

INDIVIDUAL CLAIMS FOR RETRIBUTION

"Lay not this sin to their charge." – Acts 7:60

THE words of St. Stephen on the occasion of his martyrdom, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge," must not be understood to mean that he was in any way dictating to the Almighty how to deal with those who were taking his life. Nor are we to think that he was praying for the forgiveness of all the sins of these people. We are to narrow the matter down to the words used – "Lay not to their charge."

So far as St. Stephen was concerned, he had no special claim to make upon Justice for retribution. The question then arises, has any one such a claim? The answer is that it would seem that any one who suffers injustice has a claim for retribution. In our common courts, there are some crimes and acts of injustice which are taken up for consideration, though there are others which would never be touched, unless the individual concerned took up a charge.

In St. Stephen's case, we understand that the wrongs done him are charged up against the wrong-doers. They were already tainted with original sin, as members of the human family; they were already under condemnation to death. The Lord Jesus had already begun the work of making satisfaction for their sins and for the sins of the whole world. In His own time and way, God will judge these sinners. Hence they shall have a just recompense, in proportion as they were guilty of wrong-doing.

Jesus intimates that crimes against any of the members of His Body will have to be expiated. The doing of injury to one of the Lord's people is especially evil in God's sight, and especially punishable; for these are in special covenant relationship with Him, while the world is outside of this protection of Divine Justice, except in a general way.

The words attributed to our Lord, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," given in our Common Version Bible, are not found in the oldest Greek MSS. It would be rather more difficult for Jesus to offer such a prayer than for us to do so; for the Scriptures declare that He knew what was in man. We do not know. Any prayer that we might offer respecting man would be very different from what Jesus would offer. Therefore, we must leave these words out of consideration when thinking of St. Stephen's words.

GENERAL AND SPECIAL RIGHTS UNDER THE LAW

We ask ourselves, to what extent was St. Stephen right and within his privileges in offering such a prayer? If he were one of the Apostles, we should be bound not to make inquiry, but to suppose that he was right. The fact that the words are recorded in Scripture does not prove anything more than if they were from one of us.

In our Common Law, there seems to be this principle – each individual seems to have certain rights in addition to the general rights under the Law. These special rights he may or may not press, if occasion should arise. In St. Stephen's case, we understand that he had a right to waive the claims of Justice, and did so. It is as though he had said, "I put in no protest, and ask for no vengeance on my account."

The question then arises, did he have a right to wish for vengeance on them? We think not. Our Lord's instructions are, "Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful." (Luke 6:36.) But so far as the general principles of righteousness are concerned, we must not interfere. St. Stephen very properly limits his prayer in this sense, as if he were saying (paraphrasing), "Heavenly Father, I am not asking for vengeance on them, but that they may not be held especially responsible for this sin against me."

DEFENSE OF THE INTERESTS OF THE TRUTH A DUTY

We are admonished by our Lord to love our enemies, and to do good to them who hate us, and to pray for them who spitefully use us and persecute us. The question then comes in, Would it ever be right for us to appeal to Justice? Should we always say, "Father, forgive them; I forgive them"? Should we wish that the *courts* should do **[R5260 : page 185]** nothing against them? No! Where the interests of the Lord's Cause are involved, it is our duty to say something in defense of the Truth; but not in a personal matter.

Of course, the world will not understand our motive, for the world does not act except for personal reasons. Consequently, they would suppose that we acted for our own sakes. But we have given up all our earthly rights, in consecration; that is, we covenanted to give up every claim to our just rights in the world. This is the substance of our consecration.

Where the interests of the Lord's Cause are involved, however, it is our duty to act for the good of the Truth, for the reason that certain impressions inimical to the Truth may be stopped. We see illustrations of this principle in the case of the Apostle Paul at court; also when he said to Elymas the sorcerer, "O thou child of the Devil, ...wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord?...thou shalt be blind, not seeing the sun for a season." (Acts 13:10,11.) In these cases, and also **[R5260 : page 186]** in that of Alexander the coppersmith, we may be sure that the Apostle was not seeking personal revenge.

This attitude should also be ours in all the affairs of life. If anything is done in opposition to those who oppose themselves, it should be done in the same spirit that the Apostle showed in the course which he took. We all find that as we grow in grace and in knowledge we develop a spirit of charity – forgiveness. This is as

it should be. Greater knowledge of God, greater development in character-likeness of Christ, should make us the more generous, forgiving.

IGNORANCE THE REAL CAUSE OF MUCH INJUSTICE

The Lord blesses us in giving us a clearer knowledge of the Truth. When we come to the knowledge of the Truth, it gives us a sympathetic feeling for the world. We are all fallen. But the Apostle says, "Ye are washed, ye are sanctified, ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God." (I Cor. 6:11.) Others, who are not cleansed, not sanctified, not justified, are in the gall of bitterness, so to speak.

When we consider all the evil deeds done in the world, and when we look back through the pages of history, we can see that the majority of those who perpetrated evil did so because they did not appreciate the principles involved in the matter. St. Peter, speaking by inspiration, says that in ignorance Israel killed the Prince of Life. (Acts 3:15,17.) St. Paul, who gave the authority of the Sanhedrin for the stoning of St. Stephen, tells us that he did these things in ignorance, in blindness; and that he verily thought that he was doing God service.

If this was true of all these cases in the past, may we not think that quite certainly the same principle is operating now – individually, personally? The Lord is able to stop these things, and will do so in due time. He will lift the veil and let the light shine out in due time. But it is not the due time as yet. The Church has not yet completed the sufferings of Christ.

OUR SHARE OF THE CUP OF SUFFERING

We should rejoice in having a share in the sufferings of Christ, and should receive our share in meekness and uncomplaining

obedience, realizing that the Father hath poured the cup which we are to drink. If we love our enemies and do not wish to do them harm, but on the contrary wish to open the eyes of their understanding and to do them good, then we have the right spirit. Any desire to do them injury would prove that we are lacking in the Lord's Spirit. Whoever finds that he has a spirit of viciousness will find that he has much to learn. But whoever finds in himself evidence of the Spirit of the Lord in this matter, may rejoice.

By and by, these very ones who are persecuting, slandering, doing evil towards us, will see clearly, and they will be ashamed. As the Scriptures say, "Your brethren that hated you and cast you out for My Name's sake, said, Let the Lord be glorified; but He shall appear to your joy, and they shall be ashamed." (Isa. 66:5.) The time when they shall be ashamed is the time when Christ shall appear and they shall see. "And when He shall appear, we shall be like Him." So, then, our opportunity for revenge will be future, and our revenge will be to do our enemies good. We will do them so much good that they will be thoroughly ashamed of what they are now doing against us.

