

*Acts 7:54-60. <sup>54</sup> When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup> 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. <sup>56</sup> "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." <sup>57</sup> At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, <sup>58</sup> dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup> While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup> Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.*

### Where is God?

**Our Savior God is in heaven watching over us.**

**He is in the hearts, minds, words and actions of his believers.**

Maybe you have viewed the footage, and seen the images, maybe you have refused to look because you were afraid of what you might see? Whether or not you have seen the actual footage or seen the pictures most likely you have heard the reports of Christians being tortured and executed because of their faith. And maybe when you hear about these awful occurrences you are tempted to wonder, "Where is God?" In our horror, in our distress, our faith might be so shaken that we ask, "Has he forgotten about his church? Has he abandoned his children?"

In the account of Stephen we see that the very opposite is true. When we see modern day persecution we might ask "**Where is God?**" and God gives us an answer through the account of the first Christian martyr Stephen. The answer that God gives us is this: **Our Savior God is in heaven watching over us and He is also in the hearts and minds of his believers.**

The word of Christ was clearly on the heart and mind of Stephen as he spoke the truth of Jesus Christ boldly. This truth of God cut to the hearts of those that he addressed and hearing Stephen's words led these people to feel an inward anguish and a rending of their hearts which then led to outward fury and rage. Even though there is no video footage, through these words from Holy Scripture you could see the hatred in their faces as they gnashed their teeth. You could see their inner anger spill out from their hearts into outward action as their bodies lunged forward and they rushed at Stephen. Their defiance, their rejection, of his message was so evident that they covered their ears as they ran toward him. Then they grabbed him, removed him from the city by force, and they stoned Stephen to death.

Jesus says that the world will hate his disciples and so we should not be surprised when that inward hatred translates into outward acts of rejection that include violence and

persecution. Jesus warned his disciples, he warns Christians today, that not only will the world have a rotten disposition toward his believers, but they will act upon those feelings of hatred. In some cases that will mean violent persecution and harm, in other cases it will be words of hatred and subtle jabs that will sting as others do things that attack our faith. Whatever the case may be we are should not be surprised when the unbelieving world acts out on these feelings hatred.

For Stephen this was certainly the case, and yet Stephen was confident that his Lord had not abandoned him, but his Savior Jesus was still very much there. God blessed Stephen with the ability to look through the hatred that was in front of him so that he could gaze upon the glory of God. Stephen did not have to ask, "Where is God?" but rather through that crowd of hatred that so thickly surrounded him, Stephen gazed into the calming and glorious expanse of heaven and saw his Savior. He saw the LORD Jesus standing at the right hand of God, firmly established as the ruler of heaven and earth. The Lord Jesus had not forgotten about his faithful servant, but looked down upon his suffering disciple and gave Stephen the vision to see that his Lord was with him even in this terrible circumstance.

When we view persecution and trouble, when we see Christians mistreated and abused, when we see evil forces crowding around them and killing them it is very hard for us to see past the acts of hatred and violence. However, God keeps us from falling into Satan's trap. Our enemy the devil wants us to think that God is powerless or has abandoned us, but our loving Father, our almighty God wants us to know that He has in no way left or abandoned his people. Our Lord has the power to save. He has power to keep his faithful believers held close in his arms.

Persecution has always been a part of the history of the Christian church. The ancient church father Augustine once said, "From Abel to the end of times, the people of God will always suffer persecution on their journey through time." Another ancient believer Tertullian once wrote, "The blood of the saints is the seed of the church." Tertullian lived around 200 AD in Africa and his words still ring true as African Christian have never lived without persecution. When Ethiopia was conquered by Italian forces in 1937 some 500,000 Ethiopian believers lost their lives. False religions, political regimes, and other groups still make being a Christian difficult on this continent of Africa, throughout many countries in Asia and Europe, and even in this nation.

Seeing and hearing recent reports of the persecution of Christians, does not mean that our Lord Jesus has been ousted from his throne. Living in a world in which the prevailing culture seems to be more and more anti-Christian does not mean that the Lord no longer cares about us. God is still in heaven. Jesus is still watching over us as he is firmly established as the ruler of heaven and earth. From that position of eternal power, from the right hand of God, Jesus looks down upon his servants and knows that through his word he has prepared his believers to take on such challenges. He was there for Stephen. He is there for his people always. He is there to answer the prayer that we pray so often: deliver us from evil. At times he delivers his people from evil by delivering them from harm, at times the LORD in his grace and mercy may deliver his people from evil once and for all as he brings them into the glories of heaven.

The world sees the things much differently, don't they? All they can see is a man or woman dying such a horrible death. They see the cruelty. They see the horror. They see a Christian suffering and slaughtered and they wonder aloud, "Where is God? How could he abandon his people and allow such things to happen?" They might even use this as a platform to mock Christianity and hold up such examples to show that Christianity is useless and pointless and does more harm than good.

As Christians we may see the same horrific images or at least we may hear the same terrible stories. However, the difference for the believer is that there is comfort that God gives us to through his Word. While the unbeliever only hopes to forget that image or find a semblance of relief by being made numb by other disturbing images and stories, for the believer there is actual comfort, there is resounding strength. With the eyes of faith we are able to see what Stephen saw. We see the Lord Jesus welcoming home a precious soul. We see the Lord Jesus looking down with care and compassion upon his faithful servant. We see the Lord, through the gift of faith, comforting his child, making him or her strong, and receiving that servant home. And now this image while still terrible, still horrible, is a reminder of God's grace and love that overcomes and defeats the horrible. Our Savior God has defeated the worst of enemies of Satan and death.

The question may still come, "Where is God?" But through the very word of God we saved from the devil's attack and quickly have the answer: Our Savior God is in heaven watching over us. He does not forget about his people, but he is in heaven ruling over all things for the good of his Church. And Jesus is there to strengthen and comfort and deliver his people. The account of Stephen also gives us another answer to this question of "Where is God?" He is in the hearts and minds, the words and actions of his people.

Our Lord Jesus is seen in the words and actions of his faithful servant. We see Jesus clearly in the words of Stephen that seem to echo so closely those that Jesus spoke with his very own lips while he hung on the cross. As Jesus prayed, "**Father, forgive them,**" as men carried out their evil work and nailed him to the cross Stephen likewise cried out with words of remarkable compassion concerning those who acted in hatred and violence toward him, "**Lord, do not hold this sin against them.**"

Our Lord Jesus overcame the horrible curse of sin and death for us, as he hung on the cross in his misery, as a crowd of evil surrounded him, as he suffered horrible pain at the hands of evil men, he prayed that Lord might forgive those who tortured and kill him. Strengthened by faith, filled by the Holy Spirit, Stephen was able to do the same. The Lord Jesus was not far away from Stephen at all. Not only was he there before Stephen's eyes, but he was in his heart and in his mind, in his words and in his actions.

Persecution of the Church and of individual Christians it is not a thing of the past, nor is it a new phenomenon that suddenly appeared with the rise of this terrorist group or the recent growth of this religion or this group or demographic. But such persecution has been around for centuries and will be around until this world is no more. Ever since Jesus walked this earth his followers have been hated and attacked, persecuted and picked on. As Solomon said there is nothing new under the sun. Jesus himself warned his disciples that this world would hate them as they hated him. Some will listen and be receptive to our message others will outright hate us. So how are Christians to deal with such harsh

realities? How are Christians to live in countries that are decisively anti-Christian? How are Christians to live in a culture that has made Christianity into a villainous organization that does not want to be tolerant of someone else's view of religion or tolerant of someone else's position on this social issue or another?

As the Father has sent me out, so I am sending you. As the Father sent his Son to live a life of compassion and love in a sinful and violent and hateful world, so Jesus sends out his disciples as sheep among wolves. And so we look to Christ and we let Christ be seen in how we live in every circumstance. Believers are to conduct themselves in such a way that their actions represent Christ and adorn their faith; that their life matches with their witness no matter how the world around them treats them. Even as they face those that oppose or criticize or harm them they are to let Christ be seen. It is for this reason that Peter uses the concept of being a foreigner or alien in this sinful world that can be so anti-Christian. In 1 Peter chapter 2, the apostle says, <sup>11</sup> ***Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.*** <sup>12</sup> ***Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.*** Through faith we are no longer of this world but we are of Christ, and Christ is seen as we live as foreigners and strangers in this world. Christ is seen in the lives of those who live honorably in their relationship with their neighbors, their government, and coworkers even when they receive opposition from those very groups. Christ is seen in the lives of his people when they respond to ridicule with deeper devotion, when they respond to hatred with love, when they continue to live and share their faith despite negative repercussions. Christ is seen in the refugee who is willing to flee his home and leave everything behind so that he may continue to know and believe in and worship his Savior. Christ is seen and the magnitude of what he has done for us is displayed when those imprisoned and threatened do not give up their faith and refuse to turn from Jesus even in the face of death. Christ is seen and his eternal influence and importance is demonstrated when Christians living in an increasing anti-Christian society refuse to bend or to break when they are pushed on to change their beliefs or the morals. Christ is seen in the faith of his believers even when God allows even such horrible things to happen, because it can be used for the strengthening of his church and the good of those who love him who died for them and was raised again. This same Jesus who died for us has risen and ascended and he rules over all things for the good of those who believe in him.

Dear friends, look with Stephen past the snarling crowd. Look beyond those stones being hurled. Look with Stephen past those terrible moments as he sees his Savior God looking down on him and listen as God's faithful servant speaks words of compassion and forgiveness that let Christ be known. ***"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."*** ***When he had said this, he fell asleep.*** Those words, those actions, this account of the first martyr, it all reminds us – still today - exactly where God is: Our Savior God is in heaven watching over us and Christ Jesus is in the hearts and minds, words and actions of his faithful people. Amen.