# “Mine Eyes Have Seen The Glory”

## *Acts 7:55-56*

Let’s turn to Acts 7:55-56 for today’s Scripture reading.

***On April 29, 2019, television channel WBIR in Knoxville did a segment on 10 News about Priscilla McGill. The Knoxville woman was struck by a car in March 2017 while walking across Woodland Avenue in North Knoxville. She had just finished an errand to a local market. McGill said that as she crossed the road she dropped her cigarettes. She bent down, grabbed them―and that was the last thing she remembered before the vehicle hit her.***

***She was taken to UT Medical Center with crushed knees, broken ribs, injuries to her hip, her femur, internal injuries, and multiple cuts. She spent months in the hospital during which she “coded”―that is, she lost consciousness when her heart stopped beating―a total of seven times. McGill recalled vivid experiences during those times in which she saw people she knew, including her mother, as well as fields, bright flowers, lavish settings, and a heavenly figure who said she couldn’t stay. In fact, the figure told McGill that she would have to go back to the living.***

***McGill insists that she’d been shown what death would be like, and that it wasn’t a terrible thing at all. It was a momentous turning point in her life. “I've heard people tell me, ‘They had you on plenty of high-powered drugs.’ But until you experience it, I don’t think you can really a 100 percent change them,” she said. Today, she believes it’s her duty to testify for God, to bring people closer to God. “I feel like that I need to tell people, you know: Is your heart right?”***

***Again and again, people across cultures have described feeling what it’s like to die and then come back, sometimes reluctantly, to this world. Debate continues in science about just how real it is. Doctors themselves cannot say definitively what may be happening, but many don’t deny it’s possible.***

We’ve all heard or read stories like this. You may be inclined to believe them or not. ***But in the years I’ve been in the ministry, I’ve heard dozens of accounts of the dying being able to see friends, family, heaven or Jesus. Family members have told me that their loved one―while in their right mind and not under the influence of pain-killers―spoke to people, or looked at people, who weren’t in the room. They claimed that a spouse, friend or angel stood before them, welcoming them into heaven.***

I don’t doubt those accounts. While it’s true that some “I-died-and-went-to-heaven-and-came-back-to-write-a-book-about-it” stories have proven to be nothing more than money grabs, I’ve come in contact with too many people whose loved ones saw someone or something that no one else did. I also believe that in some mysterious way, according to his divine will, God sometimes allows those who’re about to die to have some sort of intuition about it.

***My grandfather passed away suddenly in 1992. In the days after the funeral, our family encountered several people who had run into my grandfather before his death. Each one of them noted how he had said something during their conversations that didn’t make an impression at the time, but after his death stood out. When one man greeted my grandfather and asked how he was doing, my grandfather replied that he was “only going to be around a little while longer.” Another person said that my grandfather told him that it was time to start getting rid of some of his possessions.***

Did my grandfather have some premonition or intuition about his impending death? Did he know―without really knowing―that he would soon die? In their final days or hours, do our loved ones see the faces of those who have preceded them in death? I believe that sometimes God does give his faithful servants a secret glimpse into the reward that awaits them. It’s what happened to a man named Stephen in our Scripture reading. *55But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God’s right hand.  56And he told them, “Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God’s right hand!”*

Stephen was the first Christian to be martyred for his faith. He first appeared in Acts 6:5 and only a few verses later was arrested on the trumped-up charge of blaspheming Moses, the temple, the law, and God. He was hauled before the Sanhedrin where false witnesses had been lined up to condemn him. If this sounds suspiciously like what happened to Jesus, you’re right! The end of Stephen’s life mirrors that of Jesus―to show readers that the Jewish leaders hadn’t learned from their mistake with Jesus.

When Stephen was asked about the truth of the charges against him, Acts 7 records the speech he gave to the Sanhedrin. It’s the longest speech in Acts, and second only to Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount as the longest in the New Testament. In verses 2-50, Stephen recited Israel’s history from Abraham to Solomon, noting his peoples’ penchant for disobeying God. Then Stephen shifted the focus to the Jewish leaders around him. In 7:51-53 he declared, *51“You stubborn people! You are heathen at heart and deaf to the truth. Must you forever resist the Holy Spirit? That’s what your ancestors did, and so do you!  52Name one prophet your ancestors didn’t persecute! They even killed the ones who predicted the coming of the Righteous One—the Messiah whom you betrayed and murdered.  53You deliberately disobeyed God’s law, even though you received it from the hands of angels.”* Unsurprisingly, the Sanhedrin flew into a rage. *54The Jewish leaders were infuriated by Stephen’s accusation, and they shook their fists at him in rage.* *55But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God’s right hand.  56And he told them, “Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God’s right hand!”*

God granted Stephen a glimpse of his reward because only a few verses later a mob took Stephen outside the city and stoned him to death. And for his faithfulness and boldness, Stephen received a vision of glory that no one else saw.

Note in our Scripture reading that Stephen saw *Jesus standing in the place of honor at God’s right hand*. In Mark 14:61-62, during the kangaroo court that tried Jesus, it says *Then the high priest asked [Jesus], “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” 62Jesus said, “I am. And you will see the Son of Man seated in the place of power at God’s right hand and coming on the clouds of heaven.”* But in Stephen’s vision Jesus was *standing*, not seated.

***This is because standing was the common posture for a witness in judicial proceedings.*** ***In our system of jurisprudence, witnesses sit and deliver their testimony. But in Jewish custom of the day, witnesses stood to give testimony.*** Jesus was standing beside the Father to show Stephen that he was a witness to Stephen’s faith and courage. By standing, Jesus was testifying to the truth of Stephen’s words and faith. What a comforting sight that must’ve been for the man who had just spoken with the courage and conviction of a prophet, and was about to be murdered for it.

When Jesus sent out his disciples he warned them of the persecutions they would face. In Matthew 10:32 he told them, *32“Everyone who acknowledges me publicly here on earth, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven.”* Perhaps Stephen had heard that from the original disciples and remembered it as he looked up into heaven. Stephen had lived as a true disciple of Jesus Christ. We don’t know how long he was a Christian, but according to the Scriptures his obedience, dedication and witness were unimpeachable. And as a result, God let him see something that would give him comfort and peace in his final minutes.

I believe that even in the most shocking and unexpected deaths―such as in a natural disaster or being blindsided by another driver―God can grant us peace and serenity. I believe he has a way of rewarding his faithful believers with words or images that bring solace, relief and promise, to ease the transition from this world to the next. It’s just one more proof of how God never leaves us, never forsakes us, always provides for us.

***Despite pressures of the time to provide for her husband and home in very traditional ways, Julia Ward Howe was socially active in circles that included Ralph Waldo Emerson and Charles Dickens. She was active in prison reform, the fight to end slavery, and the fight to win equal rights for women. A prolific poet and author, she was the author of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” which begins “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”*** It’s an image to which we as Christian cling to, hope for, and long for―the day when Christ returns. Not because we want Armageddon, or suffering upon others, or an end to the world as some Christian folk do―but because with the return of Christ all things will be put to right. True justice will prevail for all persons, not just those of a certain skin color or with enough money. True peace will encompass the earth so there will be no more wars or violence or hatred. Death and Hell will be forever destroyed. And for those who are alive at that time, they will witness the full glory of Jesus Christ as he comes to fulfill God’s grand design. The eyes of Stephen saw the glory of the Lord before he died.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day, when we recognize and remember the valiant men and women who have given their lives in service to our country across the years. And I believe it’s also appropriate for us to remember, reflect on, and give thanks for our ancestors in the Christian faith. They, too, saw the glory of the Lord in their day and when they received their reward. They have passed on to us a legacy of faith and love. They have filled these pews over the years. They surround us, even now, *as…a huge crowd of witnesses,* as Hebrews 12:1 reminds us.

***So before we conclude, I’d like to offer us an opportunity to remember aloud the names of those who’ve preceded us in death. If you have the name of someone you’d like to remember, just raise your hand. I’ll repeat the name you give me and then together as a congregation we’ll respond with the phrase from Psalm 136 “His faithful love endures forever.” For example, I might say “Jim Adams” and we reply “His faithful love endures forever.”***

Now let us be in a spirit of prayerful remembrance and gratitude.

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Let us pray: *Merciful God, who measures out every grace that we need, and who comforts us in our grief and loss, we thank you for having brought us together this day to remember those who lost their lives defending our nation, as well as all those we love who have entered into your eternal embrace. May their souls live on in your gracious presence, and may they experience the full measure of your love and mercy. We also ask that you guide us and make us worthy of the sacrifices and gifts they have left us. We pray that we never forget how blessed we truly are as a nation, as a church, and as your children. Blessed be the holy and magnificent name of the Lord. Amen.*