we learn that Stephen's face was like the face of an angel (6:15). Yet even with these abundant, positive attributes, Stephen finds himself in trouble.

As he went forth, recounting the wonderful deeds of God, Stephen began to garner negative attention from some of the religious leaders. He was accused of speaking "blasphemous words against Moses and God" (6:11). Eventually he was dragged before the council and the high priest, to give a defense of his supposed blasphemy. In his words of defense, the

accused becomes the one accusing *others*. Stephen recounts the history of Israel and accuses the religious leaders of the same crime as their fathers: resisting the Holy Spirit, persecuting the prophets, betrayal and murder of the Righteous One, and breaking the law. Hearing these accusations, the religious leaders “became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen” (Acts 6:54).

Stephen then gazes into heaven and sees “the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:55). After conveying this vision to the assembled, Stephen is stoned to death by the mob.

Theological Reflection |

Throughout every age, the events of Acts 7:55-60 have reminded the church of the unfading glory of God. Although Stephen is martyred, his legacy lives on and is a source of encouragement for all who would follow Jesus. Even in the midst of the rocky or tumultuous beginning of the church, the stoning of Stephen shows the *hope* on which the church is founded.

Stephen, a leader of the church, is stoned to death, but his death does not end the movement. Rather, it serves as one of the movement’s catalysts. Stephen, the church’s first martyr, is an example of how God’s glory prevails and transforms tragedy.

In this passage, we learn something of Stephen’s character through the stark difference between him and the mob. Stephen is filled with the Holy Spirit, while the mob is enraged, grinding their teeth. In this, Stephen’s character resembles Christ’s own behavior. Just as Jesus prayed that God would forgive those who crucified him, Stephen similarly prays, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Stephen is described in such a positive light because he embodies the one he serves. The followers of Jesus are to live in imitation of the one they serve. Stephen models this in his actions and demeanor.

But this passage takes Stephen’s witness one step further. Stephen did not simply imitate God, he embodies God in his witness. The Holy Spirit of God indwelt Stephen, and Stephen lived out God’s truth in his life—and in his death.

The indwelling Holy Spirit does not guarantee that followers of Jesus will not experience pain, for the human experience is inescapable. Rather, the indwelling of God’s Holy Spirit means that in the midst of tragedy and suffering, all is not lost. For God never abandons his

people. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the glory of God will shine through, even during suffering and loss.

Today's passage from Acts tells us that as Stephen was about to be stoned, he "gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (7:55). God most certainly did not abandon Stephen in his hour of need; Jesus is portrayed as standing at God's right hand, indicating his support and defense of Stephen. Significantly, this is the only instance in Scripture where Jesus is depicted as standing at God's right hand.

In this moment—the very stoning of Stephen—the glory of God shines through. This is because in God's economy, nothing goes to waste. Hope is not lost with the stoning of Stephen and the loss of this early church leader.

In fact, in this same passage, a new character enters the scene. "And the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul." The reader of The Acts of the Apostles will learn that this same Saul becomes Saint Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

We continue to celebrate Christ's resurrection from the dead by meditating on the stoning of Stephen. Because of Christ's defeat of death, Stephen's death need not lead to despair, but rather to hope and the promise of transformation.

Reflection Questions |

- Why do you think that, rather than shrinking during persecution, the Church grew?
- How does the stoning of Stephen relate to the Easter message of Christ's resurrection?
- Where in your own life have you seen God's glory during hardship?
- Are there areas in your life where you cannot seem to see God's hope? After reading this passage, what do you think God wants to say to you?
- Think of those people who, like Saul, might seem out of reach of God's transformation. How might God transform them?

Faith in Practice |

Take a moment this week to pray for someone who reminds you of Saul. Instead of thinking of their negative traits, dream about how God could transform them. Pray that, like Saul, they would experience God's radical transformation and be used for God's glory.

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