

This past Thursday we celebrated the ascension of Jesus up into heaven. To ascend means to go up. After Jesus rose from the dead, he appeared to his disciples over a period of forty days and he gave them many convincing proofs that he was alive. And then 40 days after his resurrection he ascended, or went up into heaven. And took his place at the right hand of God.

The fact that Jesus is at the right hand of God means that he is in the position of power and authority over the whole universe. In our passage for today from Acts chapter 7, Stephen saw Jesus at the right hand of God. Many times in the Bible the ascended Jesus is said to be at the right hand of God. But usually Jesus is said to be sitting at the right hand of God. This is the only instance where Jesus is said to be *standing* at the right hand of God. Stephen **“looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus *standing* at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:55)**. Why is Jesus standing? Some have thought maybe he is standing in judgment on the injustice that is being done to Stephen. Other have thought maybe he is standing to welcome Stephen into heaven. No matter the exact reason why Jesus is standing in those vision, we certainly can learn from God’s word today that **The Ascended Jesus Receives His Believers. I. He Receives their prayers. II. He Receives their spirit**

First, the ascended Jesus receives our *prayers*. Why was Stephen before the Sanhedrin in the first place? Not because he had done anything wrong, but because he was doing miracles and teaching about Jesus. There were false witnesses who brought false charges against Stephen: **“This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place [the temple] 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” (Acts 6:13-14)**.

Stephen told the Sanhedrin that their ancestors had rejected all the prophets and now they had rejected and murdered the one the prophets pointed to: Jesus. He told them that they had stiff necks; and hearts and ears that refused to listen (7:51). He told them that they had received the law from Moses but they had not obeyed it (7:53).

And that’s where our passage for today picks up: **“When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him” (7:54)**. It was a terrible situation that Stephen was in, but God gave Stephen a vision to strengthen him: **“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” (7:55)**. Even though it looked like his enemies were in control, God opened heaven and showed Stephen and showed Stephen that his enemies were not in control, his Ascended Savior and Lord was in control. This strengthened Stephen to say, **“Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (7:56)**. Stephen confessed his face in Jesus and he was killed for it. Stephen became the first Christian martyr.

People have noticed in this story the very close parallels between Stephen and Jesus. Stephen is standing before the Sanhedrin. Jesus stood before the Sanhedrin. There are false witnesses against Stephen. There were false witnesses against Jesus. In both cases the false witnesses brought charges of speaking against the temple. Jesus told the high priest, “You will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of God.” Stephen says that he sees the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

Stephen was a lot like his Lord. But the way that he was like his Lord that I want to focus on is that he *prayed*. Jesus is presented as a man of prayer. Jesus often went to lonely places and prayed. In the Gospel of Luke Jesus is praying at his baptism when he saw the heavens opened. On the mountain of Transfiguration, the reason Jesus went up the mountain was to pray. Jesus was a man of prayer. And in his dying moments, Stephen prays.

It says, **“While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus receive my spirit’” (Acts 7:59)**. This passage shows that we can address prayer to any one of the three members of the Trinity. We can address our prayers to God the Father. The Lord’s prayer is addressed to God the Father. We can also address our prayers to Jesus. Here Stephen addresses his prayer to the Lord Jesus. We could also pray to the Holy Spirit.

And the triune God receives our prayers. He invites us to pray and promises to hear and answer our prayers. We can certainly pray for ourselves, but Jesus also wants us to pray for others.

In the Gospel for today we heard Jesus’ high priestly prayer in John chapter 17. Part of priest’s main job was to pray for the people. This is sometimes called intercessory prayer: when you pray to God on behalf of someone else. For example, if a person is sick we might ask God to heal them. If a person is going through a difficult time we might ask God to help them. Now this is easy to do when it is someone who is kind to us. It’s much harder to do when it is a person who is mean to us.

These people were mean and cruel to Stephen. They were furious when he spoke to them God’s word and called them to repent. It says, **“When the members of Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him” (7:54)**. In their faces you could see their anger at Stephen for speaking God’s word. And then they seized him with their hands and dragged him outside the city. And then they threw stones at him to kill him.

And what was Stephen’s prayer for them? **“Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60)**. Isn’t that amazing? I mentioned before that many have pointed out a similarity between Stephen and Jesus. Here’s a very string similarity: What was Jesus’ prayer when they were nailing him to the cross? **“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34, NIV)**. Stephen was like his Lord. He was like his Lord in that he was a man of prayer. He was like his Lord in that he prayed for his enemies.

The ascended Jesus receives our prayers. He receives our prayers for ourselves and for our friends. And he also tells us to pray for our enemies. He says in Matthew chapter 5: **“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44)**.

But it’s hard to pray for our enemies. One objection we might have is that, “Oh, that won’t work.” We might think, “What’s the use in praying for them? Their attitude and their actions are never going to change.” Well, think about this: When the people were stoning Stephen, who was watching their coats? It says, **“Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul” (7:58)**. You know him better as Paul. At the time nobody would have thought that he would have turned around, but later in the book of Acts Paul confessed his sin, **“And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him” (22:20)**. God brought Saul to repentance and forgave him and did great things through him. God can do the same for those who sin against us.

The Ascended Lord receives our prayers. And, when the time comes for us to go to heaven, the ascended Lord also receives our spirit. Stephen said, **“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”** Stephen drew a lot of strength from the vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God. We are just a few days after celebrating ascension. What strength can we draw from this vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God? Well, the one standing at the right hand of God is divine and human. Why did he become a human? He became a human to save us from our sins. Why is he back up in heaven now? He returned to heaven because his work of paying for our sins is complete. He is in heaven with his glorified body, because he rose from the dead. Pastor Lahmann reminded us on Thursday that Christ is going to return. And when Christ returns he is going to transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorified body. Just like Stephen drew strength from this vision, we also can draw strength

from this vision because it reminds us that Jesus' work of paying for our sins is complete. And he is risen from the dead and will someday raise us from the dead.

Jesus standing at the right hand of God reminds us that he is in control of the whole universe. The book of Ephesians says that God placed everything under Christ feet and appointed him to be ruler over everything for the church (Ephesians 1:23). We can draw strength from the fact that at the right hand of God Jesus rules everything for the good of his people. And so we can entrust ourselves to him. We can entrust ourselves to him knowing that he is going to protect us. We can entrust ourselves to him knowing that when the times comes for us to go home to heaven, Jesus will receive our spirit at home in heaven.

We know that when the time comes for us to go home to heaven, we can say like Stephen, **"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59)**. It says that Stephen **"fell asleep" (Acts 7:60)**. The Bible sometimes refers to Christians who have died as those who have fallen asleep. It refers to them this way because sleep is temporary. When believers die, their souls go to heaven to be with Jesus and on the last day, God will raise their bodies from the dead and unite their souls with their bodies and we will live soul and body forever with Jesus in heaven. The final way that this vision that Stephen had can give us strength is that it shows us where we will be someday. While Stephen was before the Sanhedrin, he looked up to heaven. The apostle Paul tells us that as we live on this earth, we should **"should set our hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (Colossians 3:1)**.

We live our lives on this earth, but we stay focused on heaven. We stay focused on heaven, by taking time to pray for ourselves, for our friends, and for our enemies. We stay focused on heaven, by remembering that that is our real home where someday the Lord Jesus will receive our spirit. Just like this vision of Jesus at the right hand of God focused and strengthened Stephen, let this vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God focus you and strengthen you. Amen.