

*51 "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. 52 Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. 53 You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it."*

*54 When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. 55 But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" 57 But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. 58 Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.*

A long time ago I was talking with my sister-in law. She spoke a phrase that I have never forgotten. She said, "I had a Sunday School faith, then."

A child's faith I think she meant - faith that hasn't been tested - faith that simply believes the stories of fiery furnaces and angel guarding the faithful - a faith that believes that lions will be like kittens when a Daniel is intended for their food - a faith that believes that all the Lord's lambs will always dwell in green pastures, rest beside still waters.

A Sunday school faith she called it.

But reality had crushed that faith. An aneurism snuffed out the life of a brother-in-law - young children, a loving wife left behind. The fire had burned, consumed - the lion had devoured - the wolf had come and she knew that the Lord's lambs were not always safe.

Maybe she remembered the story of Stephen. Stones rain down upon him but in that Sunday school picture there is not a drop of blood. His face glows as he kneels in prayer, at peace, as he prays, "Lord Jesus receive my spirit." And just as he is slipping into the quiet peace of death we hear his gentle words, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

"And then," the text says, "he fell asleep."

Yes, I remember that story from Sunday school. I knew that I could be like him, so full of faith that nothing could touch him, not even stones. I knew that you and I could all be exactly like him, so full of faith that no lion's teeth could ever break our skin; no fire could singe the hair of our arms. Our faith would give us perfect peace no matter what the challenge.

But I couldn't find any Christians like that picture of Stephen. O sometimes they would say all the right words about forgiving and love, but I sensed a lot of pretending, especially when I was doing the talking.

“I forgive,” I would boast. But the hurt would come creeping back in - seeping back in.

And when I suffered there was no Sunday school material photographer there to record my faithfulness, only the ridicule of those who taunted me.

This was not glorious, victorious but lonely and painful.

So what do I do? I give up hope of being like Stephen. I settle. And complain. And I find that I don't show your children and mine that picture, because I don't want them to become disillusioned as I did.

But today I have the responsibility of telling you of Stephen whether I like it or not. So I have struggled. I even wrote one whole sermon and threw it away and decided to tell you the truth.

Forget the Sunday school picture of Stephen. If we had filmed the scene that day the movie would get an R rating, or even X for violence. Stones were crushing his skull, blood was flowing, bones were crunching, and our microphone would not catch a single word of Stephen over vicious screams of the crowd. They were a mob, angry enough to kill. Remember scenes of a handcuffed prisoner being kicked and beaten by police, and remember that he did not even die. But Stephen did.

That's what happened there that day. It happens all over the world today, in Liberia and Bosnia and Chechnya, and late on a Saturday night in Cleveland. It's not glorious, and when it comes on the TV screen we don't want young children to watch it.

That is the truth about Stephen's death.

But Luke tells it in a different way altogether. For Luke the camera is not here on earth, seeing as we see, but for Luke the camera with which he records this death is the very eye of God and the microphone he uses to capture the sound is the very ear of God.

While stones rained down, and the sound of curses filled the air, God heard this prayer, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” When the eyes on earth could only see a body crushed by stones, the Lord God saw Stephen kneeling in prayer, praying for the forgiveness of his tormenters. While on earth it appeared that all was lost, in heaven there were shouts of victory as Stephen fell asleep in love.

We cannot see faith in one another, but God can see. In a world where we so often see only what appears to be the triumph of evil, God is recording quite another triumph as Christians believe. Photographs in Bosnia and Liberia cannot record faith, but those who believe in Christ triumph in their suffering.

And here also. In injustice, in sickness, in loss Christ promises that he will give you faith to endure - faith to forgive - faith to love.

Trust his promise. Amen

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