

August 27, 2023

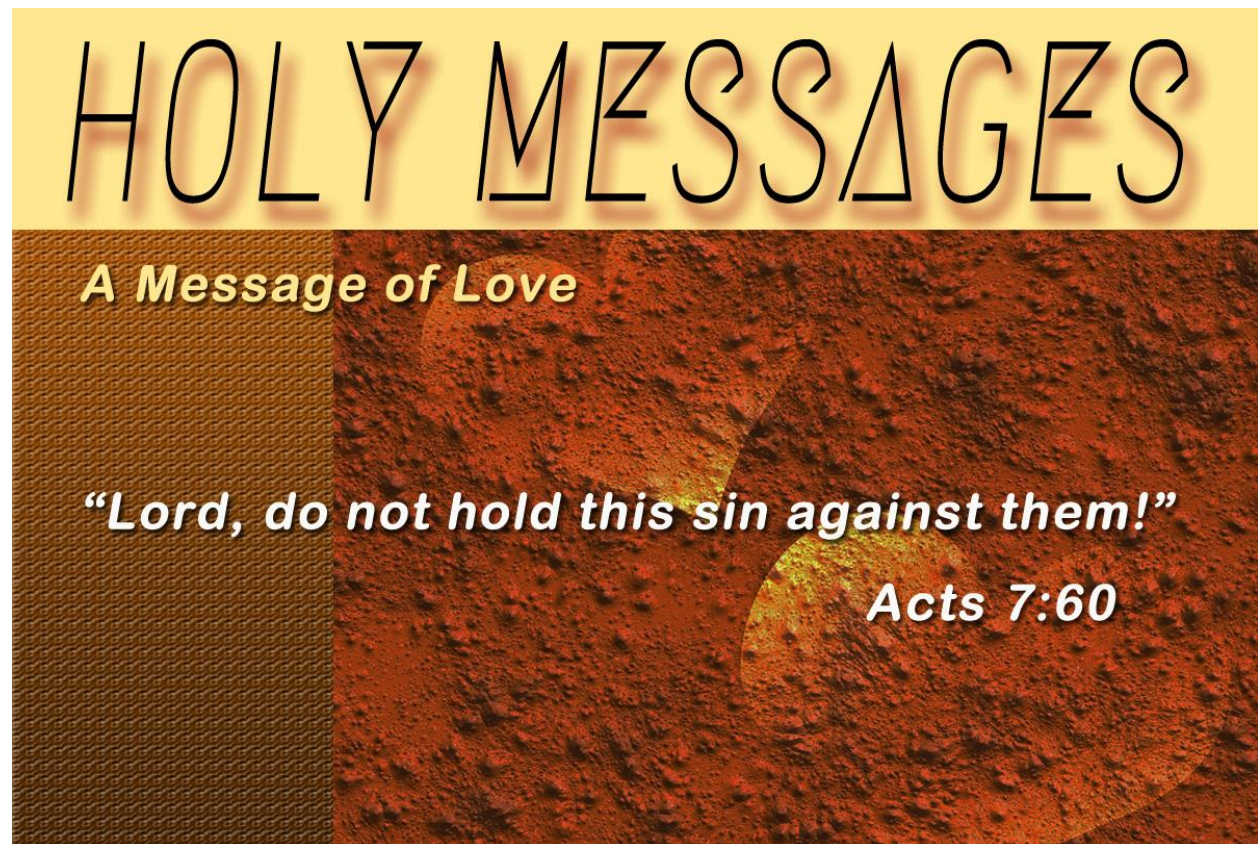
**A MESSAGE OF LOVE** (The Story of Stephen Acts\_7:54-60)

Acts 7:60

**“Lord, do not hold this sin against them!”**

Special Music: “Forgiveness” Matthew West

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1Lu5udXEZI>



## **LORD, GRANT ME A HEART LIKE STEPHEN**

**Lord, grant me a heart like Stephen.**

**A loving and forgiving heart.**

**A heart without malice or contempt.**

**A heart of acceptance and courage.**

**A heart that will stand with you,**

**Exemplify you,**

**Draw strength from you,**

**A heart filled with**

**Compassion, grace, and mercy.**

**A heart that spills over with love.**

**Lord, grant me a heart like Stephen.**

**Lord, sing me a new song**

**A true song**

**An endless song**

**Of mercy and grace**

**Moon, sun, and stars**

**In Harmony**

**A love song**

**A song**

**Sweeter than an Angel's voice**

**Or David's strings.**

**Teasing my ears**

**With lilting phrases**

**That sooth my soul.**

**A Creation song**

**In the guise of a man,  
Written before time began.**

**Lord, Grant me a heart like Jesus  
Though I be a restless soul,  
And he be God,  
I wish nothing more  
Than to be an echo  
Of his love in this weary world.  
Let me stand  
Against the tumult,  
The stones,  
The cross,  
And care for the lost.  
And if I fall  
To the devices  
And passions of man,  
Let me cry out to you,  
“Forgive them Father,  
For they know not what they do.”**

There is a dramatic scene in the 1997 movie “Volcano” starring Tommy Lee Jones and Anne Heche, directed by Mick Jackson. The movie is action packed from start to finish, but the scene I am referencing does not have any either of the stars in it. In the scene, a subway is trapped underground and most of the passengers have managed to escape. All that are left on board is an unconscious man and the train conductor played by Valente Rodriguez.

Knowing that if he left the unconscious man, the man would die, the conductor uses all of his strength to pick up the man and carry him towards the exit at the back of the train. Each step is agony as his shoes are melting from the heat and sticking to the floor of the subway car. Reaching the doorway, the conductor realizes that the lava has already covered the tracks beneath the train and as he looks down, he is faced with the reality that there is no way he can jump to safety with the man in his arms.

Nearby rescuers are pleading with the conductor to leave the man behind and save himself. The conductor looks at them and at the lava flowing under the car searching for any alternative way to save them both. In a desperate decision, knowing that it would cost him his life, the conductor jumps from the train and lands in the lava and as his body is engulfed in fire, he uses all of his remaining strength to throw the man to the rescuers on the other side of the lava stream. The conductor’s body then disappears into the lava.

The credits for the film do not give the conductor a name. He is simply listed as “Valente Rodriguez - The Train Conductor.” With all the special effects and the amazing acting in the movie, it is this scene that I remember the most. The sacrifice of one man to save another man whom he did not know, a man who would be able to return to his home, his family, his friends, and his job due to the ultimate sacrifice and grace of this train conductor that he didn’t know and probably would never have developed a relationship with in his regular day to day life.

Yes, it's dramatic. And it is something that most of us will never be called on to do. Still, our world is full of heroes and heroines who risk their lives to save us, people that do not know us, people who have never met us, people that cannot weigh our existence on a balance scale to determine if our life is even worth saving.

These heroes and heroines are willing to take a bullet for us, to stand in the gap, to rescue us from danger, to step into the lava so that we can continue with our lives. They do not do it for our gratitude. They do it because they have found purpose beyond their own existence. And yes, we should be showing our gratitude even though we may never meet them in person.

**3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,**

**4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.**

#### **Phillippians 2:3-4**

Love is given with no expectation of reciprocation. It is the desire to improve the lot of someone other than ourselves. It is meant to bring light to their world. It is not self-seeking. We do not love someone to make ourselves feel better. We love someone to bring newness to their world, refresh their hearts, help them clear their mind and thoughts, to give them a taste of what God wants to give them. True love is a revelation for others regarding essence of God's love for his creation.

And while self-love is important, even self-love is never meant to be narcissistic, precluding our love for those around us. We should love and take care of ourselves in order to better take care of others. But, self-love is should never be conceited or be used in such a way as to place our own safety and value above others.

**12 My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.**

**13 Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.**

**John 15:12-13**

Are we truly capable of love at that level? Do we have the compassion for our fellow humans to lay down our lives to save those around us?

Sometimes in life, there are choices that have to be made. Those who have served in the military or been first responders understand this. Are we secure enough in our faith that we are willing to lay down our lives, not just for Christ's sake, but for the sake of both the innocent and also the not-so-innocent? Are we willing to look past the wrongs perpetuated against our minds and bodies in this chaotic world by people who don't even know us, and forgive them. Even though they may not ask for forgiveness? Can we lay down our lives for people such as these? If we were beaten, broken, torn and ragged, and nailed to a cross, are we able to cry out to heaven, **"Lord, forgive them for they know not what they do?"** Can we call out like Stephen as the stones pummeled his body, **"Lord, do not hold this sin against them?"**

Truly, are we capable of such love? I ask us sincerely to look into our hearts and ask ourselves if we are capable of interceding for those who truly do not understand the depth of their sins. Could we ask God for the forgiveness of the greatest monsters in history if we were to suffer at their hands? Stalin, Mussolini, Hitler, Ossama Bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, Idi Amin, Ivan the Terrible, Vlad the Impaler, Pol Pot, Heinrich Himmler, Attila the Hun, Mao Zedong, Jim Jones, and so many more. These people brought about suffering and death to so many people, the number of which is beyond comprehension. Can they be forgiven? Can we muster up enough compassion for them as they lay waste to millions and say, **“Lord, do not hold this sin against them?”**

Most of us are fortunate that we will never have to look that kind of evil in the face. We may experience it in a peripheral way, but it is unlikely we will ever have to stand in their presence or suffer under the evil that they instigate.

But we are not here today to determine the level of wrong that these people perpetrated on the innocent. We are not here to put them on humanity’s balance scale. We are here to determine how we can, as Christians, have the faith and compassion of Jesus as he bled dying on the cross. We are here to understand that it is possible for us to keep the message of love in our hearts that Stephen felt while under duress, pain, and eventual death.

How can we deliver a message of love to those who hate, despise, or humiliate us? How can we have a heart like Jesus’ in such circumstances?

**But pastor, you might say, Jesus would never condone the evil that these people perpetrated on human-kind. And you are right. Such evil rests in the hearts of men. Jesus would never condone their actions. He didn't condone the actions of the Sanhedrin as they tried and persecuted him. He did not condone the actions of the men who flogged and beat him. He did not condone the actions of the Roman soldiers that tortured him and nailed him to the cross. Love is not a spirit of condoning evil, but a spirit of forgiveness and grace. We must find within us the compassion to love people even when they bring struggles and pain into our lives.**

**Everyday, we are faced with people that choose to ignore us or opt for a path that annoys us. The people that refuse to wait their turn at a stop sign, the doctor who makes us wait three weeks to get an appointment, the person at the super-market that cuts in the checkout line, the person who gives us an obscene gesture in traffic. Then there are the people who break promises to us, or lie to us, or berate us. Often these minor things are annoyances, but sometimes those annoyances can turn into anger and instead of quickly forgiving them and moving on, we choose to confront them or seek retribution.**

**There are also times that people cause us greater inconveniences by costing us time or money or both. That can be more than an annoyance and a little more difficult to forgive. Even if reconciliation occurs, there remains a certain amount of bitterness regarding that person. But that bitterness is our own, because we don't have a heart of love and forgiveness. Such a heart is not ours by nature. Such a heart is filled with human responses. Such a heart is not**



echoing the love and grace of our father who showed us what love and grace was like when he allowed his son to go to the cross for the likes of us.

It is so easy for us to forget the example of love that we find on the Cross. We hear preachers and teachers tell us that Jesus went to the cross to save us from our sins, which he did and it is such a beautiful and selfless act, but there is so much more here at the foot of the Cross, so much for us to learn and absorb.

I do not deny or want to trivialize the gift of salvation in any way, but to think this is the only treasure to be found at Calvary is a gross understatement. The Cross was the greatest gift to ever come from the heart of our living God. It was the ultimate sacrifice not just to build a bridge to heaven, but also to build a gate into the heart of God himself.

We so limited our understanding of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Our work as Christians is not to keep people out of Hell or even to bring people to heaven. It is so much more than that.

When I was still a boy, my dad was reassigned from Kadina Air Force Base in Okinawa to Carlswell Air Force Base in Fort Worth. We flew from Okinawa to Los Angeles on a DC-10. Pretty exciting for a 5 year old. I remember the flight in spite of my age. Trust me, that is a very long flight in a DC-10. I was also excited when my dad said that we would be landing in Hawaii for fuel. Hawaii was just as big of a deal in 1960 as it is today. Palm trees. Hula dancers. Sunny beaches. But here's the problem. Even though I had high expectations of being in Hawaii, I forgot that my dad had said we would be landing for fuel. That's it. We never left

**the plane. We sat on the tarmac for several hours while the plane was refueled. It was a most difficult time for a 5 year old boy to sit still knowing that we were in Hawaii and we couldn't even see a palm tree. I was almost embarrassed to tell people that we had been to Hawaii because we had experienced none of the wonders of being there. There would have been so much to see and do had we just gotten off the plane for a little while.**

**Is that really the way we want to think of heaven? Just a destination? A place that we can feel good because we made it there even though we really didn't think much about what it was truly all about? There is no way in our human minds to gain an understanding of an endless and boundless eternity.**

**But, we are meant to walk off the plane and enter the gates of God's heart. It is the purpose of the journey. Not the house on the hill on a street of gold. We are there to experience a complete and total enveloping relationship with God.**

**Now, here is the really good part. We do not have to die and go to heaven to experience that relationship. That relationship is available right here on earth if we will just allow God to be our focus, if we will accept him and allow him to use us, to allow him to heal and comfort us. This relationship does not attempt to fix our human heart to match the heart of Jesus. This relationship actually imbues us with the heart of Jesus, if we will allow it. And the heart of Jesus has no problem showing love to even the worst of sinners, which is how Paul described himself.**

Isn't that the greatest gift of love ever granted to humankind? Heaven now. Heaven on earth. Heaven because God can take our shriveling, rock hard, ugly hearts and turn them into flesh from his own heart? We may not be able to love those people that hurt us. But Jesus can. We may not be able to love those people who create chaos and pain. But Jesus can. We may not be able to turn our cheek as often as we should. But Jesus can. We may not be able to forgive people to the depth that they need forgiving. But Jesus can.

Folks, if you have never allowed yourself this kind of relationship with our all-loving, gracious, and merciful God, I would encourage you to do so today. Take that first step. Tell God that you are beginning to understand. Tell him that you are sorry for all the wrongs in your life. Tell him that you want to love others the way that he loves you. Tell him thank you for making this kind of life possible for you. Tell him that you are ready to step off the plane and explore the wonders and grace of his heart.

Stephen was not God, but he allowed God to perform a miracle so that he could embrace the truth behind forgiveness and grace.

**“Lord, do not hold this sin against them!”**

God bless you all,

**AMEN**

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