

## 'Extraordinary Trust'

'And 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.' (Acts 7:59-60)

Well, how did we get here, to the place where Stephen, one of the early followers of Christ, is having to defend his faith in the Lord, in the face of fierce opposition? We need to go back to Acts Ch.6:9-15 to discover that:

'Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.'

Stephen had previously had hands laid on him in Acts 6:5, to act as 'one who served at tables'. Now we learn that at some time after, there was a bit of a purge, a roundup by the local Jewish authorities of these pesky Christians. Subsequently Stephen is required to give a defence, not of himself, but of the righteousness of the one he calls Lord, this same Jesus of Nazareth. Fired by the Holy Spirit, he used scripture from the Old Testament from the time of the first Patriarch, Abraham, to: 'the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.'

It did not go down well. The local Jews showed extraordinary hardness of heart in not only denouncing Stephen, but putting him to death for his trouble. Stephen was the first martyr for Christ recorded in the New Testament; the first of many ever since, who have held onto faith even to the death.

Very remarkable though, is not simply his willingness to hold onto the faith right to the end, but to do so at the same time as asking the Lord not to hold this sin against his persecutors. Here is true Christ-likeness, and evidence of a deep relationship with his Lord, of a faith that keeps its head in the face of the worst situation and of the assurance that the gain of heaven is...assured! Knowing that death was at hand, this showed 'Extraordinary trust' in his Lord and Master that He, Jesus himself, would not let his servant perish, but raise him to eternal life with His Lord and his God.

Stephen was not the only one to show 'Extraordinary trust' in the Lord Jesus. All four gospel writers remind us that there were two others crucified with Jesus, but Luke, in Ch.23 also records that of these two criminals, one of them continued to rail against Jesus, while the other showed 'Extraordinary trust' in Jesus, crying out:

"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And he (Jesus) said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Have you ever wondered what happened to this man? Did he make it? Did his 'Extraordinary trust' in Jesus bear fruit? One man who did wonder this is Alistair Begg, a Scot who was pastor for 40 years at the Parkside Church in Cleveland, Ohio. Here, he tells the story:

Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MJIKOVQVCE4>

So, according to Alistair Begg, it is entirely reasonable to presume that the Lord kept his promise and rewarded the 'Extraordinary trust' of the thief and therefore of Stephen also.

What of Stephen's persecutors? Did the Lord reward any of them? In our reading from Acts we learn that there was one other man who would go on to show 'Extraordinary trust' in Jesus. Indeed, at this point he was one of Jesus' persecutors, looking on and approving of the stoning of Stephen, while being feted for it. He was a certain Saul, who later, as Paul, would write letters to the Roman; the Corinthian; the Ephesian; the Galatian; the Colossian; the Philippian and Thessalonian churches as well as to three individuals, Timothy, Titus and Philemon and, arguably to the Hebrews. He worked as hard, if not harder than any of the other apostles to spread the faith, and in turn died on account of his own faith in Jesus. I leave you to draw your own conclusion about God's work in him.

What about us? Do we have that 'Extraordinary trust' in Jesus to see us through this life, no matter what it throws at us as we go forward in faith to eternal life? Do we ever think to mention this trust we have to others? Does it show in our words and deeds. Could we learn the courage to tell others about it

? The thief on the cross, Stephen and Saul all found their way to declare their faith and trust in the Lord in the face of extraordinary revelation. So can we.

54 Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.55 But 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. 56 'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.'

57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.