

## No Matter The Personal Cost.....

*From the Book of Acts*

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**Bible Text:** Acts 7:54—8:1

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Our text this morning is from Acts chapter seven. The context is the sermon Stephen preaches before the Sanhedrin. He has been accused of blasphemy. He defends himself. And the portion we are reading at the end of chapter seven, beginning at verse 54, relates the outcome of the sermon, the response of the Jewish Council, the Sanhedrin. And we will read verses 54 into the first verse of chapter eight.

Hear God's Word.

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him. But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep.

Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death.<sup>1</sup>

Let's pray together.

*Father, we thank you that as the great God of all you have been pleased in your grace and providence to commit yourself to your Church. And we thank you that you are pleased to dwell among your people. We pray now in this short time as we have*

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 7:54—8:1.

*opportunity to look into your Word that you will be pleased to dwell among us, that you will apply your covenant Word to your covenant people by the power of your Spirit. And so bless us, encourage us and challenge us we pray in the great and good and gracious name of Jesus Christ who is, indeed, the only Lord and Savior and King. Amen.*

Again, our text is Acts chapter seven beginning with verse 54.

I suppose it has to be over 30 years ago that, as I did this morning, I went to the study to pray with the elders or leaders of the congregation before the worship service. There was a little controversy going on in the congregation and I offered this comment when we gathered together. I said, “Brothers, don’t you realize that the devil is at work in our midst?” And one of the men said to me, “Well, Denny, don’t you realize that you are the chief instrument of the devil in this congregation?” I was a little taken back. These men, although elected to the office of elder, refused to stand for ordination. They were opposed to the Westminster Standards. They therefore could not and would not subscribe to the doctrinal standards of the church. And so, in this stressful situation, with, I believe, my own commitment to Christ intact, I went to the pulpit to preach in this congregation.

But as I have reflected on the particular text which is before us in Acts chapter seven and as I have reflected on the situation I’ve just related, I realize that, although there was some personal cost involved for me and I definitely needed to retain my commitment to Christ, to my shame, I failed to do something else. To my shame, I failed to pray for the forgiveness of those other men.

And the lesson that is before you and me in Acts chapter seven as Stephen faces the Jewish Council at great personal cost and testifies to his commitment to Christ, the lesson before us is that even though there may be a great personal cost, you must commit yourself to Christ *and* you must take this additional step. You must pray for the forgiveness of others. This is the lesson that arises from the text. And so I lay it before you again. No matter the personal cost, commit yourself to Christ *and* seek forgiveness for others. Let’s see how the text unfolds and gives us this particular point.

Stephen is in the midst of a great controversy in the then visible church. He has been hauled before the Sanhedrin on very specific charges. You find these charges at the end of chapter six. And so turn in your Bibles, if you have a Bible, turn back to chapter six and verse 11. You see one of the charges.

Acts 6:11. “Then they secretly induced men to say, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.’”<sup>2</sup> Stephen is charged with blasphemy against Moses and against God. And verse 14 gives us the further charge. “For we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 6:11.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 6:14.

You see, here is the charge: “You follow Jesus and so as a result, you have repudiated Moses and you have repudiated the services of the temple, the ceremonial law. This is blasphemy.” And Stephen’s defense is basically this. “No! You have got it backwards, elders of Israel. I am not the one who has rejected Moses and rejected the ceremonial law. You are the ones, in fact, who have rejected Moses and the ceremonial law because you have not come to Christ.” And so in Stephen’s address, he turns the tables on the Jewish Sanhedrin. To put it positively, Stephen declares, “If you follow Moses and understand the temple ceremonies, you follow Christ.”

But as you see in our text in chapter seven, turn back to chapter seven and verse 54, the Sanhedrin is not very happy. Verse 54, “Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him.”<sup>4</sup> The text says they were cut to the quick. Now this does not mean that they were convicted like the assembly was convicted on the day of Pentecost at the hearing of Peter’s preaching. You remember in Acts two it says they were pierced to the heart. The language is similar, but what takes place here is actually not the same. They were cut deeply in the heart, all right, with an anger in response to the preaching of Stephen. This is what was taking place. This is what was happening.

And they were so angry that they were grinding their teeth. Have you ever ground your teeth? Have you ever clenched your teeth so hard that your jaw gets sore? I bet some of you have. This is exactly what was taking place with the Jewish Sanhedrin. They were angry. And they were showing that they were angry.

But now, in response to the Jewish Sanhedrin, you have to notice the demeanor of Stephen. Look at verses 55 and 56. “But being full of the Holy Spirit...”<sup>5</sup> Well, maybe we had better just stop there. “But being full of the Holy Spirit...”<sup>6</sup> “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control.”<sup>7</sup> Self-control. That is in the prominent place at the end of the string of that fruit of the Spirit. And what is self-control as a fruit of the Spirit? Self-control, as a fruit of the Spirit, is really God control. And so Stephen is full of the Spirit and full of self-control is under God’s control.

Can you imagine, now, in this scene where the Jewish Sanhedrin, the 70 elders of Israel, are in opposition to him and have in their hearts a virulent anger and animosity, and Stephen remains composed, full of the Spirit, full of self-control?

Then the text goes on and says, “He gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 7:54.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 7:55.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Galatians 5:22-23.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 7:55-56.

Now I expect that when Stephen has this vision of Jesus and there is a great clamor in the Council—I know you have never seen a great clamor at a presbytery meeting or at a synod meeting. Since there is a great clamor in the Council, Stephen doesn't speak with a small voice. He sees the heavens opened and he is not so concerned with the horizontal relationships there in the Council and the relationship of the Council with him. He is more preoccupied with this vertical relationship and with seeing Jesus. And he *cries out*, “Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”<sup>9</sup>

And the Jewish Council is thinking, “Son of Man. Daniel seven. He is talking about Jesus as the Son of Man, as the one who ascends up to the Ancient of Days and is given dominion and a kingdom and authority. Blasphemy! You are Blaspheinous, Stephen, equating the Son of Man in Daniel to Jesus.”

And not only so, Stephen adds, “I saw the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” “Blasphemy, Stephen!” You see, the right hand of God is the place of authority. The right hand of God is the place of dignity. The right hand of God is the place of rule. “You, Stephen, are equating the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God with Jesus. This is the accusation against you. Blasphemy!” And so it was from the perspective of the Jewish Council.

Now, you may say to me and rightly say to me, “I have never had a vision of Jesus like that.” I haven't either. But I ask you, dear friends in Christ, where do you see Jesus? Is it not here in this book, the Bible? Is it not in the writings of Moses that you see Jesus? Because as Jesus himself said, “Moses speaks of me.” And is it not in the Psalms that you see Jesus? And is it not in the prophets that you see Jesus? Isn't it in Moses and the Psalms and the prophets unfolded as Jesus says to his disciples on the Emmaus road? Isn't it in these words of the Old Testament that you see Jesus?

And isn't it true that in the gospels, as you read the gospels, as you read the story of the birth of the Savior, as you see that 12 year old go to the temple and debate with the leaders of Israel, and as you see this man baptized and the Holy Spirit come upon him, and as he goes out and begins his ministry and heals the sick and raises the dead and brings sight to the blind, is it not Jesus whom you see? And, as Paul tells us, isn't it in the Bible that you see “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”?<sup>10</sup> And so I submit to you that God is pleased, as you read the Bible and as I read the Bible, to give you and me a vision of Jesus.

But now the Council, once again. While Stephen is full of self-control, the Council is out of control. The Council's response is one of virtual insanity. And I put it purposefully with this strong language. It is virtual insanity. Verse 57, “But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse.”<sup>11</sup> Listen to the text.

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<sup>9</sup> Acts 7:56.

<sup>10</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:6.

<sup>11</sup> Acts 7:57-58.

They cried out, “Stephen, no, no, no, no. We cannot stand to listen to you. We will not put up with you. We will not listen to you.” Verse 58, “And when they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him, and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.”<sup>12</sup>

The witnesses were called upon by the Old Testament law to be the first ones to cast the stone against the accused. And so in order to do their task, they took off their outer garments so they could move around a little bit more freely and do this work throwing stones. The others join in. They do not just throw gravel or pebbles. They throw rocks at Stephen, large rocks which more than fill their hands. Seventy of them!

And, of course, the text says they rushed out with one impulse. And what was that one impulse? It was the impulse of anger and hatred which gives birth to murder. “You are a blasphemer. You must die.” This was the impulse. Yes, it was the impulse of murder and hatred. And with one impulse they went out, the Scripture tells us, to stone him.

During the Vietnam War there was an air force general who was the commander of all the air force in Vietnam, the US air force. He was a four star general. And in 1972 he was relieved of his command and reduced in grade to a two star general. Why? It was alleged that he ordered bombing raids in North Vietnam contrary to standing orders. It was also alleged that he altered official records to cover up his actions.

Now, more recently, when the Nixon White House tapes were transcribed and some research was being done on another matter, those who were doing the research discovered that General Lavelle didn’t do anything wrong in Vietnam. Yes, when the Nixon tapes were transcribed, it was discovered that General Lavelle didn’t do anything wrong at all. The president of the United States actually ordered those bombing raids in North Vietnam. And General Alexander Haig who was a West Point graduate—and I know a little bit about this—the motto of West Point is, “Duty, honor, country.” General Alexander Haig went along with President Nixon. Haig was his chief of staff. Haig went along with President Nixon and threw General Lavelle under the bus. To save their own necks they lied. The president lied and his chief of staff lied.

This is insane, when the chief executive officer of the United States of America lies like this to save his own neck and when a West Point graduate also lies to protect his own neck. And at the same time, they destroy the life and career of an innocent top ranking military man. This is insane. But it is this kind of insanity that we see as Stephen faces the Jewish Council. They are in an absolute rage and nothing will stop them. They would sooner destroy another than face the truth themselves.

Now look at verse 59. “They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!’”<sup>13</sup> When you are in a tough situation like General Lavelle and false charges are being brought against you and you are hauled before the authorities, what do you do? What do you do? What is the Christian response? The

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<sup>12</sup> Acts 7:58.

<sup>13</sup> Acts 7:59.

Christian response is to commit yourself to Christ. You must commit yourself to Christ. Even when there is great personal cost involved, you must commit yourself to Christ.

And this is exactly what Stephen does. Look at the text again in verse 59. “They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!’”<sup>14</sup> As the stones are coming and he is feeling the pounding from those stones, he looks to heaven and cries out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!”<sup>15</sup>

And we remember the words of Jesus himself on the cross, do we not? As Jesus looks upon all of those around the cross, those who had flogged him, those who had put the nails in his hand and feet, the ones who will pierce his side with a spear. And what does he say in the midst of all that clamor? “Father, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT.”<sup>16</sup> There must be commitment to Christ no matter the personal cost. There must be commitment to Christ.

A couple of years ago a Fox camera crew was kidnapped in the Gaza Strip by Palestinian terrorists, members of Hamas. And of course, there was great concern as to the welfare of these men. But they were released. And when they came out one of the men said, “Here was the requirement for our release. At gun point we were required to confess Islam as our religion. And so we did.” When I heard that report on the news the words of Jesus Christ were ringing in my ears. “If you do not confess me before men, I will not confess you before my Father in heaven.” Well, these men came out and confessed they “converted” to Islam.

What would you do if you were in that circumstance? What would I do? I hope that in that circumstance I would say, “No, I am not going to confess Islam. It is a false religion. Jesus Christ is Lord.” And if that had to be at gunpoint or the personal cost had to be death, then so be it. I hope that this would be my response. What would you do? Would you follow Stephen? “Lord, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

But then Stephen doesn’t stop there. This is the amazing and startling thing about the text.

Verses 59-60 say, “They went on stoning Stephen as he called upon the Lord and said, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!’ Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them!’” Having said this, he fell asleep.”<sup>17</sup>

In the midst of the clamor with stones coming his way, I can’t believe that Stephen was quiet or soft-spoken. The text says he fell on his knees. We don’t know if this was an act of piety or if physically he was driven to his knees by the stoning which was taking place. We don’t know. In either case the text says, and certainly he had to cry out as it says in the text, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Luke 23:46.

<sup>17</sup> Acts 7:59-60.

<sup>18</sup> Acts 7:60.

And you wonder if any of the Sanhedrin heard what he had to say. Stephen is begging for the forgiveness of those who are stoning him. He is begging for the forgiveness of the perpetrators. He is begging for the forgiveness of others. Now you have to think this through a little bit because normally when we think about this whole matter of forgiveness we have got it beaten into our brains that forgiveness requires repentance. So we always tie them together. This is good.

For example, Jesus says in Luke 17, “If anyone comes to you and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him. And if he comes to a second time and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him. If he comes to you 70 times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”

I went through a little tussle with the presbytery years ago on this matter. There was a fellow who came to the presbytery meeting. He asked me to be his counsel to help him and he was repentant. I am persuaded he was repentant of a gross sin. And he came to the presbytery and said, “I repent.” And the presbytery said, “Well, We don’t know. We don’t know. We are going to have to think about this a little bit. We think maybe we ought to wait six months, maybe a year and see if there is any fruit. And then you can come back and we may grant forgiveness, but we have got to see.”

I turned in my Bible to Luke 17 and I read the passage to the presbytery. And I said, “Don’t you see these words? If the man *says* he repents, Jesus Christ requires you to forgive him.” Well, with that challenge, they proceeded to grant forgiveness. But it was wrestling match. So this connection between repentance and forgiveness is important.

But what then does Stephen’s prayer mean? “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!”<sup>19</sup> If you pray this prayer or when Stephen prays this prayer it really means this. “Lord, Lord, work in the hearts of these men. Change their dispositions. If they need to be born again, cause them to be born again by your work. Give them the fruit of faith and repentance. Convert them solidly to faith in you. Do the work that only you can do, oh Lord Jesus.” You see, all of this is involved in Stephen’s short prayer. And I should add this. Stephen was following Christ when he uttered this prayer. Do you remember the prayer of Jesus on the cross? “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”<sup>20</sup> And so Stephen was following Jesus. And you too must follow Jesus. And I must follow Jesus.

Think about this now. Who was present when all of this was going on? Look at verse one in chapter eight. “Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death.”<sup>21</sup> Saul was there. Paul was there. And who was one of the chief beneficiaries of Stephen’s prayer? It was Paul. He was later converted. Agreeing with the death of Stephen, but later converted, he became a great preacher by whom we have all benefited, all of us.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Luke 23:34.

<sup>21</sup> Acts 8:1.

And so you see the pattern set forth by Stephen. At great personal cost, no matter the cost—you must recognize the cost—commit yourself to Christ. Then there is this third part, pray for the forgiveness of others. Count the cost. Commit to Christ. Pray for the forgiveness of others. No matter the personal cost, commit to Christ and pray for the forgiveness of others.

Some of you know that I had the privilege of being a chaplain in the army and it was back in the Vietnam era. Our battalion area was south of Saigon on the north edge of the Mekong River delta. One Sunday morning I went to the chapel service that I had planned in our battalion. When I got to the chapel service and looked at those who were present, right in the front row, right in front of the pulpit, there sat my commanding officer, a colonel, and sitting right next to him was his mistress. Now that didn't shock me so much except that the sermon I planned for the morning was from Hosea and the adultery of Gomer. The prophet portrays God's love in restoring adulterous Israel as his people by commanding Hosea to restore adulterous Gomer as his wife.

So I looked at the colonel. I looked at his mistress. I looked at my sermon notes. The question, of course, was: Do I preach the sermon? I did. Of course, this could have been at great personal cost. Let me tell you. This colonel wrote my efficiency reports. He could have destroyed me. But I think my commitment to Christ was intact and I preached the sermon. When the service was over and the colonel and his mistress and others came out of the service, the colonel shook my hand and said, "Next time, chaplain, give me a little warning."

Now, once again, I have reflected on this particular incident and I have reflected on Stephen and the sermon point that arises from this text. No matter the personal cost commit yourself to Christ *and* pray for the forgiveness of others. I counted the cost. I preached my sermon. However, to my shame, I never prayed for that commanding officer that God would forgive him. I never prayed for his mistress. I never did that.

Yes, it is a good thing to count the cost and commit yourself to Christ, but that is going two-thirds of the way, friends. That is two-thirds of the way. And two-thirds of the way is not good enough. You must commit yourself to Christ no matter the personal cost *and* pray for the forgiveness of others.

Who knows what God will do in response to your prayers? Saul was converted through Stephen's prayer. Who else may be converted as you follow Stephen's example? No matter the personal cost, commit to Christ *and* pray for the forgiveness of others.

Let's pray now.

*Father, forgive me for my woeful failure to follow the teaching of this text, to follow your teaching, to follow Christ in this teaching. Forgive me. Forgive us, Lord, and cause us by your grace to see new light, new refreshment, fresh grace as it comes to us in this text. And grant, Father, that we as your people no matter the personal cost may commit ourselves to Christ and to seek, to seek forgiveness for others. Please, Lord, please,*



*Lord, work in our hearts to this end we ask in the good and gracious and holy name of Jesus Christ who is the only Lord and King. Amen.*