

ACTS 7:59-8:4

WHERE IS GOD WHEN I HURT?

“As they were stoning Stephen, he called out, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

“And Saul approved of his execution.

“And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

“Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.”¹

When we long for comfort and consolation, we too often discover that few comforters are available. In our hour of darkness we are prone to cry out, “Where is God? Has He forgotten me?” Where is God when I hurt? No doubt the question intruded into the mind of persecuted Christians. It was the unvoiced thought attending every step of expatriate pilgrims. It was the silent spectre observing the dissolution of families as children were torn from their parents. It was the question as believers were tortured and killed. Where is God now? Where is God when I hurt?

The first martyr was Stephen, a believer characterised as “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” [ACTS 6:5]. This godly man was accused out of jealousy and charged with heinous sin against the Lord God of Heaven. Hailed before the religious leaders he defended himself so ably that he could not be answered. Nor did he cease his defence of the Faith with an apologia, but he confronted the sin of those who had indicted him.

“You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it” [ACTS 7:51-53].

Such pointed exposure of sin infuriated those whom he exposed. As they raged, God drew back the curtain separating time and eternity, and Stephen saw what his persecutors could not hope to see. “Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God’” [ACTS 7:55, 56].

An enraged mob, with the blessing of religious leaders, mercilessly murdered one of God’s choice servants. One of the instigators of the mob action was a young rabbi named Saul; he guarded the clothing of those who stoned Stephen. As the stones pelted Stephen’s body, he prayed for his tormentors, “Lord do not hold this sin against them” [ACTS 7:59]. How precious are the words inspired by the Spirit that describe his transition to glory: “When he had said this, he fell asleep.” With that the brave deacon died.

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Stephen's death signalled the beginning of the first great persecution against the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ. The fury of the persecution was so great that all the saints, with the exception of the Apostles, were scattered throughout the land. The Body was struck with such ferocity that it must have seemed that nothing would survive. Though the primary story speaks of the Church, there is a secondary theme interwoven throughout the account which Doctor Luke provides. The divine account simply states that "godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him" [ACTS 8:2].

THE EVENTS OF THE DAY — We could substitute at this point virtually any of the great persecutions for the cause of Christ. Among those awful hurts which have been visited upon the churches are such insults as the invasion of the Netherlands by Alva, the Spanish Inquisition and the destruction of the churches of Waldois by the Pope's henchmen. Students of the history of the Faith will recall the drowning of the Anabaptists by the Lutherans and Calvinists and the frightful persecution of Baptists in Virginia by the Church of England, as well as the banishment of dissenters by the Congregationalists in New England. Conscientious Christians have been mercilessly persecuted because they are Christians since the days of the first churches. To this day, there are vast regions where adherence to the Christian Faith brings the threat of death.

Believers are taught to "mourn with those who mourn" [ROMANS 12:15b]. Have you felt the pangs of hunger when Vietnamese believers are starved? Have you experienced your heart being torn from your breast as the child of a Sudanese mother is taken from her to be raised in the home of a Muslim? Have you cringed at the lash on the back of a Chinese believer or felt the hot blush of shame resulting as you were paraded naked before the leering eyes of wicked men?

Murder... death... persecution... scourging... expatriation... destruction of beloved institutions... unjust accusations... all these and more was the lot of early believers. These events are with us to this day, though the motivation may not necessarily be directed at us because we are Christians—they occur all the same. Nor is the hurt we experience restricted to widespread attack against the Faith.

Many of us—perhaps most of us—have known the heartbreak which accompanies the parting of loved ones. Though we are comforted in the knowledge that we shall see them again, we grieve and sorrow at their parting since we can no longer speak with them or enjoy their company. Too many among us have experienced the sorrow which accompanies the demise of beloved institutions—whether churches or governments or philosophies. We have likely all acted at one time or another under the smarting lash of unjust accusations. Lies and rumours, slander and gossip have caused many of us at one time or another silently to die a little inside as tears fall unbidden from our cheeks.

Because I am a Christian does not make me immune to sorrow, heartache or pain. Because I am a Christian, I may well experience even greater opposition—even greater persecution and even greater hurt—than if I were of the world.

Perhaps you will recall the comfort Jesus delivered to His disciples before His passion. "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" [JOHN 16:33]. Have you considered the comfort of the first missionaries' words, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" [ACTS 14:22]? Perhaps we need our vision adjusted. The Christian life does not inoculate against pain or sorrow or suffering.

THE RESPONSE OF THE BELIEVERS — How should believers respond in the face of tragedy? Assuredly, we must keep our eyes on the prize. This is the constant encouragement found throughout the Word of God. In the first place, we must maintain perspective; we must stay focused on Christ the Lord rather than our momentary problems.

This is the admonition to suffering saints that is found in the letter to Hebrew Christians. “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

“Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood” [HEBREWS 12:1-4].

Christians must be careful to bear in mind what has been promised and what shall shortly be revealed. You will undoubtedly recall Paul’s encouragement to suffering saints to have a truthful appraisal of their situation, contrasting what was then occurring to what was shortly to take place. To the Roman Christians, Paul counselled, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” [ROMANS 8:18].

To the Corinthians, the Apostle spoke of his own trials and his response to them. He was candid in his assessment. “We do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again” [2 CORINTHIANS 1:8-10].

He informed others of his struggles, inviting them to join him in his struggles. “You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many” [2 CORINTHIANS 1:11].

Throughout, he remained focused on what was coming. “This light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” [2 CORINTHIANS 4:17, 18].

Christians must make themselves aware of God’s perfect work that will shortly be revealed. “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words” [1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18].

It is here that we must pause to correct a common misperception. Paul did not say that we should not grieve; he said we were not to grieve as do others who have no hope. We have a hope, and the world cannot steal that hope. Thus, in our text we read that “devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him” [ACTS 8:2]. These devout men grieved, but they were not overwhelmed by their grief. However, the majority continued doing what the Master had commanded, which was to make disciples. This is apparent in this one verse: “Those who were scattered went about preaching the word” [ACTS 8:4].

PURPOSE IN SUFFERING — I really cannot tell you why we suffer, because there are differing causes of suffering. Some saints may experience satanic attack. Others of us suffer because we are subject to the frailties that are common to all mankind. We know that some suffer because they are beset by opposition from family and friends who are offended by their righteousness. The Master warned, “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you” [JOHN 15:18]. The Apostle of Love has written, “Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him” [1 JOHN 3:13-15].

And the Apostle to the Jews wrote to saints experiencing opposition and pressure, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And

‘If the righteous is scarcely saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?’

Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good” [1 PETER 4:12-19].

While we cannot say with certainty why any of the saints of God suffer, we can say with confidence that God does not desert His saints. What we do know is that in some manner, God is at work in our trials to bring glory to His Name and to work good for us. As we saw earlier when the Apostle to the Gentiles exulted, “This light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” [2 CORINTHIANS 4:17]. I cannot tell you precisely why God permits us to suffer, but I am confident that He is at work, even when His people suffer.

Jesus promised, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” [HEBREWS 13:5]. This same Jesus promised, “I am with you always, to the end of the age” [MATTHEW 28:20]. In the midst of a trial, threatened with death by an enraged mob, the Lord stood with Paul and testified, “I am with you” [ACTS 18:10].

God will work in our trials to accomplish His purpose for our lives. This is the reason for the testimony to Roman Christians, “We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” [**ROMANS 8:28-30**].

Amen.