**Cross And Crown Christian Outreach**

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**Suffer For Divine Purposes**

**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

Managing the increasing number of the converts due to the positive actions of the disciples was becoming very challenging and lots of discontent was beginning to evolve amongst the brethren – Acts 6:1. The Twelve were left with no choice than to encourage the people to appoint representatives amongst them to take care of all issues aside from rendering prayers as ministering Word. The people in response did appoint seven representatives namely Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicamor, Parmenas and Nicolas in accordance with the selection criteria set by the Twelve and presented them to them. They were prayed for and hands were laid on them by the Twelve for them to commence on the task before them – Acts 6:2-6.

It turned out to be a good decision as their was great increase in the rate of spread of the Word and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly with the great company of priests also remaining loyal to their faith – Acts 6:6-7. No doubt, all the representatives must have met the selection criteria as prescribed by the Twelve but the Bible took special note of Stephen when he was described as a man full of the Holy Spirit and faith. He also did not disappoint as he lived up to that rating. He not only served the people in the role of a representative to handle what seemed like pure administrative matters but was recorded to have manifested great faith and power and did great wonders and miracles amongst the people – Acts 6:8. This latter role obviously made him an object of attack from the authorities of the synagogue whom he had to keep arguing with. They could not defeat him on those arguments and that made them feel humiliated. They had to think of a way to deal with this man who was becoming like a thorn in their flesh by making them feel inferior before the people with his superior arguments – Acts 6:9-10. In a move that has come to be the usual with elders and the scribes when they are trying to avoid being humiliated before their followers, they quickly arranged for a framed up charge by getting people to falsely testify that they heard speak blasphemy against Moses and God claiming that he spoke against the Holy place and the Law – Acts 6:11-14; Lk. 22:66 – 23:25; Acts 21:27 – 25:32. In such circumstances, the accused can never be acquitted as the accusers who in this case were the elders and the scribes, and the judges who in the case were the Council members were on the same page on their plan to frame him up.

Stephen himself did not help his case as what was supposed to be an opportunity to defend himself turned out to be more of a statement in defiance that further infuriated the people and he was subsequently seized, taken outside the city and stoned to death – Acts 7:54-59. The foundation scripture for today’s devotion is the prayer he made as his soul was departing this realm. He pleaded with Jesus Christ to receive his soul and prayed that the people should not be held accountable for their acts. Both prayers are in no doubt products of deep thoughts. The latter may be be similar to that of Jesus Christ on the cross but there is a significant difference which is the reason for Jesus Christ pleading that the people be forgiven. In his prayer he had told the Almighty God that the people did not know what they were doing – Lk. 23:34-36. This situation was however different as there was no known prophecy to be fulfilled by the death of Stephen in this manner so one begins to wonder why he felt people who had committed murder on a supposedly innocent person can be forgiven and allowed to go free by the Almighty God, after all His laws on the shedding of the blood of the innocent and its repercussion is very explicit – Deut. 19:8-10; Deity. 27:25. Also curious is the prayer of Stephen that his soul be received by Jesus Christ as divinely recognised martyrs have no need for such prayers. Jesus Christ himself says the kingdom of heaven belongs to them – Matt. 5:10.

There is no doubt that the immediate reaction of every believer and most neutrals will be to feel sorry for Stephen for the fate that befell him, after all he died in the defense of the gospel. That may be very true but today’s Devotional attempts to view the activities of Stephen side-by-side the reason for his selection and the eventual fate that befell him. He was called and commissioned to handle and provide solutions to the administrative challenges of the people but he obviously spent substantial period of time outside this area of Call by playing the role of the defender of the gospel, a role that seems to have been that of the Apostles. Not really a bad act on his part as every Christian would be expected to do same but with limitations being aware of the need to be more focused on the specific area of Call. His performance in the core area of his Call will be reduced if not completely absent as valuable time must have been spent in another person’s Calling at the neglect of his Call. No one has information on the position of the Almighty God on this act of Stephen because although he saw heaven open and the son of man standing at the right of God (Acts 7:55-56), no information was provided to indicate what was communicated during that brief period between him and Jesus Christ, aside from his prayer pleading that his soul should be received by him. This is definitely worth giving serious thought to by all.

He was no doubt spirit filled and full of faith but the role of taking care of the needs of the people did not include performing miraculous signs, great wonders and debating issues with scribes and elders of the Synagogue. That probably explains the pack of grave to overcome their persecutions like the Apostle did – Acts 21:17 – 28:31; 2Cor. 11:16-33. May be, Just May be he would have lived longer than he did, to do more in the area of his Call. May be he would not have died the way he died. Maybe! Just maybe, but Christians need to understand their Calling and remain in it. Being filled with the Holy Spirit and full of faith could have been used to improve the people but the issue of preaching and defending the Word was the responsibility of the Apostles and the Bible notes that they achieved a lot doing that – Acts 6:2-4, 7. No matter what the Faith of Stephen in eternity maybe, it may just be the wisest decision to stay in your Call as that remains the only area where you will be assessed and the protection of the Almighty God can be assured.

It may not be too wrong to consider the action of Stephen as that of a busy body as acting out of his Call could be regarded as meddling in an area that was outside his schedule. Should that be the case, the statement of the Apostle Peter becomes relevant when he advised that suffering as a busy body may not be rewarding – 1Pet. 4:15. The suffering that will be rewarded is the one that is experienced in the course of implementing a divinely assigned role. That is when the protection of the Almighty God can be assured and adequately rewarded. May all our sufferings in the course of our Christian journey be found worthy of divine rewards in Jesus name. Amen.