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Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

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Communion Sunday

Selected Scriptures

Prayer: *Father, I just thank you for who you are and I thank you for the immensity of the gift that your Son is to us. We just praise you and thank you for that gift. We thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ and we thank you for the cross. So Lord, today, this morning as we are looking into again your word and what you've done for us on that cross, we pray that you would give us the presence of your Holy Spirit, open up our eyes and our ears and our heart and our minds to take in your word and to make it of permanent value, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well once again it's the first Sunday of the month and this is the day that we remember Christ and his cross. And Jesus on the night before he died, he met with his disciples to share the very last Passover supper with them. It's recorded in *Matthew 26*. It says: *Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body."* And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, *"Drink of it, all of you, for this is my*

blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." So Jesus took bread and he took wine and he offered them up as symbols of his flesh and blood then he asked his disciples to eat the bread and drink the cup so that they might symbolically eat his flesh and drink his blood. He then asked them to repeat the remembrance of his sacrifice on a regular basis, and this is what we call "the Lord's Table" and we celebrate it once a month. We do that by meditating first on the Lord Jesus Christ and what he did for us on the cross. That by examining ourselves, that means asking God's Holy Spirit to point out areas where he's convicting us of sin, by next confessing our sins and then by participating in the elements. *John 6:53 says: So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."*

Well we are following the life of Christ in the gospel of Mark, and we started last time a new chapter, chapter 6. As one commentator said of chapter 5 which we just left, it was considered the faith chapter, chapter 6 would be considered the unfaith chapter. After a time of great healings and miracles and teaching, Jesus and his disciples returned to his hometown and he begins preaching in a synagogue and first his family, his friends, his neighbors, they're

struck with his incredible wisdom and insight but very quickly they begin to reflect on his humble upbringing. And instead of being pleased and proud of their hometown prophet, they are instead offended.

We spent a great deal of time last month just looking at Jesus' pronouncement describing why he received such poor treatment in his own hometown. It says: *And Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household."* Well not only did they dishonor Jesus but their response proved that no amount of miracles done by Jesus would change their hearts. Verse 5 says: *And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. And he marveled because of their unbelief. And he went about among the villages teaching.* Some folks want to make this verse say far more than it intends to say by suggesting that Jesus had to partner with the faith of those whom he served in order to do any miracles, but that doesn't explain how he could have possibly partnered with those who were dead that he raised from the dead, nor does it explain how he did miracles to those who were clearly not expecting them, such as the man born blind in John 9. Jesus did not do miracles in his hometown not because he couldn't but because his people's state of heart and mind precluded his miracles of being any benefit. In fact such miracles rejected

would do nothing but add to their judgment. And so it's far more reasonable to look at this text the way Matthew does when he describes the very same incident. *Matthew 13* says: *And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief.* Jesus is acutely aware that his ministry is now changing subtly and it's changing from serving and healing and teaching to now dealing with critics and oppression and even persecution. Jesus knows that it's critical for him to be passing on to his disciples the task of passing out the good news, and so he begins the clinical training of his disciples by sending them out. This is *Mark 6:7-13*: *And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff -- no bread, no bag, no money in their belts -- but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. And he said to them, "Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there. And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.*

We read this account and it looks so promising, I mean, the disciples go out, they preach the good news, they cast out demons,

they heal people and -- piece of cake. The actuality was anything but that. The disciples' initial success, it grabs the attention of King Herod. We read: *King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. For when Herodias's daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." And she came in immediately with haste to the king*

and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

When we look at the life of John the Baptist, we're tempted to think that we're looking at someone who is not supposed to meet his death this way. I mean this is someone who didn't just have a distant connection to Jesus, this was one of his cousins. This was someone who was so intimately acquainted with who Jesus was that while he was an unborn baby, he leapt within the womb of his mother at the presence of Jesus when Mary went to visit Elizabeth. This is someone who had lived his life faithfully and superbly as the messenger who smoothed the way for the Lord Jesus Christ. We read of John's role right at the very beginning of Mark's gospel in *Mark 1:2*. It says: *"Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" John's ministry pointed out Israel's desperate need for repentance and he also pointed to Jesus as the source of that repentance.*

At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry he had asked John to baptize him so that he could fully identify with him. And as John sees Jesus coming towards him to be baptized, he makes a proclamation that sums up everything that the Old Testament sacrificial system stood for. John sees Jesus coming towards him and he says: *"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"* John knew that walking there before him was the one that all of the sacrifices and all of the blood of all the innocent animals for all of those thousands of years was pointing to. John knew that when God said in *Leviticus 17*: *'For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.'* John knew that those animal sacrifices were pointing towards one ultimate once-and-for-all sacrifice and that standing before him was Jesus Christ who was that sacrifice, that he had come to live out his life perfectly in order to offer up his life on a cross so that his blood, just like the blood of those sacrificed animals, could be poured out. But this time it wouldn't be symbolic, this time it would be actual. The blood of the ultimate sacrificial lamb would indeed take away the sins of the world and John the Baptist alone at this time knew it. He knew that Jesus was the creator God who had taken on flesh and he also knew precisely where he stood in relation to Jesus as he said in verse 30: *"This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who*

ranks before me, because he was before me.'" John knew Jesus was the eternal God that was now there in the flesh. And he also knew what his own role was, that he was not the Messiah, that he was the one preparing the way for the Messiah. And when the Pharisees quizzed him as to who he was and by what authority he was baptizing -- quote -- They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." John had the perfect answer to give to the religious authorities. And he also had the perfect answer to give to his own followers when they engaged in that all too human desire for fame and for power. I mean, at one point Jesus' disciples begin baptizing and they're now baptizing, the crowds are all going to him instead of to the Baptist. John 3:26 says: And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness -- look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him." Well, John's answer, his answer that he gave to his disciples proved he understood perfectly what his role was. John said: "He must increase, but I must decrease." He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all."

See, everything about John, everything about his ministry spoke to how faithful and true he was in exercising what God had given him to do. For all of his faithfulness, John earned the ire of the king, got arrested, but even after his arrest as he's sitting there in a dungeon, he begins to question not God's sovereignty or God's goodness or God's will but God's plan. He's wondering if he's gotten something wrong. *Matthew 11* says: *When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities. Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"* I mean even in the extreme of imprisonment John's not bitter, he's not complaining, in fact he's asking a very legitimate question. Jesus answers him. This is what he says in *Matthew 11:4*. He says: *And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."* As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: *"What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.*

This is he of whom it is written, "'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist."

So John lived a life wholly pleasing to God, a life in which he served God exactly as God had intended him to. He not only knew Christ, he was one of the only ones who knew him as Messiah, the Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world. He was first cousin to Jesus. Jesus describes him as more than a prophet, in fact the greatest among all those born of women. So John checks off every single box you can check from his connections to his conduct to his courage. What does it get him? Well, it gets him a one-way trip to a dungeon and an ending so ignominious and so ignoble that you wouldn't wish it on your worst enemy. His head is served up as a party favor for a salacious dancer, her wicked mother and a feckless king. On the surface it certainly looks like John got the short end of the stick, and when you pan back a little bit, you find out that he wasn't the only one. You know those disciples who started out so well? Well, they all ended up ending not so well. And it wasn't just the disciples. It was many of those who proclaimed the good news. And Paul himself had his head cut off, Peter was crucified upside down, Stephen was the very first martyr stoned to death by a murderous crowd. According to

popular tradition, every one of the twelve apostles with the exception of John met a violent and cruel death. John was exiled to an island but he was also said at one time to have been thrown into boiling oil. The bottom line is that being close to Jesus, living for Jesus guarantees you nothing in terms of an easy and pain-free life. In fact it's almost a guarantee of the exact opposite. Paul said to Timothy, his mentee, in *2 Timothy*, he said: *Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.* I mean I think we all desire to live a godly life, but I just wonder just given the way the church has been for the last forty, fifty years if we are at all prepared for persecution.

So I want us to just take a moment to consider God's call to take up our crosses and follow him and ask yourself, would I be truly willing to take the path that John the Baptist took? Consider also as you're considering that, God's warning about taking communion. It's found in *1 Corinthians 11:28*. It says: *But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.* I repeat this every month about how incredibly

serious communion is, and I beg you that if you are not at all certain of your status, do not enter into it in an unworthy manner. It is literally to court disaster. If you're not a child of the King, if you haven't been faith trusted in Christ as your Savior, if you first need to be reconciled to your brother or your sister before you bring the sacrifice of your own life to this altar, then feel free to pass the elements on. Even at home in your living room, do not participate if you don't feel right about participating. Err on the side of getting right with God first.

And always as I say, you can always make the opposite mistake of thinking you have to be spotlessly perfect in order to receive communion, and that, too, is a mistake. Because being a child of God doesn't mean that you don't sin and that you don't fail, it means that you recognize that the salvation you have received is a gift. And once again we quote Dane Ortlund. He says: "In the kingdom of God the one thing that qualifies you is knowing you don't qualify and the one thing that disqualifies you is thinking that you do." You see when you have the Holy Spirit of God, you recognize that when you fail, you are aware that you've sinned and you understand that God's Spirit is convicting you. And so you grieve as children who know that you have a Father in heaven who longs to forgive and cleanse you. God says in *1 John 1:9*: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins*

and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. So being a child of the King doesn't mean that you're spotless or sinless. It means that when you sin you understand you have someone right now up in heaven speaking on your behalf, an advocate. 1 John 2:1 says: My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father -- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. And that's our bottom line, it's because we have a foreign righteousness, we have an alien righteousness, Jesus' righteousness and not our own, we have perfect righteousness and because of that we are free to eat from his table. And so if you love your Lord, don't deny yourself the privilege that he purchased for you at the cross. He lived the life we were supposed to live and then he died the death we all deserved to die in our place so that we could be made worthy of this very moment, worthy as well of heaven. So take a moment to ask yourself: Am I truly willing to take up my cross for him?

If you all have your communion, open up the bread. 1 Corinthians 11:23 says: For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." So take, and eat.

The Japanese have a statement, they say it's the nail that sticks up that gets pounded. John the Baptist stood up for Jesus and that's exactly what he got, he got pounded. So did Peter and Paul and Stephen. And so we ask the question, well, why should I? I mean doesn't Paul say in *1 Timothy 2: First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.* I don't know about you but if I had my druthers, I would certainly opt for a life that's peaceful, quiet, godly and dignified as opposed to the lives that Peter, Paul, Stephen and John the Baptist got. They got persecution, they got torture, they got godlessness, and in John's case, they had the height of indignity. It doesn't get more undignified than having your head served up on a platter at the behest of three of the most morally compromised individuals in all of history: Herod, Herodias and Salome.

There's a website called "Got Questions," a very good website, Christian website just questions about scripture. They have a little detail in there about -- just about who these three were. It said this: "Herod Antipas (the 'King Herod' of Mark 6:14) had divorced his wife and married Herodias, who was the wife of his half-brother Philip (Mark 6:17). However, Herodias herself was the

daughter of another of Herod's half-brothers, Aristobulus, making her not only the wife but the niece of both Philip and Herod -- and a sister-in-law of Herod. Salome was Herodias's daughter through Philip. Thus, Salome was the daughter (and grandniece) of Philip and the step-daughter (and grandniece by marriage) of Herod; she was also both daughter and grandniece to her own mother."

You got that? You look at these folks and you say, how can it appear that these folks won and that John the Baptist lost? Well, you know, I think our problem in looking at John's story is that we look at it from an historical rather than a biblical perspective. You see for many of us it's all we think of. You think of John the Baptist, when I hear of John the Baptist, I think of a salacious dance and an unbelievably awful beheading. We just tend to play that moment in history over and over again, but that's just what it was and no more. It was a moment in history. If we were to look at it biblically we'd have to understand what I was referring to just last week about heaven itself and that there's a whole lot more hereafter than there is here. And so if you're going to do justice to the sad tale of John the Baptist's execution, you really have to ask the question not about what happened 2,000 years ago but what has been happening in the 2,000 years since. You see, there's no question that Herod and Herodias and Salome, they won that moment, but it was only a moment. Paul said: *For our light*

affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

Now with all due respect to Paul, I mean, that statement seems absurd, if you look at what he considered to be light afflictions. I mean we all know that Paul was beaten and lashed, stoned, starved, eventually beheaded. So what could possibly make these afflictions light? Only a comparison to something else and that something else is heaven itself. It's the hereafter not the here. See, for over 2,000 years now John the Baptist and Peter and Paul and Stephen and all the others have been unpacking the full weight of the glory that their affliction gave rise to. I mean I wish I could give you a detailed account of what it is they're experiencing, but God himself tells us that it's beyond human understanding to even grasp or describe it. This is how Paul puts it in *1 Corinthians 2*. He says: *But as it is written: "EYE HAS NOT SEEN, NOR EAR HEARD, NOR HAVE ENTERED INTO THE HEART OF MAN THE THINGS WHICH GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM."* And what God is saying is take all of the senses that you have and add to all of your senses all of that emotional power that you have within you and just picture the most amazingly glorious moment in your

life, whether it was a sunset or a mountain or an ocean or something where you just felt so incredibly glorious and God's saying that doesn't cut it. That doesn't work. It's not adequate to describe what I've got in store for you. I mean imagine arriving in heaven as your new eternal home and having Jesus Christ himself announce to the angels his love for you and his pleasure in your willingness to confess him before others. Well, that's just what Jesus promised to those who are faithful. He says in *Luke 12*: *"Also I say to you, whoever confesses Me before men, him the Son of Man also will confess before the angels of God."* And those three people, those three folks responsible for John the Baptist's ignominious death, they've also been reaping their rewards as well. They took something precious to God from him in the most awful way imaginable. So for 2,000 years now Herodias, Herod and Salome have been reaping the full harvest of what it is they sowed while they were alive. *Hebrews 10* says: *For we know Him who said, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord. And again, "THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE."* *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*

We know Jesus himself said in *Luke 12*: *"And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast*

into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!" So some 2,000 years ago these three wicked people clearly, they did win their moment in time, they were able to kill the body, but every single moment, every single second that has passed subsequent to that moment has been a testimony to how empty a victory that was. We who believe that heaven is forever and ever also believe that it will be an ongoing process of growing from glory to glory. We have no inkling of how blessed we are. We don't have a clue, I mean, not even close. I mean just last week we shared Paul's promise of what is in store for us. He said this, he said: *For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.* God says, I've got a body for you, it's going to be just like mine. It's waiting for you.

I mean in light of that promise we have to ask ourselves not about what happened 2,000 years ago but what is happening right now, what's happening in the lives of Paul and Peter and Stephen and John the Baptist as well as Herod, Herodias and Salome. Hebrews tells us that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, those who have gone before us. And among them are thousands and thousands of those who suffered incredibly cruel torture for naming

the name of Christ. I mean even today, I mean, through the *Voice of the Martyrs* we know that that kind of suffering goes on all over the world but they can only kill the body.

You know when I get to heaven, there's one question that I would love to be able to ask any of the witnesses who suffered through their individual moments of pain and agony who are now in their eternal home, and the question I would love to ask them is: Do you have any regrets? I mean, knowing what you now know in heaven, would you have changed what took place in your life on earth? We've been told again that human senses don't even comprehend the wonder of what's in store for us. No eye has seen no ear has heard what God has waiting for us. And especially for those who lost their individual moments here on earth. Stephen's a perfect example of that. And Stephen's death is actually illustrative for us. I mean it just became obvious a few years back when we were doing a study on the book of Acts. I was really struck by Peter and Stephen and the messages they gave and the responses they got from faithfully delivering each of them their message. The time frame is shortly after Jesus has ascended into heaven and Peter's called before the ruling body in Israel. They just -- obviously they're feeling pretty happy, pretty sassy, they've just executed Jesus on a cross, they're convinced that they've gotten rid of the problem forever. Now Peter and his church is doing the miraculous

and thousands of people are starting to join him. And Peter very publicly heals a crippled man and the leaders were furious at this turn of events. So they call Peter to come before them. In *Acts 4* it says: *And when they had set them in the midst, they asked, "By what power or by what name have you done this?" Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders of Israel: If we this day are judged for a good deed done to a helpless man, by what means he has been made well, let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole. The religious leaders, they can't believe the boldness, the insight and the wisdom they're hearing from this fisherman. Who's this guy? But they're terrified now and they're terrified of all the power that he has, and so they warn him emptily to stop preaching and Peter does no such thing.*

Contrast that with the almost identical message that Stephen delivers to the same body of men a short while later. Stephen's out there doing the same thing, he's preaching and doing great miracles and he, too, is called before the ruling body. This is *Acts 6*. It says: *And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man*

does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us." And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel. Well then Stephen then delivers this historic lecture. It's a stunning lecture detailing exactly why God has raised up Israel, who Jesus the Messiah actually was, how the whole of history has played itself out and how wickedly they were resisting it. And he ends up saying in Acts 7: "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it." You might think that Stephen should receive the same response that Peter did. You know, Peter delivers his message and the rulers are cowed into silence by his power. Peter's clearly won the moment. But again, it's only an historical moment. Stephen delivers essentially the same message to the same rulers but this time the crowd's different. The crowd's response is exactly the opposite. It says: *When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and*

Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

Peter won his moment of trial. Stephen, not so much. But there was a reason for both. See, it turns out that Stephen's martyrdom started a wholesale persecution of the church and it was that persecution that caused the church to spread throughout all of Asian and even into Europe. So in God's great purpose he says, Peter, you're going to win the moment, and Stephen, you're going to lose it for my sake. And yet both Peter and Stephen and John and Paul and every other one who's ever lost a moment to the enemy would tell you that the other side, the heaven side has made it far more than worthwhile. For losing the moment they've gained eternity.

And the story of Stephen's death also gives us incite, a precious little window detailing just what happens on the other side when a saint loses his historical moment to the enemy. You see while Stephen is literally being executed, as the rocks are flying

towards him, the Holy Spirit gives him a revelation. For Stephen the heavens suddenly part and he's given the ability to gaze directly into that kingdom, and even as the rocks are flying, he's stunned and amazed and this is what he says, he says: *"Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."* That alone is a stunning revelation because one thing we know about heaven is that the ascended Jesus sits at the right hand of God, he doesn't stand. I mean the simple reason for Stephen seeing Jesus standing would be the King of heaven himself stepping up from the throne that he was seated on to welcome Stephen into the kingdom to enjoy his forever reward. He, like John the Baptist, absolutely lost the historical moment but he, like the Baptist, won the eternal moment.

So how does this relate to us? Well, you know we have been told in scripture over and over again that suffering is going to be a part of believing in Jesus Christ. Jesus himself said that we are to take up our crosses and follow him. Peter tells us don't be surprised if you're suffering. The book the Hebrews describes the lives of many of the saints, some of them lived those quiet and peaceful lives that we'd all love to live but lots of them didn't. It describes these present saints going through absolutely horrific moments. This is what it says, it says: *Women received their dead raised to life again. Others were tortured, not accepting*

deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented -- of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.

Now do you catch what God says here? God says that some of us are going to lead peaceable, quiet lives. But he also says others are going to be tortured, afflicted, destitute and tormented. But God describes those people by saying these were people -- quote -- *of whom the world was not worthy*. So God is literally saying that the best and the brightest and the choicest of his saints will oftentimes undergo brutal struggles. So we ask why? Please don't misunderstand me when I say, "Why not?" And after all we are here to be imitators of the One who underwent the greatest struggle of all. See, no saint can hold a candle to the torture that Jesus underwent. Not physically, although that was horrific, but spiritually when he took on the sin of the world at the cross. And Jesus did it for one reason. See, Jesus knew that he too was going

to lose his historical moment but he also knew what he would gain. He would gain the glory of his Father and the eternal lives of all of his saints, and for that he went joyfully to his torture.

Hebrews 12 says: Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

So the next time you're tempted to think that God has abandoned you or has been unfair or has not lived up to some promise you think he has made, just consider that God does not live in the moment, particularly the moments that look grim. And should those moments come for you, God never, never promises to get you around them. He does, however, promise to get you through them. *Psalm 23 says: Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.* And because God is on the other side you might be tempted to think that, oh, maybe he's absent. But you see, he lives eternally in the kingdom that welcomed Stephen and John and Paul like it welcomes any and all who suffer for the King's sake.

So take a moment to consider as you take the cup and ask yourself, am I willing to take whatever cup he sends me? Am I willing to trust the eternal moment rather than the historical? *1 Corinthians 11* says: *In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me."* So take, and drink.

We have a moment we talk about head, heart and feet. And you know *Luke 16* says: *"He who is faithful in little will be faithful in much,"* and I think when we think about persecution, I think what a lot of folks think is, you know, if those doors burst open and a bunch of soldiers come in here and they put a gun to your head, and they say, "Are you going to deny Christ?" Not a chance, I will not deny Christ. But you know what? That's not going to happen. It may happen someday in the future but it's not going to happen now.

But how about publicly identifying with Christ in the little ways? How about saying, "I am a Christian. Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior." How about enduring some kind of social media scorn for sticking up for Jesus Christ? How about saying to your neighbor who loves to blaspheme the name of Jesus Christ, "Hey, that's my Lord and Savior." See, here's the deal. God says that we are going to be in these positions, some of us, and we are going to suffer persecution, some of us. But just like he did with his

disciples, he starts out with little things. Our faithfulness is tested by little things. He who is faithful in little will be faithful in much. He who is unfaithful or untrustworthy in little will be untrustworthy and unfaithful in much. So this week or the next few days as you start to go through life and maybe God will give you an opportunity for a little thing, somebody says something, somebody challenges you, somebody gives you an opportunity to say, "Hey, I'm a Christian." You know, as Dave said in Sunday school class this morning, it's becoming a lot more easy to call us haters and bigots because we believe God's word. So when you get challenged or if you get challenged and you're tempted to stay silent, just think of Jesus saying, hey, this is the clinical stuff, this is the training stuff. We get trained in the little things so that when the big things come, we're ready for that. So I ask if that cup is given to you -- and it's a tiny little cup -- that you'll accept it. Let's pray.

Father, I just thank you for what you've done for us. I thank you for the fact that you asked if this cup could be passed by you and you desperately wanted it to because you knew the perfect holy one would be absorbing all of the sin of your sheep. And Lord, you did not pass that cup by, you drank it and you drank it to the full. And Lord, I pray as we are challenged with little cups most likely in these days, that we would recognize them, this is part of our

clinical, this is part of our training, this is part of you testing us through Luke 16 to be faithful in little things. Lord, give us the opportunity and give us the courage to pass that test, I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.