



## FOCUS VERSE

### Acts 7:60

And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

## LESSON TEXT

### Acts 7:54–60

54 When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth.

55 But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God,

56 And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.

57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord,

58 And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.

59 And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

60 And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.



## FOCUS THOUGHT

Forgiveness opens the door for God's grace and blessings, and it closes the door to many heartaches.



## CULTURE CONNECTION

### The Freedom That Comes through Forgiving Others

It is sad how many people hold on to resentment, bitterness, and grudges against others whom they perceive to have wronged them. Individuals tend to think their anger against others hurts the recipients of that anger. Actually, it hurts most those who hold the anger or bitterness.

Medical science has long recognized the harmful effects of holding onto anger and resentment. They also have revealed the healing power of forgiving others.

An article titled “Forgiveness: Letting Go of Grudges and Bitterness,” written by the Mayo Clinic staff, revealed many of the healthful benefits of forgiving others. In the article they point out that most individuals have experienced hurtful words or experiences caused by others. But the authors quickly suggest

the harm of unforgiveness is not upon the unforgiven, but on the unforgiving.

The authors state, “If you don’t practice forgiveness, you might be the one who pays most dearly. By embracing forgiveness, you can also embrace peace, hope, gratitude and joy. . . . Forgiveness can lead to healthier relationships; greater spiritual and psychological well-being; less anxiety, stress, and hostility; lower blood pressure; fewer symptoms of depression; stronger immune system; improved heart health; higher self-esteem” (<http://www.mayoclinic.org>, accessed July 11, 2016).

Is refusing to forgive others really worth the cost? Instead, let us follow the lead of Stephen in the New Testament, who forgave those who were stoning him to death, and pray for and forgive those who have wronged us.

#### OUTLINE

##### I. BAD THINGS HAPPEN

- A. Good People Suffer
- B. Victim or Victor?

##### II. PRAYER OF FORGIVENESS

- A. Jesus’ Prayer on the Cross
- B. Stephen’s Prayer at Death

##### III. TRUE FORGIVENESS

- A. Choose to Forgive
- B. True Forgiveness Is Releasing the Right to Retribution or Revenge
- C. True Forgiveness Requires Practical Application

#### CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

It is possible that forgiveness—both to give and to receive forgiveness—is one of the greatest needs in today’s culture. Giving forgiveness is one of the rare gifts in which the gift giver receives as much, if not more, benefit from the gift than does the recipient.

Giving forgiveness frees a person from the devastating effects of resentment, bitterness, and hatred. These negative emotions are capable of destroying a person, but the person who chooses to forgive an offending party is freed from the corrosiveness of negative emotions and spared their debilitating effects. This is not to suggest that forgiveness is easy. It rarely is. But the cost of unforgiveness should motivate us to ask God to help us to be forgivers.

Too many individuals have endeavored to cloak a show of forgiveness in the deceptive suggestion, “Well, I’ll forgive, but I won’t forget.” The statement is a smokescreen through which unforgiving individuals try to portray the appearance of giving forgiveness while continuing to hold on to a sense of injustice or a grudge so they can “lick their wounds” and nurse their resentment and anger.

The two elements of the statement, forgiving and forgetting, are separate and unrelated. Extending forgiveness is a personal

choice; remembrance of perceived wrongs is not a choice but an involuntary function of the human brain. It is technically impossible to completely forget a perceived sense of having suffered wrongdoing at the hands of another person. However, when people who have been violated choose to forgive, they also choose not to focus on remembering the wrongdoing. By not focusing on the negative memories, those memories will have a tendency to fade over time. Once a person has truly forgiven another person, remembering the offending actions becomes insignificant and meaningless because the forgiver has released all sense of vindictiveness and possible retribution against the other individual.

Why would anybody choose to live under a life sentence in the prison of refusal to forgive? How much better it is to release the perceived wrongdoing to God, step into the fresh air of forgiveness, and breathe in the refreshing reality of true freedom! People who give the gift of forgiveness to offenders will in return receive the gift of freedom to enjoy the absence of hard feelings, bitterness, and hatred. Choosing freedom from vengeance is absolutely the better choice and the only one that opens the door to complete emotional healing and freedom.

## SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

### I. BAD THINGS HAPPEN

One aspect of human life is that it includes the experience of both good and bad events. All humans experience pain and suffering at times because it is part of human life. However, all people also have times in which they experience pleasure and satisfaction, for both pain and pleasure are components of life. Because of the intensity with which we tend to react to suffering, however, we often believe we suffer pain more than we experience pleasure. Still, that is not usually the case. We tend to take pleasure for granted while focusing on every moment of suffering.

Suffering is not unique to any particular kind of individual. Whether we perceive a person to be good or bad—labels that are subjective and dependent on one’s perspective—all humans experience good events in their lives, and they all will experience times

of suffering. However, the ratio between blessings and suffering is not the same for each of us.

### A. Good People Suffer

All people suffer the pains and problems of life, even those whom we consider to be good people. Life just includes suffering.

Many people have misinterpreted Matthew 5:45, using the idea of rain falling upon the just and the unjust as if it were the judgment of God. Clearly, however, rain (and also sun in the verse) is a blessing from God, not an act of judgment. The biblical principle of God’s fairness both in blessing and in judgment is well established in Scripture, but one should be careful not to misapply Matthew 5:45 or any other verse of Scripture.



**“Jesus calls members of the kingdom to reflect the character of the one whose kingdom it is. Just as God gives the good gifts of sun and rain to all people without distinction, members of the kingdom should act with love, kindness, and generosity toward all” (Barry, J. D., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Mangum, D., & Whitehead, M. M. (2012). *Faithlife Study Bible (Mt 5:45)*. Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software).**

We should consider another biblical truth here: while we tend to view all events of life—both negative and positive—as actions of God, most life events have nothing to do with the favor of God or the lack of God’s favor on an individual. Many things occur in life just because we are human and because those things are part of our earthly existence. In fact, the psalmist spoke of his life including many tears of suffering.

*“My tears have been my meat day and night, While they continually say unto me, Where is thy God?” (Psalm 42:3).*

In this life we will suffer from the effects of undesirable, unwelcome, and often unavoidable events in our lives. It is not a question of whether we will suffer from hurts, pains, and disappointments in life;

the question is how do we respond when facing times of suffering.

## **B. Victim or Victor?**

All people suffer from the general disappointments, pains, and troubles of human life, but they also will sometimes suffer from the cruel or unkind actions of others against them. Because all humans will sometimes suffer wrongdoing, it is vital that believers decide in advance how they will deal with wrongful suffering when it comes. A proper attitude is vital to experiencing a positive outcome in spite of the pain suffered. Individuals can choose to become victims or they can choose to rise above the unmerited pain through forgiveness. Ultimately, those who choose to forgive will be the victors in life's struggles.

*"Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified" (1 Peter 4:12-14).*

## **II. PRAYER OF FORGIVENESS**

Jesus established the ideal model for forgiveness. He forgave those who were in the process of crucifying Him on the cross (Luke 23:34). What a supreme act of true forgiveness on display!

### **A. Jesus' Prayer on the Cross**

Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). He clearly recognized that His murderers would not have inflicted this evil upon Him had they understood who He was and the true extent of their actions. (See 1 Corinthians 2:8.) They did not realize they were killing the King of glory. Still, Jesus forgave them and in so doing He set high the standard of forgiveness.

How can we be so petty as to hold grudges against others who mistreat us in ways that cannot even be compared to what the

people did to Jesus? People can be so arrogant and self-centered, thinking only of themselves and what they desire. We should learn to look at the big picture of life and weigh the actions of others against it, not against our own personal inconvenience or selfish perspectives.

As demonstrated in our text today, Stephen followed the pattern set by Jesus Christ. He forgave the actions of those who would ultimately take his life.

## **B. Stephen's Prayer at Death**

Stephen did not deserve the vengeful actions of the angry mob that stoned him for daring to believe and share the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Jewish audience cried out at Stephen, closed their ears to his message, and ran together against him in violence. They then threw him out of the city and stoned him to death. All this they did against Stephen just because he spoke truth to them, but they did not want to hear it. They chose to eliminate the source of their conviction and discomfort. They were not seeking forgiveness, especially not from Stephen, whom they viewed as a blasphemer. Still, Stephen forgave them of their violence against him.

*"And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep" (Acts 7:59-60).*

Perhaps the greatest measure of forgiveness is that which is given toward those who intentionally hurt or destroy us. It is never easy for our flesh to humble itself to forgive others who hurt our feelings or disappoint us, but hurt feelings seem so insignificant when compared to forgiving ones who are intentionally destroying us. In the case of Stephen, they did destroy his human life, but they could not touch his eternal soul. Even in his anguish and pain, Stephen cried out to the Lord not to lay their actions to their own charge. In other words, he was praying for God to excuse and forgive their sins committed against Stephen, which would end his human life.

### III. TRUE FORGIVENESS

What is true forgiveness? How can we identify true forgiveness and what steps must we take to ensure that our forgiveness of others is genuine? First, it is a chosen response; because it is not a natural response of human flesh, intention and discipline are necessary for a person to choose to forgive.

#### A. Choose to Forgive

*Forgiveness is not based on forgetting.* It is not necessary to forget wrongful deeds we have suffered in order to choose to forgive the perpetrators. People sometimes use the phrase “forgive and forget,” but it is impossible to forget wrongs done against us. Through forgiveness, however, we allow the details of the wrongdoing to fade until it seems almost as if it never happened.

*Forgiveness is not based on understanding or justifying the offender.* We often try to understand the actions others have taken against us. If we cannot comprehend the wrongdoing or see any sense of justification in the actions, we tend to reject the idea of forgiveness. We tend to think, *They have no excuse for such behavior and they do not deserve forgiveness.* That may be true, but it is not our judgment to make. Vengeance belongs to the Lord alone and never to us. Further, in the model of God’s grace, neither did we deserve the forgiveness God gave to us when He saved us from sin. Had we merited the forgiveness God gave, it would not have been grace, for grace cannot be earned or deserved. It is not our responsibility to judge worthiness or to account for the actions of others; we are simply accountable for our actions, which include the responsibility to forgive others who have wronged us.

*Forgiveness is not based on the offender’s reception or response to our expression of forgiveness.* Offenders may even believe they have done nothing wrong and have no cause to apologize or to seek or receive forgiveness. In such cases, they may even take offense at our expressions of forgiveness. Such an expression will sometimes cause arrogance, haughtiness, or pride to surface in the offenders. We should not engage them in argument over who was wrong or whether they should accept our forgiveness. We have

the responsibility to God to forgive them, but it is not our responsibility to try to force their acceptance.

However, we should do all that is in our power to end the conflict peacefully, which often may require humility and meekness on our part. We should humbly let the offenders know we love and care for them and drop the matter. Further, we should pray for them. Again, this is often difficult, especially for those who have been deeply wounded. We should ask God for help. He can empower us to overcome our most difficult trials.

*Reconciliation is not a requirement for forgiveness.* Reconciliation is a noble and worthy objective, but it is not essential in order to validate our act of forgiveness. It is our biblical responsibility to live in peace with all people to whatever extent is possible (Hebrews 12:14), but sometimes it is impossible. Reconciliation requires cooperation by at least two parties between whom the tension or problem exists. We can only control our response, not that of the other person. We should do all we can do to achieve peace without exacerbating the rift between ourselves and those who may cause offense, but our responsibility is only to forgive.

*Forgiveness is based on obedience to the covenant (Matthew 6:14–15).* Our reception of God’s forgiveness is dependent on our willingness to forgive others who transgress against us. If we forgive others, God has promised He will forgive us. But if we stingily refuse to forgive others, God will withhold forgiveness from us as well.

*“For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6:14–15).*

#### B. True Forgiveness Is Releasing the Right to Retribution or Revenge

As we continue to consider what true forgiveness is, we should recognize that true forgiveness requires a release of the right to execute retribution or seek revenge. North American culture strongly emphasizes individual rights, which are given to us by the Creator. However, while we may think we

have the right to get even with those who offend us and transgress against us, God did not give us that right. He alone retains the right of vengeance; never has He given that right to us. Further, vengeful hearts exhibit the lack of humility, remorse, and repentance.

*“Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord” (Romans 12:19).*

*“For we know him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, The Lord shall judge his people” (Hebrews 10:30).*



**“If there is no repentance, there can be no pardon. Some years ago a murderer was sentenced to death. The murderer’s brother, to whom the State was deeply indebted for former services, besought the governor of the State for his brother’s pardon. The pardon was granted, and the man visited his brother with the pardon in his pocket. ‘What would you do,’ he said to him, ‘if you received a pardon?’**

**“‘The first thing I would do,’ he answered, ‘is to track down the judge who sentenced me, and murder him; and the next thing I would do is to track down the chief witness, and murder him.’**

**“The brother rose, and left the prison with the pardon in his pocket” (Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times*).**

If we release a helium-filled balloon, we can watch it slowly ascend into the sky. As we watch its ascent, it gradually appears to become smaller and smaller. The balloon does not actually become smaller, but our ability to see it lessens as it ascends into the sky. So it is for the individual who releases to God the right to seek vengeance. As it ascends to God it becomes smaller and smaller in our eyes and in our memory as well. We need to

release to God the right of vengeance, which never belonged to us in the first place.

Our refusal to release the right to get even will rob us of the very thing we withhold from others—forgiveness. In Matthew 18:23–35, Jesus told the story regarding a king who forgave a servant a debt he could not pay, yet the servant refused to forgive another individual who owed a debt to him. Consequently, when the king heard of the refusal of the man to forgive the debt of another, the king reinstated the debt and delivered the servant to the authorities to be imprisoned in the debtors’ prison. The King James Version says he was delivered to the “tormentors” (Matthew 18:34); the word *tormentor* means “oppressive jailer.” The debtor’s anger and grudge against one who owed him a relatively small amount so consumed him that he could not release it. Consequently, neither was he ultimately released from his debt, which amounted to a large sum of money.

While forgiving others is both a responsibility and a great gift, we must not lose sight of its effect upon us when we forgive. Forgiveness is not only a great gift to others but also a great gift to ourselves. It is the greatest thing people can do for themselves. Forgiving others brings great inner, emotional freedom to the one who forgives.

We not only owe a spiritual debt to forgive others who have wronged us, but we also owe it to ourselves.

### **C. True Forgiveness Requires Practical Application**

True forgiveness is more than shallow words. “I forgive you” are rich words, and they comprise a great and vital start toward genuine forgiveness. But if it ends there, it is sadly lacking. True forgiveness necessarily includes practical steps that back up the expression.

*Continue to affirm in prayer the choice to forgive.* We should continue to pray over the situation and individual that caused offense, not in an effort to irritate the raw wound, but in an effort to keep our hearts pure and free of any sense of offense, to restore any damages done to a relationship, and in praying blessing over the offender. The Scriptures command us to bless those who curse

us and to pray for those who use us. (See Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27; Romans 12:20; I Corinthians 4:12.) It is difficult to hold a grudge against individuals for whom we are praying the blessing of God.

*Do good to the offender (Matthew 5:44; Romans 12:20).* We should not just forgive the offender and then go out of our way to avoid the person. (An exception may be that in an abusive relationship, the abuser may need to be avoided in order to prevent further abuse.) Rather, we should go out of our way to show kindness and goodness to the person and to exhibit our sincere love and respect for the individual. By doing good things, we demonstrate the genuineness of not only our forgiveness, but also of our love and care for the person as a brother or sister in the body of Christ.

Only true forgiveness will ensure that we have fulfilled our part of the covenant with God for receiving God's forgiveness. If we are to receive forgiveness—from God or from others—we must be willing to forgive. Forgiveness must go beyond the minimum of expressing the right words of forgiveness; true forgiveness is evidenced by practical efforts to heal the damaged relationship and demonstrate the purity of our hearts toward our fellow believers, including those who have hurt us.

## INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Oh, the transformative power of forgiveness! Forgiveness has the ability to salvage relationships, restore hope, and redeem lives. When we choose to forgive those who have committed wrongs against us, we choose the higher pathway of life—one that

produces both inner and outer peace and one that empowers a person to enjoy a happier, more fulfilling life on earth. It only makes sense to forgive.

Forgiveness not only transforms relationships and engenders peace with our fellow believers, but it also positions us to receive the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. If we are unwilling to forgive others, God will not forgive us. A clenched fist is not capable of receiving.

The story is told of an experiment that involved a chimpanzee and a jar of jelly beans. The chimp loved jelly beans and would do almost anything to receive the treats. A jar of jelly beans was placed in his cage. The jar was attached to the floor of the cage so it was stationary. The chimp soon began trying to extract some jelly beans from the jar.

The chimpanzee discovered he was unable to get any jelly beans because when he reached into the jar and grabbed a fistful of them, his fist would not fit through the jar's neck. In order to extract his hand, he had to release his fist, letting go of the jelly beans. He finally discovered the only way to get any jelly beans was to turn loose of his greed and keep his hand open. He was able to extract only a few jelly beans at a time, but when he opened his hand he was positioned to receive.

We are not positioned to receive forgiveness until we open our heart of forgiveness toward others. When we forgive others, however, God has promised He will forgive us. Only then are we positioned to receive the beautiful gifts of God's grace, blessings, and forgiveness. While we could never earn or deserve any of God's blessings, we have to get into a proper position for receiving them. Further, only then do we close the door to many heartaches of life. ■

## REFLECTIONS

- How were the oral traditions different from the commandments of Moses' law?
- Jesus commanded us to love our enemies. How is that possible? How different is that principle from other religions of the world?
- What does it mean to forswear? Are there some cases when perjury is allowable or justified?
- Since we are not under the Law but under grace, is it permissible to present false witness or to intentionally perjure a testimony?
- What are some problems you have seen develop as a result of someone's lies (your own or those of others)?