

Forgiven and Forgiving

Acts 6:8—7:2a, 51-60

Introduction

Today, we celebrate the Feast of St. Stephen, Martyr. Stephen was one of the first seven deacons, chosen by the people and appointed by the Apostles in **Acts 6**. **Verse 8** of our text says that he was *full of grace and power, doing great wonders and signs*. He was arrested, tried, convicted, and executed for his faith, making him the first martyr of the Christian church. It's not for his wonders and signs, but his martyrdom that we have this fast day. Let's take a closer look then at his death.

Examining Stephen's Death

Stephen's suffering and death mirrored that of Christ in several ways:

- When people couldn't defeat him in debate, they stirred up the crowds against him (**Acts 6:10-12; Mark 15:11**).
- They set up false witnesses against him: (**Acts 6:13-14; Mark 14:57-58**).
- He was directly questioned by the high priest (**Acts 7:1; Mark 15:2**).
- They cast him "outside the city" (**Acts 7:58; Mark 15:22; Hebrews 13:11-12; Leviticus 16:22**).
- He cried, "*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit*" (**Acts 7:59; Luke 23:46**).
- He cried, "*Lord, do not hold this sin against them*" (**Acts 7:60; Luke 23:34**).

Now, we want to narrow our focus to these last two points, what Stephen said while he was being killed. We pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." As a martyr, Stephen is our example of what it means to be forgiven and forgiving.

Receive My Spirit

"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" should be the prayer that is on the lips of each of us when we die. When Jesus prayed, "*Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit*" (**Luke 23:46**), He was entrusting the care of His spirit to His Father. In the Committal Service of a Christian funeral, we entrust the spirit of the deceased into the care of the Lord. We can do this because the dearly departed was a child of God. Without that faith in Christ, we stand guilty before the Judge of the universe and our doom is certain. But with faith in Christ, the Judge becomes our Father and welcomes us home. He can do this because our sins are forgiven.

Forgiven

Our sins are forgiven because of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross. As we've been saying, that's why the Son became Emmanuel, God with us; that's why He took on flesh and lived among us. He did all that so He could die in our place, receiving the punishment we deserve. We appropriate that forgiveness when we believe that He did all that for us. Once forgiven, we have an obligation. Well, not so much an obligation as a freedom. We are now free to forgive others.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is an act of grace. It cannot be forced or compelled. Anyone who's been told to "shake hands and make up" knows this to be true. Forgiveness cannot be earned. So, what causes us to forgive others? When God forgives us, we experience His love and realize just how terrible our crime was. Filled with His love, He moves us to imitate Him and pass that forgiveness on to others who have wronged us. The problem is our sin nature tells us that what's been done to us is too great to forgive. When I begin to think that, then I must remind myself of just how much I hurt God and realize the wrong done to me is a drop in the ocean compared to the wrong that I have done, and He has forgiven.

Stephen's Example

Stephen is our example. He could forgive his enemies and ask God to forgive them as they killed him because the love of God had freed him to do this.

Why During Christmas?

Some may wonder, "Why do we celebrate St. Stephen the day after Christmas. Shouldn't we be focusing on Christ, the newborn King?" Let me answer with some words by Martin Luther from a sermon on the Feast of St. Stephen in 1520. *Whomever this Child's birth should benefit, he must, as I have said, forfeit absolutely everything else. ... Then the Child comes and creates in us a new person.* This is what the Babe in the manger is all about: forgiving us and making each of us a new person who forgives.

Means of Grace

We experience this new creation every time we receive the Sacrament of the Altar. Jesus once again forgives our sins and strengthens our faith so we can pass that forgiveness on to others. That's the best Christmas present ever.

*And the peace of God,
Which surpasses all understanding,
Will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*
