

Good News Times Two

Acts 7: 55-60

As Stephen was being stoned to death by an angry mob, his dying request was that Jesus forgive those who would soon take his life. Do you think his request was granted? It can be a dangerous thing to presume to know how God would respond to such a plea, for even the most learned Bible scholar is tainted by sin and human fallibility. Nevertheless, it is an important question to resolve if we are to have the power to forgive, one of the basic foundations of our faith. Forgiveness is at the heart of the message that Jesus Christ came to earth to deliver. In fact, one of the reasons Jesus was crucified was that He claimed to have the ability to offer forgiveness of sins, something that God alone has the power to do. There are numerous examples recorded for us in the Gospels where that exact thing took place. In Luke chapter 5, a paralytic man is lowered from the roof into a crowded room by his friends so that Jesus might see him and be healed. Their efforts were rewarded, as Jesus forgave the man's sins and commanded him to rise up and walk.

Two chapters later Jesus is eating supper with a group of Pharisee's when an anonymous woman, repentant of her sin, breaks an expensive jar of oil and anoints the feet of Jesus with it. Again, Jesus forgives her sins, which the Bible says were many. Another example was when He saved the woman about to be stoned to death for adultery. He forgave her sins and commanded her to go and sin no more. Or when he forgave Peter for denying Him three times. And then when he forgave my sins and yours, even though we had done nothing to deserve such mercy and grace.

Forgiveness is such an important Biblical principle that Jesus intended it to be a focus of our prayer time. Turn with me to Matthew's Gospel 6: 6-14. If you are like me, you probably have said these words hundreds or even thousands of times already. If we are not careful, we will do the very thing Jesus warned us not to do, which is to pray with vain repetitions. The tendency is to recite these words as a ritual, rather than a prayer from the heart. But if we pray this prayer in the way Jesus taught, from the heart, it becomes a prayer that allows us to honor God and humbly ask Him to provide for our needs. And as sinners, our need for forgiveness is greater than our need for daily bread.

Jesus puts this prayer in context in verses 14&15 and provides a critical teaching about forgiveness. If we desire God to forgive our sins, He demands that we do the same. Sometimes we need to forgive others for the sins they have committed against us, and other times we have to forgive ourselves. Neither one is easy. It is a struggle directly related to the magnitude of the sin involved.

Forgiveness is no small thing. The Greek word that Matthew uses for “forgive” is the same word that Jesus used when He told Peter that he was expected to offer forgiveness 490 times to a brother who had wronged him. So, with that in view, turn back to the Scripture passage we looked at earlier. How could Stephen ask God to forgive those who were about to kill him? There is no doubt that God’s grace was a factor. He surely was not born with the need to forgive in his heart. That changed when he met this man named Jesus. Perhaps he was among those who heard Jesus ask God to forgive those who crucified Him, and those words returned to him at the moment he needed to hear them most.

There are similarities in their deaths. Stephen was brought before the high priest Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, the same authorities that handed Jesus over to the Romans to be tried and crucified. Jesus and Stephen were charged with similar offenses, although Stephen never claimed to be God. Both were murdered at the hands of an angry throng of people, egged on by corrupt church leaders. One was sanctioned by the government and the other was a lynch mob. Their only crime was speaking the truth; truth the angry mobs didn’t want to hear. Jesus knowingly and willingly gave His life on the cross for the sake of many, maybe even those who were now throwing rocks at Stephen. Stephen died for the sake of Jesus, likely knowing that this powerful sermon would be his last.

Where did Stephen get the power to forgive those who would soon kill him? The answer is found in verses 55 and 56. First, he was filled with the Holy Spirit. Unlike the angry mob who resisted His presence, 6:10 Stephen was receptive and allowed the Spirit to fill his body and empower him to face whatever challenges life brought, including the challenge of suffering and death.

Secondly, Stephen caught a glimpse of the glory of God. He was one of only 5 people recorded in the Scriptures that received that blessing. You might imagine that seeing the glory of God would make everything else seem pretty insignificant. Even so, God didn't stop there. Stephen also saw Jesus Christ, standing in the position of authority at the right hand of the Father. It seems that spirit filled man, witnessing the glory of God and the resurrected Christ, would have no problem forgetting about his present situation. Is that how he was able to forgive his killers?

If we allow our reasoning to reach that conclusion, we might miss the heart of the Gospel message. Signs and wonders cannot convince us to love and forgive our enemies. The power to do that comes from our faith in Jesus, believing our own sins are forgiven by His work on the cross. Our faith in Christ alone saves us from our sins, and such faith is displayed and validated in our willingness to forgive others. Stephen's faith was certainly visible in his courage to share the truth and his plea for forgiveness, and there can be no doubt he was richly rewarded.

Did God honor Stephen's dying request? There can be no doubt that God was willing to forgive those who stoned Stephen to death. Jeremiah 31 and Hebrews 8 both affirm that the God of the Bible is a forgiving God. The only uncertainty is whether forgiveness was in the hearts of those who hurled the stones and those who egged them on. We know Christ and forgiveness eventually came into the heart of one of them, a man named Paul. We don't know for certain about the others, but if they were like Paul, the answer must be yes, they were forgiven. Not once, but twice. Once by Stephen and once by our Lord Jesus Christ. That is good news times two! Praise God! Amen.