



## BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

**Easter 5 (A)**  
**May 7, 2023**

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

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

Today's passage from the Acts of the Apostles opens with Stephen, who was previously said to have an angelic or transfigured face (Acts 6:15), gazing into heaven and having a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God. He voiced his vision to those around him. Stephen was steadfast in his faith in Jesus as the Righteous One. Stephen had done great wonders and signs among the people, and in his steadfastness, he found himself in opposition to the religious establishment who might have felt like they were playing a game of whack-a-mole with the apostles.

Much as later Christians defined heresies and what was orthodox and what was not, the Sanhedrin was struggling with this group of Jewish heretics. Christians did not exist yet. Gamaliel, a Pharisee on the council, advised leaving the apostles alone. If they are not of God, he said, their preaching will run its course and die out. If they are of God, perhaps the council should be taking notice (Acts 5:34-39). But tensions were clearly running high, and Stephen was killed. He is considered to be the first Christian martyr. His last words echo those of Jesus' words during his passion (Luke 23:34, 46). He followed Jesus to the end of his life.

- What does it mean to you to be faithful to your beliefs? How might you see those whose beliefs differ from yours as fellow children of God?
- How can this passage inform your own actions when you become angry when someone challenges your core beliefs? What are some alternatives to the immediate reaction that is sparked in you?

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

The first five verses of Psalm 31 are one of the psalm options for Compline. Compline is the last service of the daily office and one intended for quiet reflection on the day and preparation for the night of rest. The psalmist is expressing trust in God – trust that God will be a safe refuge, a strong rock, a castle, and protection that one can hide behind in hard moments. The psalmist places themselves in the hands of God and asks that God rescue them from the hands of their enemies. Jesus and Stephen's words echo verse 5 about commending one's spirit to God. Verse 16, in which the psalmist exhorts God, "Make your face to shine upon your servant, and in your loving-kindness save me," reprises the scene in Numbers in which Aaron delivers a blessing to the Israelites during the Exodus. He says, "The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you." Here, the psalmist is asking for God's blessing and saving grace.

- Are there times in your life when it is easier or harder to trust God? What are those moments?
- When might you want to pray the words of this psalm? How would they be meaningful in that situation?

## 1 Peter 2:2-10

Just as babies grow drinking milk, Peter said that new Christians will grow by consuming the Word of God. When this was written, however, there was no agreed-upon definition of the Bible as we know it today. Certainly not the Second Testament. Part of consuming the Word of God in the time of Peter most certainly meant hearing it. Many people were not literate and would not have had access to the written word, even if they were. Today, we have the Bible with both Testaments included.

And, as we are living stones whom God uses to build, part of our responsibility as Christians is to be mindful of what we are reading and the context of these words. Peter was likely writing to Jewish and newish Christians, which might explain the borrowing of phrases from First Testament writings (Exodus 19:6, Isaiah 28:16, 43:20-21, and Psalm 118:22). Peter is making the case that followers of Jesus also belong to God because of the saving work that Jesus did. He was writing when there was not a Christian church on every corner. He is encouraging new Christians, using language previously used to refer to Israelites, to tell them they are worthy and do belong to God, even when it was not clear where they fit in society.

- How have you grown as a Christian by consuming “spiritual milk”? Have your understandings evolved or changed over time or not?
- How could this text be misused?

## John 14:1-14

Before Christians were called Christians, they were known as “followers of the Way.” The Acts of the Apostles is filled with references to those belonging to or knowing the Way, as in Acts 9:2 and 18:25-26. Instead of God being a long way off, Jesus told his disciples that if you know him, you know God. Jesus is Emmanuel, God is with us. But he is also foreshadowing his death for his disciples and telling them it is not the end. Jesus tells them that they know the way to the place he is going. Ever-practical Thomas says, “Hang on a minute, Jesus, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” This is the same Thomas who would later say to his fellow disciples that he would not believe in the resurrected Jesus unless he saw and touched Jesus’ wounds.

It is notable that Jesus doesn’t ignore Thomas. Jesus doesn’t gloss over Thomas’ question. Jesus doesn’t appear to answer him condescendingly. He tells Thomas and all the disciples present, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” Jesus is connecting himself again to God by describing himself with an “I AM” statement. Thomas asked hard questions of Jesus that perhaps the other disciples did not dare to, and in so doing, helped to crack open the Word a bit more for all of us.

- When have you had doubts or wanted to ask more questions of God?
- What does knowing Jesus as the Way mean to you? How does that impact your life and your relationship with others?

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