

Devotion for Saturday after Pentecost

Psalm 119:81-88

My soul faints with longing for your salvation, but I have put my hope in your word.

My eyes fail, looking for your promise; I say, "When will you comfort me?"

Though I am like a wineskin in the smoke, I do not forget your decrees.

How long must your servant wait? When will you punish my persecutors?

The arrogant dig pitfalls for me, contrary to your law.

All your commands are trustworthy; help me, for men persecute me without cause.

They almost wiped me from the earth, but I have not forsaken your precepts.

Preserve my life according to your love, and I will obey the statutes of your mouth.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;

As it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever. Amen

Old Testament Reading: Numbers 28:1-29:40 *Offerings to the Lord*

New Testament Reading: Acts 7:1-60 *Stephen's testimony and death*

Faithful unto Death

Jesus told the disciples that they would be hated for His sake. He said a time was coming when people would kill them and think they were offering a service to God. That time came with the martyrdom of Stephen. The idyllic existence of the Jerusalem church came to a crashing end with the death of Stephen. A persecution arose that saw the leadership imprisoned and the bulk of the church dispersed to return to the places they had come from before Pentecost Sunday.

Persecution that began in Jerusalem followed the believers wherever they went. In Revelation Jesus addressed the church in Smyrna, now modern Turkey, saying, "*Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold the devil is about to throw some of you into prison that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.*" It is fitting that the first person to receive the crown of life, because of his faithful witness to Christ, should be a man named Stephen, for his name means "crown."

Stephen was one of the seven deacons chosen to assist the apostles, as a result of the conflict between the Hebraic Jews and the Hellenistic Jews. Their dispute about the distribution of food, became a minor incident in view of the death of Stephen and the persecution that followed. Stephen was chosen to distribute daily bread to the church and ensure everyone received their fair share. Stephen was also empowered by the Holy Spirit to teach the truth of Jesus; and show from the scriptures that Jesus is the Christ, the promised Messiah of Israel and Saviour of all who believe.

He spoke the same message as Peter did on Pentecost Sunday. He showed his fellow Jews their sins, so they would repent and receive their Saviour. However, unlike the three thousand who turned to Jesus that day, these people turned on Stephen and killed him. Not everyone who hears believes. The Holy Spirit calls all people to faith through the gospel, but many people remain stiff necked and resist the Holy Spirit. Stephen was faithful unto death and in dying, he gave witness to the gospel and God's desire that all come to repentance: He prayed "*Lord, do not hold this sin against them.*"

Whether we die in dramatic fashion and suffer a violent death for the sake of Christ as did Stephen, or quietly pass away in our sleep, Jesus calls us to be faithful. The way we face death says as much about our faith, as the way we lived. In fact, it may be a more powerful witness! Stephen died as a witness or "martyr," not because of his violent death. He was a "witness," or martyr, because of his faith, expressed in his life and in his last words, "*Lord Jesus receive my spirit.*" God bless us with the Holy Spirit that in living and in dying, we may be faithful witnesses to Christ. He was won for us the crown of life!

Hymn: Fight the Good Fight (Public Domain)

**Fight the good fight with all your might;
Christ is your strength and Christ your right.
Lay hold on life and it shall be,
Your joy and crown eternally.**

**Run the straight race through God's good grace;
Lift up your eyes, and seek His face.
Life with its way before us lies;
Christ is the path and Christ the prize.**

**Cast care aside, lean on your guide;
His boundless mercy will provide.
Trust and enduring faith shall prove,
Christ is your life and Christ your love.**

**Faint not nor fear, His arms are near;
He changes not who holds you dear;
Only believe, and you will see,
That Christ is all eternally.**

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we give thanks for the faithful witness of those who have gone before us in faith. We especially thank you for those who personally shared the faith with us, through words and by actions. Bless us to witness to our faith in you, by our words and through our deeds. Bless us to witness to the power and promise of your love in living and in dying. When our time comes, bless us with Stephen and all martyrs, to commit our spirits into your hands, trusting your promises and believing your name. Amen

The Lord's Prayer

**Our Father who art in heaven.
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy Kingdom come.
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory,
Forever and ever. Amen**

The Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From thence He will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen

Benediction

Psalm 118:1

“O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever.”