

Stephen and Saul

by C.H. Spurgeon

C.H. Spurgeon contrasts the sincere yet opposing hearts of Stephen and Saul to reveal the transformative power of true spiritual faith over mere formalism.

Scripture: Acts 7:58, Acts 8:1-3, Acts 9:1-22, John 14:27, Psalm 34:18

Topics: "Martyrdom", "Spiritual Sincerity", "Conversion"

Description

In this sermon, C.H. Spurgeon explores the powerful biblical account of Stephen's martyrdom and Saul's role as his persecutor, highlighting the profound contrast between spiritual sincerity and mere formalism. Spurgeon emphasizes the enduring impact of true faith and the transformative potential of God's grace, even on the hardest hearts. Through vivid biblical exposition, he calls believers to steadfastness in defending the Gospel and warns against complacency in religious formality.

Transcript

"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." Acts 7:58.

THE Holy Spirit does not tell us much about the deaths of saints at any time and He says very little about the deaths of the martyrs. He gives us much more about Stephen—the first of them—than about any other. A few words are made to suffice for the death of James, the brother of John. As to the deaths of Peter and Paul, they are incidentally mentioned as yet to be, but we have no account of them whatever. I suppose there was no need and the Holy Spirit never gives us superfluous information. There were hundreds of years to come in which martyrologies might be written and the Lord has taken care that there should be eye-witnesses with ready pens to record the deaths of martyrs. Hence we have many volumes and, especially in our own country, the renowned Acts and Monuments of John Foxe which record how, through seas of blood, the martyrs swam to their crowns! The noble army of martyrs has never been without a chronicler and there was no need that the Holy Spirit should give us the details of the deaths of the witnesses for Christ because we should have plenty in another form.

And it is noteworthy that in this one, which is the fullest we have, there is nothing said about the sufferings of Stephen. Have you not had your feelings harrowed by descriptions of the burnings in the reign of Queen Mary—how the wood was slowly lighted. How, sometimes, the martyrs actually cried out, "For pity's sake, give us more fire!" And how they writhed in agony and yet cried out, "None but Jesus"? Such details may be very proper, but I think that they minister to our sentiment rather than to our edification. The Holy Spirit

takes a different line and tells of the triumph of the martyr, of the light which shone upon his face, of the vision which he beheld, which cheered his spirit, and of the blessed calm which came over him as Jesus rose up, rebuked the winds and waves that gathered around his boat, so that the martyr entered into the Port of Peace in a perfect calm. I believe that every incident which is recorded is intended for our profit—but it is not always profitable to have sensational descriptions which upsets one's feelings. There is something better than that, namely, to teach us the true source of strength and to guide us to a Heavenly calm, come what may.

However, in this instance, the Holy Spirit was pleased to direct the pen of Luke to record that the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. According to the Jewish Law, the witnesses were bound to be the first throwers of the stones. They were, in fact, the leading executioners, for they gave evidence against the accused and on their witness, he was condemned to death. They had to take the responsibility of his death and to throw the first stones. In order to do this, they took off their long flowing robes and, casting them down, they left them in the charge of one who would appear to have been much delighted with the death of Stephen, as he had probably given his vote against him in the Sanhedrin and was looking on to see that the dreadful murder was fully accomplished. Now, why is it recorded that these witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of the young man whose name was Saul? It was not to gratify our curiosity, but it was doubtless for some good reason—so let us try to find out why it is recorded and learn some lessons from it—God helping us.

I. And, first, does not the Holy Spirit here suggest to us A VERY NOTEWORTHY CONTRAST?

Here are two men—Stephen and Saul—both in Heaven now. I wonder how they felt when they first met there? What joy they must both have had—Stephen to see Saul and Saul to see Stephen! I suppose it is incompatible with the

Heavenly state for Saul to have any apologies to make, but, certainly, if they could have been indulged in there, he might have made them most lovingly and tenderly. The joy of meeting there must have been exceedingly great. Look at the two men—the one about to die and the other taking care of the clothes of the executioners. Let us do them justice.

They were both sincere men. There was no hypocrisy about Stephen. You could see that the words that he spoke came warm from his heart. Neither was there any hypocrisy about Saul. He really thought that he was doing God's service in what he did. He was quite as sincere, in his own way, as was the martyr who was about to die. What is more, they were both thoroughly earnest men. It was not in the nature of Stephen to quench his convictions, or to silence his testimony. Neither was it in the nature of Saul to keep quiet when he thought that a miserable imposter ought to be crushed out of existence. He is all on fire from the first moment when we meet him to the last record we have concerning him. He had a zeal for God, though not according to knowledge and, as he sat there, and took care of the executioners' garments, he felt in his conscience perfectly satisfied that what he was doing was for the glory of God. Sometimes we cannot understand how this could be, yet I do not doubt that many who have persecuted the saints of God, have done it ignorantly in unbelief and it has not struck them that they were really rebelling against the Most High and fighting against the Lord, Himself. It is very difficult to estimate the amount of darkness that may come over the human conscience and to imagine how blind a man may become, or how fully he may put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter— but certain it is that an unrenewed heart may become as darkened that while we are going posthaste to Hell, we may imagine that we are making good headway towards Heaven! These two men, Stephen and Saul, were unlike one another in

many respects, but they were alike in this sense—that they were both sincere and both thoroughgoing in their sincerity.

But, now observe the difference between them. Look first at Saul, a man wrapped up in self-righteousness. He will tell you that he has kept the Commandments from his youth up. If you gave him time, he would, perhaps, tell you that by descent he was a Hebrew of the Hebrews—that as touching the Law, he was blameless—that he belonged to the strictest sect of his religion and was a Pharisee. If you began to charge him with sin, you would see the fire flame from his eyes as he declared that concerning the righteousness which was by the Law of God, he was without fault. If any man was accepted before God, he felt that he was. And there he sat, in all the pride of self-righteousness, assisting at the murder of a truly righteous man. Had you spoken to Stephen, you would have found a man of quite another class. The martyr's only hope was in the Crucified Christ of Calvary. That which gladdened him was not a sight of himself, but a sight of his exalted Lord. He drew his comfort, not from what he had done, but from the finished work of Him who was, at that moment, standing at the right hand of the Father.

What a difference there was between those two men! Perhaps there may be two such persons here, sitting very near each other—the one self-righteous and self-reliant, depending only upon his own good works—the other humbly looking away from self and trusting only to the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. Of you two, I would sooner be you who is looking to Christ, even though you are to be executed tonight, than I would be you, Sir, wrapped up in the robes of your fancied self-righteousness, even though you are honored and respected by all mankind!

Look again at Saul and you will see a man Ritualistic to the utmost extent—a formalist of the deepest dye. He is a man who highly esteems everything that has to do with the Temple, the priesthood and the Law. You will find that his phylacteries are exceedingly broad and if you speak to him about the sacred roll of the Old Testament, you will find that he can debate and discuss with you upon every letter of it, for he has a great attachment to the letter. He is a man entirely taken up by the externals of religion—the shell is everything to him. But now look at Stephen and you will see a man who has put external matters altogether on one side. That last speech of his shows that it is so. He has not despised the Temple, but he has said of it, "However the Most High dwells not in temples made with hands." He has not despised the chosen people, Israel, but he has spoken of them as "stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears." He has not despised the outward forms of religion so far as they were ordained of God, but he has shown that, in themselves, they were useless because even when they were in the full tide of their glory, they did not change men's hearts, for many of them remained idolaters and murmurers in the wilderness. Stephen is the spiritual man and Saul is the formal man.

Both these classes may be represented here and I would have you see to which of them you belong because it is the spiritual worshipper whom God seeks. It is the spiritual worshipper who is God's friend—the formalist is no friend of the King of Heaven, though he may seem to be so! He fights for the letter of the Word but, in despising its inner meaning,

he has despised the very essence of it! He fights for rites and ceremonies but, in neglecting the inward and spiritual Grace, he has neglected the vital matter and he remains as much a foe of God and of His Christ as was this young man named

Saul!

The great difference between Stephen and Saul, however, lies in this—Stephen is defending the cause of Christ at the cost of his own life and Saul is opposing him with all his might. Even in a congregation like the present, there may not be many, yet there may be some who are opposing the Gospel. There may be some here who, although they would not stone Believers, yet would make a jest of them—perhaps they have been making merry today over those Christian Brothers [Moody and Sankey] who have of late been prominent in the matter of revivals—some foolish jest they have perpetrated about them—and done their best to lower them in the esteem of their fellows. Ah, dear Friends, beware what you are doing, for the Lord of Hosts says concerning His people, "He that touches you, touches the apple of My eye." Nothing brings the color into a man's cheek sooner than any ill-treatment of his children! And if any of you want to provoke God to speedy and sudden judgment against you, you have only to join in treating, in a cruel manner, those who are really His children. May God keep all of us from such a shameful sin as that!

The contrast mentioned in our text is a very painful one and though we see it illustrated every day, it is none the less painful. We ought to look at it with weeping eyes, praying that the young man named Saul may yet be converted to God. "But," says one, "there are none of us who would be like Saul." No, you would not stone the saints, but perhaps those who do so would be permitted to lay their clothes at your feet. You do not invent the jest against the saints but, perhaps, you repeat it and laugh at it—and give approval to those who use it.

There are many persons who are keepers of the clothes of open sinners. For instance, I believe that very often a merely moral man may exert a very detrimental influence upon sinners because they will say, "Look at So-and-So! He is not a Christian, yet he is a man of good repute," and so they are led to believe that they may stay where he stays—out of Christ! O dear Friends, may there be nothing about your walk and conversation which can be used to oppose the Gospel of Jesus Christ! But there will be unless you are wholly on His side, for He, Himself, said, "He that is not with Me is against Me; and he that gathers not with Me scatters abroad." If you are not on the side of Christ you are on the side of His enemies, for this is a fight which admits of no neutrality. And if you cannot feel that you would, like Stephen, defend the cause of Christ, then I fear you only lack the opportunity and the circumstances, if not to stone Stephen, yet, at least, to let those who do the dreadful deed lay their clothes at your feet! The contrast recorded in our text is a very vivid one. I wish I could depict the equally vivid one between unconverted persons and Christians, for there is a contrast between them, a contrast which will come to this one day—there will be a great gulf fixed between them, across which there will be no passage. At the Last Great Day, the righteous shall be upon the right hand of the Judge and the wicked on His left hand and Christ, Himself, shall stand between them, so that the division shall last as long as Christ Himself shall live!

II. Now, secondly, our text affords us A REMARKABLE INTRODUCTION OF A PERSON TO TRUE RELIGION.

Perhaps there may be someone here whom you know who has never yet come into contact with real, vital godliness, and you are very anxious that he should do so. I am equally anxious that he should and I think it ought to be your earnest endeavor that not only he, but all who are like he should, somewhere or other, come into contact with real religion. Now, as far as we see in the Bible, this is Saul's first introduction to anything like real Christianity. We have not his name, before this verse, in the Acts of the Apostles, so here, for the first time, he steps forward into the arena of conflict—"a young man, whose name was Saul." Was he favorably impressed at once with Christ and His people? Certainly not, but quite the reverse! The impression made upon him was that of intense hatred and enmity towards Jesus of Nazareth and all His

followers.

But perhaps he saw a bad specimen of Christianity. Perhaps he listened to a very poor sermon that misrepresented the Gospel. Perhaps he never saw any sign of the working of the Spirit. On the contrary, Saul's introduction to Christianity, in the person of Stephen, was of the most favorable kind. His own heart, however, was so desperately prejudiced against Christ that we find him no sooner brought into contact with Christianity than he becomes the keeper of the clothes of those who stoned the servant of the Lord!

Notice, then, what his introduction was. He saw a Christian of the noblest type—a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. And he saw him at his best, for his face shone like the face of an angel. I wish that when men of the world look upon us, they could see such Christians with shining faces. Perhaps, dear Friend, the person about whom you are concerned, may have taken a prejudice against true religion through the faults of Believers, but that was not the case with Saul. I suppose that all the Christians that he had ever met with in Jerusalem—for it was the golden age of Christianity—were of the very best type, as Stephen was. And yet, though he looked into that face which was burning with the light of Grace and glory, he hated that face and gnashed his teeth against the man whose glorious, calm demeanor ought at once to have won him.

And then he listened to a noble discourse. It was a discourse specially fitted to the Jews. They always liked to hear the history of their nation—their national pride was gratified by it. In later days, when Paul had to address them, he gave them a summary of their history very similar to this of Stephen, and wisely so. It was the best and most suitable discourse that could be given, yet the only result produced upon Saul and others was that they ran upon the preacher to stone him and put him to death! Now, dear Friends, if you have brought some relative or friend to listen to the minister and the sermon seems to you to be most suitable and admirable, do not be surprised if, instead of seeing any good result come from it, you find, on the contrary, the provocation of the whole nature of the casual hearer and a stirring up of rebellion in his heart! Think it no new thing and no strange trial, for this was the case with the young man named Saul when he was introduced to a Christian with a shining countenance, and to a ministry which was in all points admirable! Yet, for all that, he was the more hardened in his enmity against the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

But the young man named Saul saw something else. He saw a Christian die a triumphant death and many have been converted by such a spectacle as that! There have been some who could ridicule the life and ministry of a Christian, but the dying speech—the bright and lustrous glance of the closing eyes—the triumphant hymn of the departing saint—these have been irresistible arguments and they have been compelled to yield to them. But it was not so with Saul, for we read after Stephen was put to death of, "Saul, yet breathing out threats and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord." Even that spectacle which might have convinced an infidel, convinced not this young man whose name was Saul! And our first introduction of the Gospel to our friends may not at first end as hopefully as we could have wished and expected, yet we ought not to be discouraged, for Saul did become a Christian after all. It was no proof that he never would be converted that, at first, he grew more hardened. It was no evidence that the Gospel would not conquer his heart that at first, his heart shut all its gates against Jesus Christ. We have a proverb which reminds us that, "Rome was not built in a day," and we cannot always expect the new Jerusalem to be built in men's hearts in a single hour! There are some who are struck down at once, as Saul was afterwards, but there are others, against whose strong fortress the battering ram of the Truth of God must come with all its might year after year—and it is only when God strikes the effectual blow of Divine Grace that, at last, they yield, subdued by Almighty Love!

At any rate, whether they yield or not, your duty is clear. Bring them to Christ! Bring them under the sound of the Gospel! Do all that you can for their salvation, so that, if they perish, when the funeral knell startles your ears, you will be able to say to yourself, "Whether he is lost or saved, I am not responsible. I am clear of his blood, for I told him the way of salvation, I pleaded with him for God and I pleaded with God for him. I persuaded him to go with me and listen to the preaching of the Word—and if he has rejected it, and trampled it underfoot, I cannot help it, though I would have helped it if I could. I must leave his fate in the hands of God." I think this case of Saul is a very encouraging one to any of you who are seeking to win sinners to the Savior. Did a man swear at you when you spoke to him about his soul? Well, there is sometimes more hope for a man who has enough grit in him to denounce us, than of one who seems to agree with all that we say! He says, "Yes, Sir. Yes, Sir. Very good, Sir." And then he passes it all off. Perhaps it shows that there is a bigger soul in the man even when he becomes a persecutor than when he simply waves his hand and says, "Go your way for this time; when I have a convenient season I will call for you." A downright opposition may only prove that there is good soil where we may sow the good Seed of the Kingdom of God.

III. In the third place, I think our text is AN INSTANCE OF THE SECURITY OF THE APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION.

Do not be frightened at that expression! I am not a believer in that Apostolic succession which is supposed to come by the laying of human hands upon human heads, but I believe that there has always been, in the Church of God, a succession of faithful men so that when one has died, another has been called to take his place. And I believe that it will always be so until Christ Himself shall come. What a dreadful thing it was for the Church to lose Stephen! She had many

useful men in her ranks, but Stephen seemed, just then, to come to the front—he had made a stir all over Jerusalem. Though especially appointed to look after the poor, there never was a deacon who was more thoroughly in the front rank of the Church. He was worthy—I was going to say—to be an Apostle, for his holiness and daring. He convinced many of the Truth of the Gospel of Christ. If he had been ill, his Brothers and Sisters would have prayed that his life might be preserved and if they had known that he was going to be put to death, they would have said, "It is better that we should die than that Stephen should. We cannot afford to lose him." It is a calamity for the Church of Christ when her best men, whether ministers or deacons, are called Home, yet dear Friends, it often is the case that God takes His servants Home just when they are most useful. When would you have Him take them Home? When they are least useful? When they are little or no good, here, would you let the Lord have them? That is not very generous on your part! The Lord is entitled to the very best. Some are getting ripe for Glory, so it is but natural that the Master should take the ripest of them. You need not be astonished, therefore, when the most useful people are taken to Heaven.

But now, look, Stephen is going Home. Who will take Stephen's place? Do you not see him? The witnesses have laid their clothes at his feet and no doubt Stephen's mantle was among them! So, as surely as Elijah left his mantle to Elisha, the mantle of Stephen was lying at the feet of Saul He did not put it on at once, but he did put it on afterwards. And oftentimes, when men ask, "What shall we do when Mr. So-and-So has gone?" The Lord will send a man who does just as well as Mr. So-and-So has done! I have often been asked, "What is to be done with the Tabernacle, and the College, and the Orphanage when you are gone?" Dear me, the Lord got on very well before I was born and I am sure He will when I am dead. That question never troubles me. Did you ever sit down and think, "What will my wife do when I am gone?" You do not like to think of it? Then do not think of it, for it is no business of yours! The successor of

any man whom God makes useful will be found in due course. He may be at present among the haters of the Gospel! He may be among those who are railing at the Cross of Christ! Where was the great successor of John Huss found? Why, he is over there in a German monastery. What? A monk? Yes, a monk who goes crawling up the stairs of the Santa Scala at Rome, trying to get merit enough to save his father, mother and himself—and wishing he could always be there accumulating merit! Yes, Martin Luther was the man to follow Huss and God raised him up in due time!

The saints in Jerusalem did not know where Stephen's successor was, but God saw him among Stephen's enemies and He brought him out and Saul was a mightier Apostle than Stephen could ever have been! The Church lost Stephen, but she gained Saul—and that was a very good exchange for, though nothing may be said that would be derogatory to such a high-souled man as Stephen was, yet the Church of Christ has never had a servant who, taking him for all in all, has been so useful to her as the famous Apostle Paul who was once that young man named Saul! How much we owe, through Divine Grace, to his Epistles for their clear teaching of spiritual Doctrines! No other Apostle, though each one was excellent in his own way, ever had so clear a Revelation of, or so clearly taught, those grand Doctrines of Grace which are the very backbone of the Gospel of Jesus! And who else ever labored as he did? He says himself—and he was always modest—"I labored more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the Grace of God which was with me." When Stephen was taken away, it was a great mercy that he was succeeded by one who even surpassed himself!

And, my dear Friends, at this very time, we need not be asking, "What shall we do without So-and-So?" God has enough servants somewhere or other, so we need not say, "Would that He would raise up more evangelists!" He has already spied a man out in Chicago and, without going so far as that, He could find one in any part of London, or in any hamlet or village in the country, wherever He chose to look for him! The Lord is never short of men to serve Him—

"Remember that Omnipotence has servants everywhere"—and out of the ranks of Satan's army He can take the boldest champion of evil, arrest him by Almighty Grace and lay upon him the charge to become a leader to the hosts of the living God! Never despair, and never doubt, nor let even a desponding thought concerning Christ's cause flit across your mind! They tell us that dark days are coming—that is quite true, but the Sun of Righteousness will never be eclipsed! They tell us that the powers of evil will grow stronger and stronger. Suppose they do—the Almighty will never grow weak. We will fall back upon the Omnipotence and All-Sufficiency of Jehovah and then we shall know what it is not to feel any distrust or fear concerning the present or the future of the Church of the living God!

So you see, in the case of Stephen and Saul, we have a clear instance of the certainty of true Apostolic succession.

IV. Now, next, and briefly, our text seems to me to be A GRACIOUS MEMORIAL OF REPENTED SIN.

Saul became Paul and there is a great deal of good recorded of him under the name of Paul. But the Holy Spirit has caused this fact to be remembered, "The witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul." Then does God write down the sins of His people before they are converted? Yes, He does, and in this case He writes it down in the Book of books, so that, wherever the Bible goes, there goes the information that Saul of Tarsus was once a persecutor! When we read of Rahab, we are told that she was "the harlot." Why is this memorial kept of Saul's sins before conversion? It was meant to keep Paul humble—and it always did that. You notice how very sorrowfully he always

speaks about this matter. He says that he was not meet to be called an Apostle because he persecuted the Church of God. Once, in speaking to the Lord, he said, "And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I, also, was standing by and consenting unto his death, and kept the raiment of them that slew him." He never forgot that and it always made him walk humbly before God. He wrote to Timothy, "I was a blasphemer and a persecutor, and injurious; but I obtained mercy."

Do not try, Beloved, to forget your old sins. Let them always be before you to keep you humble. I have heard of a certain high ecclesiastic who had been a fisherman. And while he was rising in the world he used to hang up his net that he might be reminded that he had once been a fisherman. At last, the Pope made him a cardinal and no one ever saw his net after that. They said that he had caught what he had fished for, so he put his net away. You and I had better always keep our nets in sight to remind us of what we once were. Look at the pit from where you were dug, and when God gives you any special mercy, say to yourself, "What a miracle of Grace is this, for I was among the most undeserving of all."

This sin of Paul's was always on his mind and so it continually increased his love. He was like the woman who loved much because she had had much forgiven—like the debtor who, although he owed the most, was most grateful because his lord had freely forgiven him all. Who was as zealous as Paul? He counted all things but loss for the Glory of God and surely that was because he felt himself to be a debtor beyond all others to the Grace which had washed away the scarlet sin of murder from his guilty soul!

And, again, dear Friends, this sin of Paul's was recorded in the Bible and retained in his memory because it kept him to the Doctrines of Grace. I have generally noticed that those professors who were always so very good, and had nothing very marked about their conversion, have gone off to that form of doctrine which I do not find in the Scriptures. But those of us who know how base we were before our conversion feel that there is only one kind of Doctrine in which we can believe, and that is the Doctrine of Sovereign Grace. It would take a great deal to grind me down into a belief in free will because it is contrary to my whole experience. I know this, if the Lord had not first loved me, I never would have loved Him. And if there is any good thing in men whatever, it must have been implanted there by the Holy Spirit. If salvation is of works, then I can never have it—and if it is the reward of natural goodness, then I shall never have it. I feel that it must be of Grace, and of Grace alone. No doubt, the recollection of his sin helped to make Paul what he was—the grand Evangelical preacher—the man who brought out the glorious Doctrine of God's electing love—the man who, beyond all others, proclaimed the Doctrine that salvation is of Grace and Grace alone, and that God will have mercy on whom He will have mercy and will have compassion on whom He will have compassion. It would have been incompatible with the experience of the Apostle to preach anything else and, therefore, was the remembrance of his sin kept before him that he might always make known those precious Truths of God!

And, perhaps, dear Brothers and Sisters, this sin of Paul is recorded that we might always be hopeful about other people. You know, from the moment he was converted to the moment he died, he was always a persecuted man. His life was divided into two periods—first he was persecutor and then he was persecuted. When he had been driven from city to city and many times stoned, how he must have thought of Stephen and the stones that fell on him! When he had been hated of all men for Christ's sake, he might well have despaired of the Gospel ever spreading had he not said, "Ah, but as it converted me, it can convert others. Did I not take care of the clothes of those who stoned Stephen—those rebels who took the pearls that fell from his lips and trod them underfoot like swine?" This would encourage him to stand before the cruel Nero and to tell him the Gospel of Jesus, for He who could convert a Saul could convert a Nero if He willed to do it. You never find Paul drawing back or flinching, but he went preaching almost to

the ends of the earth, feeling himself to be a debtor both to Jew and Gentile, barbarian, Scythian, bond and free because, he said, "I obtained mercy, that in me, first Jesus Christ might show forth all long-suffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on Him to

life everlasting." Oh, yes! it is good for you to remember what you used to be, for you will have hope for other people when you remember that!

V. Our text, in the fifth place, is AN INSTANCE OF THE OVERRULING OF GOD.

If you look very carefully at it and look long enough, it will appear not altogether a bad thing that Saul should be there taking care of the clothes of the murderers of Stephen. Possibly you cannot, at first, see how any good can come out of it, but there was never a bad thing out of which God could not bring good. Even the death of Christ, which was the culmination of human sin, was the crowning point of Divine Love. If Saul had not been there, Stephen would not have prayed for him. Augustine says, in a sentence which is always quoted in every commentary on the Acts that I have seen, "If Stephen had not prayed, Paul had never preached." But Stephen's prayer, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge," was such a comprehensive plea for his murderers that I can well conceive of his fixing his tearful gaze upon that young man named Saul and in his thoughts including him in that petition and beseeching the Lord not to lay it to his charge! And the Lord did not lay it to his charge "because," Paul said, "I did it ignorantly in unbelief."

I believe it was a good thing for Saul to be there and I have sometimes thought, when I have heard a man swear in the street, "That is an awful thing, but if he had not done it, I would probably not have prayed for him." I always make it a rule to pray for a man when I hear him swear, so, in that way God may bring good out of evil. Take care, all of you who love the Lord, whenever you hear or see anybody doing that which is wrong, to always pray—for this is the way we are to be "the salt of the earth." The salt is always to be put where the rottenness begins. This is the way in which we are to be "the light of the world." The candles are to be brought when the darkness comes out—you do not need them till the sun has gone and the darkness has come. So, when you perceive the darkness, light your candles! When you perceive the putrefaction, scatter the salt by bringing the sinner before God in prayer!

But there is also something more than this. If Saul had not been there, he would have missed the benefit of Stephen's discourse. And Stephen's sermon is the text from which Paul preached all his life. If you examine it carefully, you will find that Stephen's speech is the root out of which, through the blessing of the Spirit of God, Paul's theology grows. Stephen gives him the clue of all that argument in the Epistle to the Romans about Sarah and Hagar. And all that discussion about father Abraham being justified by faith is there in Stephen's speech. And the Epistle to the Hebrews is another plant that grows out of the seed which Stephen sowed in Saul's mind. There are several phrases which are identical. I think that the reason why we have the speech of Stephen recorded so fully is that Paul traveled with Luke, who wrote the Acts of the Apostles, and Paul told Luke what Stephen had said, for it seems to have gone right into his soul and to have stuck there! It must have been so, for it molded all his Epistles and you can trace the influence of Stephen in every parchment upon which Paul put his pen. It may sometimes happen that men who are opposed to the Word of God may actually be influenced by a man at whom they sneered. That may be the very man at whose feet they humble themselves. Perhaps, after he is dead and gone, that man's piety may color the whole life of a young man who now hates him. You cannot tell, but this I know—that out of many an evil thing God has often brought great good—as He did in this case, both through the prayer and through the preaching of holy Stephen!

Whenever you think that an unconverted man has formed some plot to allure you into sin, have so much of the Holy Spirit about you that instead of his overcoming you, you will overcome him! Have you never heard of the soldier who reported that he had taken a prisoner? The officer said, "Bring him along, then." He said, "I cannot." "Why not?" "Because he is dragging me the other way," replied the soldier. He had not taken a prisoner—he had become a prisoner himself! And many a Christian, instead of doing good to the world, is being led away captive by the world. Let it not be so with you. Make them turn to you, but do not turn to them. It is well, in the firmness of faith, to draw them towards the Savior, but may it never happen that their evil example shall master your good and their revelry shall overcome your piety. God fill us with the Holy Spirit and with faith so that we may, like Stephen, be the means of transforming Saul, the persecutor, into Paul, the Apostle!

I leave this subject with you, only asking you to pray for any whom you see to be distinguished for sin, or infidelity, or heresy. Pray God to save them! The more mischief they are doing, the more earnestly you ought to pray for them, for it is very likely that if they were converted, the more good would they do. I read a strange speech of John Bunyan's once, with which I did not wholly agree, though there was some truth in it. He said that he had great hope for the next generation because the young men that he met with were so intensely wicked and he thought that if God, by His Grace, changed them, they would make grand saints. So, when you meet with intensely wicked men, pray God to make grand saints of them! They are the raw material, ready to His hands for Him to work upon. The very obstinacy and rebellion of their nature shows that when Divine Grace comes into them, they will make the most outspoken Christians. Therefore, pray for such and may God hear your prayer, for Jesus Christ's sake! Amen.

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