**Faithful to the End (Acts 7:54-60)**

 God calls us to be faithful to Him to our very last breath.

 Greetings to you dear brothers and sisters in Christ as we continue to take another look at the events taking place during the time period of the first Christian church in the book of Acts, for our benefit. Faithfulness, or loyalty, is one of the most important characteristics of our faith; but often, in this consumeristic culture in which items are thrown away and no longer repaired, the same is done with interpersonal and even spiritual relationships. Because of that, the martyrdom of Stephen is a great example of faithfulness (in a culture that has devalued loyalty). His loyalty to God would have a great effect on the flourishing of the church after his death. Therefore, today we’re going to briefly study Stephen’s faithfulness to God and its effect upon the church in those difficult times, as well as what the above says to us in today’s circumstances. Once again, I stress that through this passage, God is calling us to remain faithful to Him until our last breath. Let’s speak, then, about this virtue…

 When we remain faithful to the Lord, our example opens the way for the church’s growth. The deacon Stephen was an excellent example of a well-prepared servant of the Lord. As we read the 6th and 7th chapters of Acts, we saw just how well he recounted the experiences of God’s people. He remembered, near the end of his exhortation, that God did not live in man-made buildings (namely the Temple in Jerusalem), but rather, that His throne was heaven itself, and that He had created everything. After rehashing the above, Stephen scolded his brother Jews who, by his words, were “stiff-necked” and “uncircumcised in heart and ear” – in other words, far from God spiritually. At that point the people listening were already incensed and drove him out of the city and began pelting him with stones. But Stephen did not put aside his Godly focus and demeanor as those rocks wounded his body and head. He not only accepted their violence towards him, but he even prayed for his adversaries that their sin would be atoned for and not counted against them. Of course, he was praying for their salvation, which was the only way that their sins would not be held against them. Notice his faithfulness to God. Notice his focus on doing God’s will so much so that his face shone like an angel in those last moments of his life. The following story is appropriate here:

The forty wrestlers were Christian soldiers in one of the legions of the Roman army. The army was on a campaign in the high mountains of Armenia, in Asia Minor, and it was bitter winter. The emperor had issued a decree to the generals of all his armies that on a given day the soldiers must march past the statue of the emperor, do obeisance, pour out a libation of wine, and drop incense on the fire.

At the appointed time the trumpets blew and the army marched past the emperor's statue, where all bowed and poured out the wine and offered the incense, as if to a god. But the forty wrestlers, these Christian soldiers, refused to pay the emperor's statue divine honors. They were renowned for both their prowess on the field of battle and their athletic triumphs in the amphitheater. Their general, who thought highly of them, besought them, for his sake and their love for him, to obey the decree. For a moment they hesitated, as they thought of the sweetness of life and of their families at home—but it was only for a moment. Then they answered their general and said, "For Rome we will fight on any field and under any sky. In the service of the emperor, if necessary, we will die. But we worship no one save our Master, Jesus Christ." Then with great sorrow and reluctance the general pronounced the sentence of punishment decreed for those who refused to worship the image of the emperor.

The forty soldiers were stripped of their armor, which they had honored so in many a hard-fought campaign. Their helmets and breastplates and shields and spears and swords were taken from them. Then they were divested of their undergarments and their sandals, and, stark naked, were driven out into the subzero weather upon the frozen lake. The night had come down, and as the soldiers of the legion sat about the campfires in their bivouacs they could hear the voices of the forty wrestlers as they sang, "Forty wrestlers wrestling for thee, O Christ, claim for thee the victory and from thee the crown."

As the night passed, their song grew fainter and fainter, as man after man succumbed to the cold and fell lifeless on the ice. At length only one survivor was left. Naked and trembling and shivering, he appeared before the tent of the general and said to the sentinel, "I will drop the incense and pour the wine." But the sentinel, who, although a pagan, had been moved by the heroic faith of the forty wrestlers, answered, "Since thou hast proved a coward, I will take thy place."

With that he stripped off his armor and his clothing and went out in the night upon the ice to take his stand among the thirty-nine who had fallen

For a time the soldiers about the campfire heard his voice singing as he caught up the chant of those who fallen: "Forty wrestlers wrestling thee, O Christ, claim for thee the victory and from thee the crown." At length he, too, fell dead upon the ice. When the morning sun rose over the bleak Armenian mountains, that was what it looked down upon—the forty wrestlers who had died for Christ, and from whom they had received the crown. This story is known as the story of the Forty Youth, or “Karasoun Manoug” in Armenian.

 Having heard all the above, we ask ourselves: what about us? Today there is no one persecuting us in that way on this side of the world. However, today we continue to need to be faithful to God because our war continues on spiritual battlefields. Our enemy may not be the emperor of Rome anymore, but it may be our physical or economic comfort or an addiction that seems enjoyable. Our spiritual enemy that demands worship from us may be our own family or our great accumulated wealth. Sometimes, even, our jobs become the Caesars that demand worship; sometimes it’s our house, or a particular place, building, or other material thing. In short: as believers, our martyr forefathers who went before us open the way for us to be brave against the temptations of idolatry and to stand firmly upon on our faith in Christ. Let us especially take into account that immediately after Stephen’s stoning, we are told the account of Saul’s conversion, whom we know better as Paul the Apostle.

Sometimes our faithfulness to God will draw new believers and servants forward into the life of the church, especially when they see the value that we place on loyalty to Jesus Christ. Perhaps Stephen’s death paved the way for the Apostle Paul to arise…

Therefore, let’s not forget the story of the 40 Youth. The bravery of the 39 inspired the guard, who immediately experienced a baptism of sorts through his desire to unite with believers in love and ultimate loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ.

 When we remain faithful to the Lord, our example opens the way for the church’s growth. God is calling us to remain faithful to Him until our last breath.

 May God give us even more courage, so that we may bear witness to our Savior wherever we are, whenever it is needed. May the Lord Bless you all. Amen.