

Easter 4
May 15, 2011

Faithful to the Good Shepherd

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Acts 6 and 7

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

One of the neat things about the Bible is that it's not only filled with statements, but also illustrations. It doesn't just state a doctrinal truth, but also gives examples of that truth in practice. What I mean is: God doesn't just make promises in the Bible, keeping it abstract and vague. He gives countless specific examples of promises made and kept. He doesn't just give us a principle to live by, he gives examples of people living by the principle and being blessed... or often a negative example of someone not living by the principle and not being blessed. God doesn't just tell us he loves us, but he shows us he loves us especially in his Son Christ Jesus, and in the lengths he went through to remove our guilt forever. So God doesn't just say it. Time and again in the pages of Scriptures, he shows it. He shows it so you can know it and live it as well. Our God is a master teacher, and he wants us to get it!

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. On this particular Sunday, we remember the truth that Jesus is our Good Shepherd. As our Good Shepherd, Jesus knows us, provides for us, he guides us, and he protects us. Ultimately, he is leading us safely through this valley of the shadow of death to live with him in peace forever in heaven.

This truth is stated clearly and beautifully in a passage that is often chosen as a confirmation passage, or is preached on at confirmation. It's also a passage that often is found on bulletin covers at funerals. We normally hear the last part of the verse, but let me share with you the whole passage. It is Revelation 2:10: **"Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."**

A beautiful statement. Memorable. But what does it mean to be faithful to the Good Shepherd until death? God doesn't keep it abstract. God doesn't leave us hanging. He doesn't force us to guess. Instead he shows us. He shows us through the life of and death of a believer who followed the Good Shepherd until death. And he received the crown of life! His name was Stephen. And as usual, we don't have time to look at the whole story in detail, so we'll just hit the highlights. That means if you want to be fully blessed by what God wants you learn, you'll need to do a little more work at home by reading Acts 6 and 7 carefully several times. That's your assignment this week. But briefly, here's what God teaches us from Stephen:

What is perhaps most remarkable about Stephen is how relatively unremarkable Stephen is. By that I mean he is not one of the 12 apostles. He's a regular member of the congregation. He certainly was a believer, full of the Holy Spirit and quite knowledgeable about Scripture. But he was a layman. As far as we know, the first sermon he preached was the one that led to his death.

But he did have a role in the early church. In those days, widows were especially poor and needy. They had no husband to take care of them. So the church took care of the widows in the congregation. When the church was just 120 people before Pentecost, the 12 apostles could handle the care of the widows. But you'll remember how incredibly fast the church grew. At Pentecost 3,000 came to believe in one day. A short time later we're told there were 5,000 men

who were members of the Jerusalem church. If there were an equal number of women, and if just 1% of the women were widows, that would be 50 widows to care for. There were likely more than that. The apostles couldn't handle this work and still devote their time to prayer and preaching the Gospel.

So, the congregation chose 7 men to do this work. And here is how they chose: **“Choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.”** Stephen was just such a man. He was given this responsibility. Stephen continued to live his faith, as the Bible comments: **“Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.”**

Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. In his life and in his service to the church, Stephen faithfully followed his Good Shepherd, Jesus.

Unbelievers hated Jesus when he did miracles. Now they hated Jesus' followers for the same reason. The miracles were confirming that this new message about Jesus was indeed *God's* message. So some began arguing with Stephen. But the Holy Spirit gave Stephen wisdom and the right words to say. They couldn't refute what he said.

Often when someone is losing an argument, or can't refute the good points that another is making, they attack the person instead of attacking the topic. And that's literally what happened with Stephen. Since they couldn't refute his Spirit-given testimony about Jesus, they found some people to tell lies about Stephen. **“We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God.”** And others said, **“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.”**

Does any of this sound familiar? This was the way Jesus' trial went. Stephen must have seen the writing on the wall. Was there any way to prevent his death at this point? Yes. There was. The high priest asked Stephen, **“Are these charges true?”**

This was Stephen's out. He could have simply said, “No! I never said these things!” Of course that would not have been enough. His accusers would not stop unless Stephen would have renounced Jesus. All he had to say was that he wasn't a follower of Jesus. He could have just crossed his fingers when he said that he did not believe in Christ. As soon as they let him go, he could have gone back to his job of helping the widows. He could still encourage believers. He'd have to be a little quieter when in public. Be careful of what you say where! But at least he would be alive. This type of thinking never entered the head of Stephen. What he did remember was this:

“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

Whatever the sacrifice, whatever the consequence, whatever the persecution, whatever the suffering... remaining faithful to Jesus was the highest priority. Stephen trusted his Good Shepherd implicitly.

Therefore, he not only does not renounce his faith in Jesus, he begins a sermon in which he calls his accusers to repent of their sins, and turn to Jesus. He starts with the reader's digest version of the whole Old Testament. If your Old Testament Bible history is getting a bit rusty, you can review a good portion of it in Acts 7. Stephen's intent was simple: to point out that he was not a member of a sect. His faith in Jesus was rooted and anchored in Old Testament Scriptures. He firmly believed every word of the Old Testament, just as his accusers claimed they did. He wasn't tossing out the Old and replacing it with New. No, he demonstrated how the Old foretold and was fulfilled in the New. The Old Testament was all about God's plan of

salvation which culminated in the sending of his Son in human flesh. The one he sent was Jesus of Nazareth. He is the Righteous One foretold from ancient times.

And here's where Stephen really sealed his fate. He says, **“You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears!** [That would have really made them turn red with anger. Circumcision was the physical mark of being a child of Abraham. Now he accused them of being uncircumcised in their hearts and ears. He was telling them that they were not God's people because of their rejection of Jesus and unwillingness to repent.] **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.”**

Wow, talk about being blunt! Was that really necessary? Couldn't he have been a bit kinder and gentler? Not if he wanted to be faithful to the Good Shepherd! Jesus never shied away from calling sin for what it was. He called a spade a spade. Being a faithful follower of Jesus means confronting disobedience to God head on... no beating around the bush. Until a person understand the seriousness of their disobedience and the need for forgiveness, they will be lost. Stephen knew this may be the last time to address these people directly, so he lays it all out on the line by pulling no punches. But they had not picked a fight with him... they were fighting Almighty God. Stephen's heart yearned for them to admit their guilt and repent. Nothing of the sort happened.

But, the good news is, this story has a happy ending. Stephen is stoned to death. What? How is that a happy ending? Stephen did not compromise his faith in any way. He faithfully followed his Good Shepherd. And Jesus let him know by giving him a glimpse of heaven. Stephen saw Jesus as the right and of the Father in glory. Stephen would be joining them soon.

His accusers became violently furious with Stephen. They immediately drug him out of the city and began to stone him. The faithful follower made two more statement as his body was being pummeled with rocks. **“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”** And, **“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”** When he had said this, he fell asleep. This is what it means to faithfully follow our Good Shepherd. This is the perfect illustration of what God is encouraging you and me when he says, **“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”**

First a question to think about seriously. Have you been faithfully following your Good Shepherd? Would those who know you describe you as “being full of the Holy Spirit?” If you doubt they would say that about you, why is that? Are you feeding your faith daily through prayer and Bible study? Are you faithful in worship and Sunday Bible study?

Are you obedient to Christ in your daily living? Do you where your faith on your sleeve at home? Work? Recreation?

Do you boldly witness to others? Or are you afraid of what they'll say?

Is it safe to say that maybe you haven't faithfully followed Christ as he requires?

Let's take some time to unburden our consciences by turning to Jesus in sorrow over these sins. Don't justify them. And don't continue to carry the guilt for them. Unload them. And here this: The Lord Jesus, our perfect Good Shepherd, has remained faithful to you. He took that load of guilt. Not that you deserved it... just because he loves you. Through his life and death, he

paid your sin debt in full. You are forgiven. As far as the east is from the west, your guilt has been removed from you.

Now, arms filled with gifts, (life, salvation, forgiveness, peace)... arms full of gifts, Jesus says to you with a gentle, inviting smile: “**Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.**” And we’ve seen the proof, because today we saw the fulfillment of this promise to one Christian in particular: Stephen.

A wise person once said, "Find what you would be willing to die for, and then you will know what you should live for." Jesus knew what he would die for. You. As his close follower, aren't you will now to follow him even to death? And before that day of your death comes, will you:

- Submit to him in your life, and being obedient to him in every aspect of your life.
 - Do this knowing his word and his will.
 - Serve him with all your heart. Serving at home, work, church.
- Witness his name to all people (even peers) in all circumstances (even when you know you'll be persecuted?)”

May God give us strength, determination and power to live for him now, and to **be faithful to our Good Shepherd unto death.** And know this beyond all doubt: He will give you the crown of life. Amen.