

Chosen and Forgiven  
Ephesians 4:25-32

John the Baptist is known as the first prophet and the first martyr of the New Testament. He was distantly related to Jesus, perhaps a second cousin, and he also had the honor of baptizing Jesus in the river Jordan. His life ended in violence, for the Scriptures record he wound up losing his head for bravely speaking a few choice words to King Herod. In those days, free speech was not a civil right, and speech critical of those in the ruling class was especially frowned upon. John's words to the king were indeed provocative, but they were also true and necessary. Even so, Herod had no desire to hear a peasant preacher tell him he had violated God's law by marrying his brother's wife. He was tossed into prison, and eventually by Herod's orders his head was chopped off and brought to Herod's wife on a silver platter.

A few prophets and a savior later, another man would lose his life for speaking the truth. His name was Stephen, and little is known about him other than the Scriptures says he was a man "full of faith and the Holy Spirit". The sermon that got him into trouble is found in Acts 7. His message was not directed towards the king, but to a different ruling class, a mob of church leaders that had assembled that day with the intention to silence him. They had little in common with King Herod except for two things- they were unwilling to accept the truth and they would stop at nothing to cancel those speaking it. We don't have time this morning to look at everything Stephen said but the fact is that his words, much like that of John the Baptist and for that matter Jesus Christ, were also true and provocative.

After clearly laying out his case and providing the new church with a beautiful synopsis of the Old Testament, Stephen signed his own death warrant by speaking these words found in **Acts 7:51-53**. The reaction of those he was speaking to was much like that of King Herod. It would be an understatement to say they were not happy. Luke gives us the graphic details in **7:54-60**.

What a prayer. Lord, do not hold this sin against them. How did he find the strength to ask for such a noble thing? If we were found in that situation, would we pray our killers or for our own soul? How many of our descendants would seek justice and retribution rather than forgiveness?

I suggest to you that Stephen was only able to face that ugly and angry mob of stone throwers like he did because of two things: God's grace and his faith in Christ. Stephen's choice to forgive those who were stoning him to death is a living testament to his faithfulness and should be an inspiration for us, no matter what challenge in life we are facing.

The question begs to be asked: did God honor Stephen's request? Don't underestimate the importance of the question, for our understanding of God's forgiveness and our own willingness to forgive others is at the heart of the matter. Such a question deserves to be approached from a Biblical perspective, as human reasoning alone is not sufficient to provide the means of arriving at a correct conclusion.

We begin by acknowledging that sin, redemption, and forgiveness are truly at the heart of the Gospel. The cycle began in the garden with Adam and Eve and one day it will end with the great tribulation described in the Book of Revelation. If there is such a thing, the list of sinners would be exhaustive. It would include Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Peter, Paul, the woman at the well with 7 husbands and Mary who anointed the feet of Jesus with perfume from an alabaster jar. And even though you and I are not famous Biblical figures with famous sins, our names would also be found on that list. In fact, every person who ever lived would be on the list. The Scripture is clear-all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. **Romans 3:23. The good news is that great sinners are never a problem for our great Redeemer.** In fact, there is a great list of redeemed sinners. The Scriptures refer to it as the lamb's book of life. **Rev 13:8 Rev 21:27.**

The need to be redeemed or freed from the bondage of human sinfulness is a common thread woven throughout the Bible. God's plan for the redemption of His people was in place even before the heavens and the earth were created, and the Scriptures clearly reveal what it was. It began with the ancient Israelites being freed from bondage to the Egyptians and was made complete 1300 years later when Jesus uttered His last words from the cross. When He said, "it is finished", it was to let the world know that His death would be the ultimate and final sacrifice and payment for sin. **1 Peter 3:18** He died because of the sin of humanity, for your sins and mine.

Jesus went to the cross because He loves us, even though we are sinners. **He went to the cross so that our sins might be forgiven.** He went to the cross so that we can become the holy and loving people that God desires us to be. He went to the cross so that we can become the church. We are reminded of that powerful truth in those 8 verses from Ephesians we read earlier. Verse 32 sums them up well. Holy and loving people are also forgiving people. Why? Because we are forgiven in Christ. That is who followers of Jesus are, and Stephen was a shining example, pardon the pun. So, what exactly does it mean to be forgiven in Christ?

Is God's forgiveness like God's love and grace, freely given to us without merit or consequence? Perhaps, but instead of given a better word might be offered. God gives us His grace and love, but He offers us forgiveness through His Son Jesus. Much like God's offer of eternal life, it requires a response to become a reality. God's forgiveness is ours for the asking, but it requires action, it involves decisions, and oftentimes it involves making difficult choices. **Receiving God's forgiveness is a matter of the will, or more specifically our *willingness* to forgive others, repent of our own sin and be faithful to Christ.**

Receiving God's forgiveness begins with our *willingness* to forgive others. The words of Jesus found in Mathews Gospel 6:14-15 reveal a simple but painful truth: If we do not forgive others, God will not forgive us. That concept is so simple a 1<sup>st</sup> grader can understand what Jesus means. It is painful because it is not easy to forgive those who have hurt us physically or emotionally, especially when it is intentional. Nevertheless, if we desire our name to be written in the lamb's book of life, if we desire to be united with Jesus and the saints in glory, our only choice in the matter is to forgive. It is a command, not a request. To say it another way, **our desire and willingness to forgive others is one way we show our love for Christ.**

How different our world would be if more of us showed our love for Jesus that way. Today, it seems the need to be forgiven and the need to forgive has been largely overlooked in the post- modern quest for social justice. Certainly, justice and peace are noble causes worth pursuing, but without forgiveness it is a fruitless effort. True justice, Biblical justice, demands that people forgive one another. Peace requires a change of heart from those on both sides of a conflict or issue. **Peace and justice may only be found through forgiveness.**

**Receiving God's forgiveness requires repentance.** Repentance is acknowledging our sin and surrendering it to God. Repentance is not denial and blame or a hollow apology but remorse and regret. Repentance is having empathy and compassion for those we have hurt. It also means accepting the consequences of our actions, It involves a change in attitude and demeanor. It's like going north when we have been travelling south or moving from the cold and wet winter of Ohio to sunny Florida. It's replacing bitterness and resentment with Godly appreciation- looking for good in someone, even when it is apparent that there is little good to be found. Repentance is replacing wrath and anger with calmness and peace, it is replacing clamor and bickering with quiet and tranquility. Repentance is replacing evil with holiness.

That brings us to the last item on the list. **Receiving God's forgiveness requires that we be faithful to Christ.** It is believing that Jesus loves us so much that He died for our sins. Being faithful to Christ is believing our sins and transgressions, from the smallest to the greatest, are forgiven forever because of His saving work on the cross. Being faithful to Christ is believing that our name is written in the lamb's book of life and will not be blotted out. Being faithful to Christ is living a life in harmony with His holy Scriptures, embracing the truth rather than lying, cheating, and spreading false rumors. It is that kind of faith that empowers us to become kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving people, the true body of Christ.

How different the church and for that matter the world might be if we would be more willing to forgive others, more willing to repent and more faithful and obedient to Jesus Christ and His Word. **The power to do the first two will come when we choose to do the third.** Let's covenant to do those very things- here in this place as well as every other place for as long as God sees fit to keep us here on this earth.

So, did God honor Stephen's dying request? That question does not have a simple yes or no answer. A perfect and holy God can not condone sin in any form, so perhaps it is best to rephrase the question. Did those who stoned Stephen accept God's offer of forgiveness and pardon? Perhaps someday we will find out. A more important question is, have you? If you haven't now is the time to do so. Accept the offer made to all who seek to know His Son. Forgive those who have wronged you, repent of your own sin and place your faith on Jesus Christ. Make it personal! I choose to forgive, because I am chosen and forgiven. Amen.