

Forgiving Persecutors?

by Wayne Goff

Acts 7 contains the sermon preached by Stephen to the Jewish Council during his trial. The sermon is a scathing denunciation of that generation, and is on a par with Jesus' condemnation of the Jewish leaders found in Matthew 24. It would do all of us good to read those two chapters just now, and recall how strong a battle was fought against religious error and corruption. The message was inspired by the Holy Spirit, so we cannot say that Stephen should have preached something else! Stephen was a man of great courage borne from great convictions.

The lesson is a brief summary of Israel's habitual apostasies from God from the first of their existence as a nation until Christ's crucifixion. In summary, Stephen said of his accusers: *"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"* (vv. 51-53). These **harsh words** were a *final pronouncement* upon those who had seen and heard Jesus, His miracles, His resurrection, and some lessons of His apostles. In spite of all the evidence, they rejected the truth. Now God was rejecting them through Stephen's sermon.

The men in the Council were so furious at Stephen that they gnashed at him with their teeth, and took him out and stoned him! As Stephen was being stoned, he cried out with a loud voice: *"Lord, do not charge them with this sin"* (v. 60). How could Stephen have such a generous disposition toward those who murdered him? Of course, we do not know the exact answer to that question, but let me suggest some thoughts that might help us consider the answer:

1. **Stephen's disposition reflected Jesus' mind, Luke 23:34.** Jesus said on the cross, *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."* We should not be surprised that Stephen's heart mimicked that of the Lord's. Jesus came to give His life for all men, even His enemies, and His prayer reflected His desire for their forgiveness. That prayer was answered on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) when some of the Jews obeyed the Gospel.
2. **Stephen's death was imminent, Acts 7:59.** He had just called on God, saying, *"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."* Eternity loomed before him, and I believe at that moment he had the best perspective of all things. No righteous man could wish for the eternal condemnation of anyone. Standing on the brink of eternity, Stephen wished to be received by God into heaven, and I truly believe he wished this for all other men, too; even his enemies. There is no place in death for hatred, anger, bitterness, resentment, or ill will. Things of a temporal nature are so tremendously insignificant at this point. Stephen saw this very well.
3. **Stephen saw the glory of God, Acts 7:55.** *"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."* When Stephen related what he saw, his enemies screamed out, stopped their ears, and stoned him. Stephen was basking in the beauty of a glimpse of heaven. You and I can be more generous toward our enemies, if we will glimpse into the pages of God's Word and see the view of eternity there. We are not speaking of forgiveness without repentance by our foes, but of a true wish for men to do what it takes to be made right with the Lord.

What impresses the reader about this event should be (1) Stephen's great conviction and courage; (2) the power of his message inspired by God; and (3) his love for his fellow-man. Dear reader, study Acts 7, reflect on these things, and ask yourself if your convictions, courage, message and love are like Stephen's. Prepare for that day of death when all things eternal will be made so very clear.

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