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Easter V
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Text: Acts 6:1 – 9; 7:2a & 51 – 60
Title: Blasphemy!?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. “Blasphemy!” he thought to himself. “Pure blasphemy!” Saul had never heard anything so infuriating. He still remembered when the apostles of Jesus of Nazareth were there. It was the second day that was so confusing because those uneducated Galileans had somehow managed to escape the prison with all the guards at their posts and all of the doors still locked. He was still angry about the way that the boldest of them, Peter, stood before them, insolently defied their authority, and declared that this Jesus could forgive sins and bring repentance to Israel. They even dared to say that that crucified traitor was now enthroned at the right hand of God! It was ludicrous to think of someone who had been crucified sitting in such a high and holy place of honor!

Saul still remembered the uproar from the council members when Peter was done talking. They were demanding the blood of all twelve of them. It was a clear case of idolatry, and they deserved execution for such a heinous crime! Saul had also shouted for them to be stoned for uttering such blasphemous statements!

Now, as Saul listened to this latest, ignorant malcontent called Stephen challenge the council’s authority in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, he recalled his mentor’s words concerning those 12 men who should have been stoned that day. Gamaliel’s wisdom was unquestionable, and when he urged the council to be cautious about this new movement they had all listened to him without debate. It just made sense that day to let this movement run its natural course. If it was truly blasphemous and against God, then it would die out. But if, as Gamaliel pointed out, it really was God’s work, then there would be nothing that they could do against it, and they might

even find themselves fighting directly against God. As Saul heard those words echo in his head once again, that warning still sent shivers down his spine. He couldn't imagine how horrible it would be to find out that he was directly opposing the will of the Lord God Almighty!

But even as Saul recalled Gamaliel's warning, he began to feel that same rage stir inside as he listened to Stephen. The insolence and blasphemy was so blatant that he just didn't want to let it continue. He looked around at the rest of the council members, and he could see the anger beginning to show on their faces too. The idea that this man would stand here and presume to lecture them about the Lord God and the history of Israel was preposterous! No one knew those things better than these men assembled here. The arrogance was unlike anything that he had ever encountered before, but was it that or was it something else? The way that he spoke could possibly be confidence. Stephen might just be sure about the truth of his message, but that would mean that he was right, and if he was right then all of them were wrong. And that just wasn't possible with all the wisdom assembled on this council.

Saul suddenly realized that he was day-dreaming, and when he looked back at Stephen he thought the man's face looked different somehow. He shook his head a little bit to help himself to refocus, and he made a conscious effort to listen closely to how this man attempted to defend himself. It might be helpful at a later date, he thought.

The accused man had already gone over most of the highlights of Israel's history talking about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. He reminded the council of many of the details of the Exodus and the life of Moses, including the nation's rejection of God at the foot of Mt. Sinai when they made the golden calf. Stephen moved on to Joshua who conquered the land, and then he talked of King David who asked to build a temple for the Lord God. He reminded them that

Solomon was given that honor instead, and that "...the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands...heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool."

After Saul had gritted his teeth through Stephen's history lesson – as if he and the others needed it! – the man actually had the audacity to say, "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

He dared to insult them!? He had the nerve to tell them they were stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, and they did not keep the Law!? These men were the most righteous men in the land! Each of them kept the Law to the letter, and they made sure that those around them kept it too! Who was this man, accused of blasphemy and insurrection, to accuse the members of this council of anything!? They were the leaders of Israel, and this man was advocating the teachings of a condemned and executed traitor and heretic! What nerve! Saul could see the fury showing plainly on the faces of the council members, but they still seemed to be holding their tempers in check, just barely though.

Saul looked over at Stephen again, and saw that he was looking up at the ceiling. Suddenly his eyes opened wider, and his face looked radiant. Saul hoped that the man was finally done talking, but then Stephen spoke again. "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." With that the room erupted with the furious shouts of the council members, and they grabbed Stephen and dragged him outside of the city gates. The officials pushed him down the slope and picked up stones, and they began to beat him as Saul waited by their cloaks. "He's getting exactly what he deserves," Saul thought.

As he was being stoned to death, Stephen called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he dropped to his knees, and spoke one last time, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Saul watched the council members hit the condemned man over and over again with their stones until Stephen went still and closed his eyes, and that was the end.

When it was all over, Saul began to make plans for what needed to be done. He knew that it couldn’t end with Stephen. There were others in the city who were teaching this new blasphemy, and he knew he had a duty to put a stop to it. This movement could not be allowed to continue, or it would doom them all. Saul knew that these followers of Jesus had to be hunted down and brought to justice, and tomorrow he would begin doing just that.

With the first martyr of Christianity also came the first real persecution of it. For the next 250 years, the Christian Church would find itself thriving in terms of growth, but struggling in terms of having to endure a near outlaw existence. Even here in the year 2026, there are countries all over the world that actively persecute and murder Christians such as reports coming out of Nigeria of terrorist attacks with the goal of eliminating Christianity completely. Even here in the United States there are examples of the world’s hatred for Christ and His church. This past week alone, there have been two incidents that clearly show that hatred. The first was the failed assassination attempt of President Trump a week ago by a man who wrote a manifesto which reportedly contained blatantly anti-Christian statements. The second example was a 565-page report released from the Department of Justice which detailed numerous and various efforts by the previous administration to openly discriminate against numerous Christian organizations. Ironically, it would be Saul, later to become the apostle Paul, who would help begin persecution of the Christian Church only to be converted by Jesus to be one of the greatest missionaries that Christianity has ever known.

Prior to his conversion, Saul was an outright enemy of the Christian Church. He did everything in his power to bring it to an end, but he found himself opposing the Will of God. And as we all know, that is the essence of sin: opposition to the Will of God. Opposition can come in many forms. It can be blatant such as Saul's efforts to literally hunt down Christians. Or it can be more subtle such as giving weight to a teaching that sounds like it's based on the Bible, but is really contradicting it as we see from many false teachers today. Opposition to God's Will can also take the form of knowingly defying His Law, such as not forgiving those who have sinned against you. That's one of the greatest things that we learn from the martyrdom of Stephen, the love of his enemies that he displayed and his ability to forgive them even as they were killing him, just as we saw Jesus do on the cross.

Stephen was given the faith that he needed to forgive and to endure until the very end. The visions that he was granted before his death gave him peace to face his execution in faith, and to endure with it until his last breath. Stephen's vision assured him that he was following the right path that would bring him to his heavenly home prepared just for him as Jesus promised all of His faithful disciples.

And that includes you who are here today. You have been given those same promises. One of the greatest ones is shown in the Words of Jesus from today's Gospel reading. Jesus has gone ahead of us. He has prepared a place for every faithful believer, and He has promised that He is coming back to take each of us who are faithful to Him to our new home with Him. He is the true and only way to that new home. He is truly the only source of everlasting life, and through faith we are promised a place there because He has already prepared it by dying and rising from the dead. Rising indeed! Alleluia! Amen.