

⁵⁴ When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 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 clothes 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.

Get a Glimpse of the Ascended Christ

1. He makes us bold in our confession
2. He keeps us strong in our suffering

“On that day, a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.” That’s the verse immediately following the lesson I just read for you. Stephen was the first. He confessed his faith boldly, and he was killed for it. But the persecution he faced has continued on to this very day.

Did you know that, since the time of Christ, people estimate that over 70 million Christians have died for their faith? Even today, over 100,000 Christians are being killed every year simply because they confess Christ as their Lord and Savior. That’s 274 people a day.

That’s the harsh reality of living as a follower of Jesus, isn’t it? In the United States, most of us haven’t come face to face with death for confessing our faith. But every day we face the hatred of the world. Jesus mentions that in his prayer in the gospel lesson this morning: “I have given them your word, and the world has hated them for it.” And when we proclaim the word he’s given us – in our words and in our actions – sometimes we do suffer for it.

In the story of Stephen, we’re reminded of how real that hatred and suffering is. But we’re also reminded of something else. At the end of Stephen’s defense, God gives him a glimpse of heaven. He sees his ascended Savior standing at the right hand of God. Through eyes of faith, we can see him, too. And that reminds us that the One on our side is greater than the ones against us. Our ascended Savior is the one who makes us bold in our confession, and who keeps us strong in our suffering.

1. He makes us bold in our confession

In this lesson, we’re really jumping in right toward the end of Stephen’s story. He’s standing on trial before the Sanhedrin – the Jewish supreme court. The charges brought against him were that he was speaking out against the temple, against Moses, and against the law.

These charges were all lies. Stephen knew that. The real reason he was on trial was because he preached the truth about Jesus, and the Jews refused to accept it. They had debated him on the subject, and Luke tells us “they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.”

But these charges were serious. Stephen knew that, too. They were accusing him of blasphemy, and the penalty for that crime was death by stoning. To save his own skin, he could have simply kept his mouth shut. Or, he could have backtracked. He could have apologized, and told them

what they wanted to hear. Instead, he boldly told them what they needed to hear: the truths of God's word.

He started with the law. In all of chapter seven, he went through the history of Israel, from the time of Abraham to the present, showing how time and time again God showed his love to the Jews, and how time and time again they had rejected God. Then, he pointed the finger straight at his accusers: "You're just like your fathers!" he said. "You always resist the Holy Spirit! God sent his Son Jesus to you, and you murdered him!"

That's where we pick up the story in our lesson. The Jews weren't happy to hear this. ⁵⁴ **When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.** Still, Stephen wasn't done. God gave him the gospel to share with them, too. 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."** The one they had murdered didn't stay dead. He was alive, and reigning in heaven.

This was good news for them, if only they would listen. But look how they responded: 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.**

That hatred hasn't gone away. That's the opposition we face when we proclaim the truths of God's word – law and gospel. You've experienced it. The bible says that Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven...and when you say that, you're called narrow-minded and stuck-up. The bible says that homosexuality is a sin, but if you say that, you're called intolerant and hateful. We're almost to the point where if I say that from the pulpit, I could be thrown in jail.

But do we always face up to that opposition as boldly as Stephen did? Or do we sometimes keep our mouths shut to avoid it? Let me make it more real for you. You have a relative living with a boyfriend or girlfriend. They're not married. Do you tell them what God has to say about it – that they're sinning, that they need to stop? Or do you keep quiet, to avoid an awkward situation or an angry response?

Or at work, when religion comes up, we have the perfect chance to tell people what the bible tells us about Jesus. Do we sometimes avoid that conversation? After all, we don't want our coworkers to think we're religious fanatics, to laugh at us.

As a result, some people say you shouldn't talk about religion at all. You've heard that before: No politics, and definitely no religion. But if we don't, then how will they ever see the error of their ways? How will they ever hear the truth and be saved? Christ called us to be his witnesses...how can we do that if we keep our mouths shut?

We need to see what Stephen saw that day. So turn your eyes heavenward, and get a glimpse of your ascended Savior. See **heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.** Yes, the way to heaven stands open, for Stephen and for you, because of Christ. He's the Son of Man – true God who loved you enough to become a human being and come to this earth to save you. He lived a perfect life for you, suffered and died on the cross for all of your sins – including all of those times that your confession hasn't been as bold as it should be. God raised him from the dead as a guarantee that those sins have been taken away.

Forty days after his resurrection, Christ ascended into heaven. Now, he's **standing at the right hand of God.** That's what Stephen saw with his own two eyes.

But for him, it was just icing on the cake. Even before he saw it, he knew all this was true. He knew Jesus died for him, rose, and was at God's right hand, and he firmly believed it. And even though we haven't seen it with our own two eyes, by faith, we know it's true, too. Christ reigns at the right hand of God. This is why Stephen could be so bold in his confession, and this is why we can be bold in ours.

First, it leaves no doubt in our minds about the message we preach. The fact that Jesus is at God's right hand assures us that Christ's saving work is complete. His sacrifice was perfect – he made the full payment for sin, once and for all. That truth stands firm, so we can stand firm proclaiming it.

Second, our ascended Savior has given us his Holy Spirit. That's what our lesson tells us about Stephen. He was full of the Holy Spirit when he said these things. Through the means of grace, he's given us that same Spirit. He's the one who gives us the desire and the boldness to proclaim God's word to others.

Third, our ascended Savior takes away all fear of the opposition. Christ reigns at the right hand of God – that's the position of power and authority. God has placed all things under his feet, including our enemies. When we confess our faith, he's standing ready to use that power to come to our defense.

Do you see how wonderful the truth of Christ's ascension is, then? He didn't leave us on earth alone, to fend for ourselves. He calls us to speak his word boldly, and gives us just what we need to do that – a sure message to proclaim, the Holy Spirit at work within us, and the assurance that he rules all things for our good.

II. He keeps us strong in our suffering

And when we do suffer, he gives us the strength to bear it. You can see that in Stephen's case. Stone by stone, the life was being bludgeoned out of his body. But look at his last words.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."** Do those two prayers sound familiar? He's echoing what his Savior spoke from the cross. There's no fear or hatred in his words. There's love for the very people who are killing him, and a firm confidence that in a few moments he'll be with his Savior in heaven.

The ascended Christ gave Stephen the strength of faith to endure his suffering like that. And he does the same thing for us. Our suffering is different. Most of us have never been in a life and limb situation for our faith, but what we do have to bear – the cold shoulders of friends, the laughs and ridicules of coworkers, even the anger of family members – is all very real.

Christ strengthens us for those moments of suffering through the means of grace. Most of you have known the song, "I am Jesus' Little Lamb since you were kids." Don't forget this line: "He knows my needs and well-provides me." That's the picture we get of the ascended Christ. He's not far-removed from our daily life. He knows exactly what we're going through. He knows when we need strength to bear suffering, and he freely provides us with that strength through the means of grace. Every time we hear God's Word, every time we participate in Holy Communion, Christ is present with his Holy Spirit to sustain us spiritually.

And we have sure confidence that Christ, who rules all things at God's right hand, rules for our benefit. He takes even the suffering we go through and turns it into good, for us and for all believers. If you want proof of that, just look at the result of the persecution that started with Stephen and spread all over Judea. "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went." They meant to stamp out the gospel, but Christ used that persecution to spread his word to the four corners of the world.

Not only that, but in all our suffering – for our faith and the pain, sadness, and loneliness we face living in a sinful world – he's walking right beside us. The ascended Christ is at God's right hand, but you can be absolutely certain that he is also with each of us every day, just like he promised: "Surely, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.