

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Third Sunday After Easter, April 21, 2024

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 263, 613:1-2, 586:1-4, 513, 585.

Lessons: Nehemiah 9:16-31, 1 Peter 2:19-25, Matthew 10:17-22.

Sermon Text: Acts 6:8-7:4 and 7:51-60.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

We are living at a time in history when people are especially concerned about their own well-being. Today we look at a man who gave up his life for Jesus. Using the example of Stephen, God is pointing us toward heavenly life, which is infinitely more important than our earthly life.

In Acts chapter 6 we first hear about Stephen, the man called the first martyr. A martyr is someone who was put to death for his faith. Today we look at how

STEPHEN, THE FIRST NEW TESTAMENT MARTYR, WON HIS BATTLE

- 1. He was a man intent on serving the Lord.**
- 2. When he was falsely accused, he used Scripture as his defense.**
- 3. His life on earth ended with his seeing “*heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.*”**

In the words immediately before our sermon text we read that the number of followers of Jesus was increasing and there was concern that some in the Jerusalem congregation “*were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, ‘It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.’*” (Acts 6:1-4, NIV84)

The twelve apostles acknowledged their gifts from God – what they call “*the ministry of the Word of God*” – and realized that the Christian congregation in Jerusalem needed more people to help with the work of God. Starting with the day of Pentecost, 50 days after Jesus rose from the dead, this was a time when the believers “*devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*” (Acts 2:42-47, NIV84)

You see that they shared the earthly possessions they had, realizing that our time on earth is limited. They were surely expecting that Jesus Christ would come again soon. Notice that it is the Christians who were sharing. This history from the first chapters of the book of Acts is plainly an example of Christians caring for and taking care of one another.

But because some were complaining about being neglected in the daily distribution of food, the leaders of the church, the twelve apostles, asked the congregation to choose seven men to help serve. They asked “*Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this*

responsibility over to them” (Acts 6:3, NIV84) After the seven are listed by name, we read that **“They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.”** (Acts 6:6, NIV84)

Stephen was one of the seven chosen, and we read that **“the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.”** (Acts 6:7, NIV84)

He started ‘waiting on tables’, in **“the daily distribution of food”**, for they had all things in common. They shared their belongings, and took care of one another. As Stephen used his God-given talents, God provided more abilities to him! To the one who is faithful in little things, the Lord will give more gifts.

Notice that these seven men weren’t only to be involved with just handing out food. We see that God blessed Stephen with great gifts and we read that **“Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.”** (Acts 6:8, NIV84)

However, his proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ met opposition.

That kind of opposition to the truth of God’s Word continues today, and is becoming stronger as God’s day of judgement is quickly approaching. Of course, we must realize that God is truly controlling all things and that Jesus has assured us that **“All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.”** (Matthew 28:18, KJV)

Some **“men began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.”** This makes it clear that it was not just Stephen’s personal wisdom, but the words of the Holy Spirit which he was speaking.

“Then [the men who could not argue against the words which the Holy Spirit provided] secretly persuaded some men to say, ‘We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God.’ So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses, who testified, ‘This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.’ All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.” (Acts 6:9–15, NIV84)

Scripture makes it clear that their claims and accusations were false. But they dragged Stephen to the council of the leaders of the Jews.

False accusations are still being made against those who speak the truths of God’s Word. The world does not want to hear what God has to say, and this is evident every day in actions and words of unbelievers. But at least the leaders of the Jews, by the intervention of God, asked Stephen questions and allowed him to defend his teaching. **“Then the high priest asked him, ‘Are these charges true?’ To this he replied: ‘Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran.’”** (Acts 7:1–2, NIV84)

Remember that Stephen had been accused of speaking against the temple and against the law. In his defense, Stephen then reviewed the history of the Jews, starting with the patriarch Abraham. If they were listening carefully, they could not deny that Stephen knew the history of their people as recorded in the Old Testament.

In this sermon we won’t take time to review that entire history of the Jews. Read Acts chapter 7 for a great summary of Jewish history right up to and including the crucifixion of the Messiah God had promised.

Stephen emphasizes the work of Moses, the prophet and lawgiver. After all, he had been accused of speaking **“words of blasphemy against Moses and against God.”** His accusers also claimed that he **“never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law.”**

After a thorough review of the history of the Jews, he tells them that the temple is not the most important thing they should be concerned about. He points out that the tabernacle and later the temple were given by God to lead his people, the Jews, to Jesus. About the temple, Stephen said **“However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says: ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?’”**

Then Stephen plainly points to Jesus as the Righteous One of God. Then he speaks boldly to those leaders of the Jews who were hearing his history lesson. **“You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed**

and murdered him—you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.”

Of course, these were words that they didn't want to hear. ***“When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.”*** They did not want to be reminded of their role in executing Jesus Christ, who fulfilled and accomplished what God had prophesied in the Old Testament. The history of Stephen and his martyrdom took place only months after the crucifixion of Jesus!

They were furious and they would not accept or want to hear what he had to say. Immediately Scripture tells us ***“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. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ 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.”*** (Acts 7:1–60, NIV84)

We might think of “stoning to death” as just throwing stones at someone. Stoning was a terrible way to die. Historians point out that stoning to death often meant heaping stones on the living person until he was crushed and couldn't breathe, in addition to all the wounds suffered from the blows.

In this way, God ended Stephen's life on earth. But look at how Stephen approached death. ***“While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ 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.”***

They were attacking his Lord Jesus Christ. They were attacking him because he was speaking God's truth. God took care of Stephen with the gift of eternal life. His life on earth was over, but his eternal life was just beginning. God will take care of everyone who believes with the gift of eternal life.

Because death is the doorway to heaven for every believer in Christ, we can look forward to our death, however unpleasant that thought may be. No matter what happens on earth, or what we have to face on earth, ***“we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”*** (Romans 8:28, NIV84)

May God give us the ability to focus, every day, on the work he sets before us, especially the task of witnessing boldly for him and finally reaching the goal of eternal life. Amen.