



## BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

**Easter 5 (A)**  
**May 10, 2020**

**RCL: Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14**

### **Acts 7:55-60**

In the midst of his suffering and persecution, Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he saw the glory of God. The fact that Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit shows the source of his courage, wisdom, and power in preaching. To make room for the Holy Spirit, he had to let go of his need for control - or the need to cling to his own life. In his hour of trial, Stephen saw Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father. The language of verse 56 illustrates a paradox. “‘Look,’ Stephen said, ‘I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!’”

Stephen saw the heavens open up, but he also had a sense that Jesus was standing right beside him, as opposed to a mere vision of Jesus who was far off. This verse indicates that Jesus was standing in solidarity with Stephen at the moment of his martyrdom. Following Christ the whole way gave Stephen the strength to do things which seem humanly impossible: finding peace when facing painful death; forgiving those who stoned him: “‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he died.” Stephen died the way he lived: in complete trust in God. May we do likewise.

- Where do you see the glory of God? Where do you find beauty, joy, and peace?
- What helps you make room for the Holy Spirit in your life? What aids you to let go of your need for control - the need to plan your life in accordance with your own ideas, comfort, and preferences?
- How can you fix your eyes on Jesus?

### **Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16**

Many scholars believe that Psalm 31 was intended for public singing. This psalm is a communal plea for rescue. It begins in a familiar way, “In you, O Lord, have I taken refuge.” This psalm is a declaration to God in time of trouble. When the psalmist asks God, “Deliver me in your righteousness,” there are two possible ways to interpret this. One is that God’s sense of justice will find us worthy of deliverance. This is a tall order for any of us. The second interpretation comes from the rendering of the word “righteousness” as friendship with God. In light of this translation, the psalmist is asking that his friendship with God become the vehicle of his deliverance.

If we re-read the psalm substituting “righteousness” with “friendship with God,” the psalm acquires new depth and meaning. It is not about what we need. It is about what God desires for us. God desires our friendship. Many of us have a very severe idea of God. We are afraid of God (notice that this is different from fear of God, which is a gift of the Spirit). When that harsh image of God softens, we come to see that God wants to have a personal relationship with each one of us. Even so, we might still see God as an umpire or the manager of a baseball team: God shares a few words of encouragement with us, and maybe a joke or two, but God is always watching us critically - ready to bench us or cut us from the team if we make too many errors.

This is not what God desires. God is our refuge, not our referee. God is our friend. What God wants is friendship. God brought us into existence out of an abundance of personal love. I believe the psalmist saw God as mighty and awesome - as his refuge and stronghold - but also as a friend. And this changed everything.

- When was the last time your community of faith prayed together for God’s deliverance?
- God wants to be your friend. That’s a powerful idea. What feelings or thoughts come to mind when you ponder that God wants to have a friendship or a personal relationship with you?

### **1 Peter 2:2-10**

In the second chapter of his first letter, Peter used two eloquent images. First, Peter writes that God is building a spiritual temple using living stones (God’s people), those who believe in the ultimate living stone (Jesus). Peter writes that in order to be living stones, we need to be alive in the Spirit. Peter writes, “Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation.” The words “long for” echo the language of the psalms. In Psalm 42, “long for” is used for humanity’s deepest desire for God: “As the deer longs for the water-brooks, so longs my soul for you, O God.”

This speaks of the desire each person should have for the word of God. Peter is telling us that we are to gulp down a nourishing drink that is spiritual and pure. He reminds us that the soul needs to be fed. The great spiritual writers tell us about junk food for the soul: wealth, pleasure, honor, and power. That junk food will not satisfy the soul - just as our body cannot live on Twinkies and milkshakes. The soul is hungry for grace and the divine life. What it wants is God. How do we nourish the soul? Prayer, which is the raising of the mind and the heart to God. Without the prayer, the soul dries up. Peter pleads with us to feed the soul.

- If you’ve been sick for a few days and gone without much food, you know how quickly the body fades without food. So it is with spiritual food. Where do you find spiritual nourishment? What feeds your soul?
- What is your go-to “junk food”? What spiritual practices help you to fast or abstain from spiritual junk food?

### **John 14:1-14**

John's own description of the purpose of his gospel is critically important to understand each chapter. His gospel is about the signs and deeds of Jesus and how they evoke belief, conversion, and transformation (cf. Kittredge, *Conversations with Scripture: The Gospel of John*). This is how John stated the purpose of this gospel: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31).

In chapter fourteen, Jesus told his disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me" (John 14:1). The disciples had reason to be troubled. The signs and deeds they had witnessed were confusing. Furthermore, Jesus had just told them that there was a traitor among them. All of this legitimately troubled the disciples. Yet Jesus told them to not let their hearts be troubled. Not quite, "Do not be afraid." Rather, "Do not let your fears overwhelm you."

Jesus never wanted his disciples, then and now, to have life without trouble. But Jesus promised that we could have an untroubled heart even in a troubled life. Jesus told us that putting our trust in him was the path to a non-anxious presence. Merrill C. Tenney argues that this passage is a command to the disciples; he says that the form of the imperative in the first verse "*me tarassetho*" implies that the disciples should "stop being troubled." Another translation for this is, "Set your heart at ease." Unclench your heart and let go of your fears. Instead of giving into a troubled heart, Jesus told the disciples to put their trust in God. This was a radical call. It was also a radical promise that doing so would bring comfort and peace to a troubled heart. For us today, it is an invitation to put our trust in God and to find peace in Jesus. It is not about suppressing our fears, but to be aware of our fears and our anxieties and to firmly put our trust in the living God.

- What does life in Jesus' name look like?
- What brings you peace when you are afraid?
- What helps you to put your trust in God?

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