



THERE were giants in the earth in those days.

(Gen 6:4)

YE stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. 52 Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers: 53 Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it.

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 stedfastly 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. (Acts 7:51-60)

Perhaps the greatest worship hymn ever written is 'AMAZING GRACE' by the same author, John Newton, as today's beautiful hymn. John Newton had lived his young years as a desperate sinner, slave trader, and blasphemer of God. But having been caught in an intense tempest at sea, and at a moment when the ship seemed to be breaking apart, the words of Newton's old mother who had taught him the Gospel at her knee, came flooding upon his soul. He went into the bottom of the ship and prayed for the first time in many years. He later became a minister of the Gospel and wrote more than 900 biblical hymns called the Olney Hymns. Today's hymn is one he composed for St. Stephens Day in 1779. I quoted the passage from Genesis 6:4 as an introduction to today's devotion since the two subjects – John Newton and St. Stephens – are the giants of the Gospel Church. Newton had served early in life as captain of a slave-trading vessel. He later was instrumental in advising William Wilberforce in that Parliamentarian's efforts to ban slavery in the British Commonwealth.

St. Stephen, too, was a giant in the land who became the first recorded Christian martyr. He died giving his strong testimony in the face of outraged Jewish rulers whom he knew would only respond in hate and violence. He did not have a supportive congregation to speak soft compliments to him, but these Jewish rulers, including Saul (Paul), who responded with that vitriol and violence which characterized the hatred they had then and many have today, at the mention of the name of Jesus Christ.

As Some Tall Rock Amidst the Waves

As some tall rock amidst the waves,
The fury of the tempest braves;
While the fierce billows toiling high,
Break at its foot and murm'ring die:

Thus they, who in the LORD confide,
Though foes assault on every side;
Cannot he moved or overthrown,
For JESUS makes their cause his own.

So faithful Stephen, undismayed,
The malice of the Jews surveyed;
The holy joy which filled his breast
A lustre on his face impressed.

"Behold! he said, the world of light
Is opened to my strengthened sight;
My glorious LORD appears in view,
That JESUS, whom ye lately slew."

With such a friend and witness near,
No form of death could make him fear;
Calm, amidst show'rs of stones, he kneels,
And only for his murd'ers feels.

May we, by faith, perceive thee thus,
Dear Saviour, ever near to us!
This fight our peace, through life, shall keep,
And death be feared no more than sleep.

"As some tall rock amidst the waves, The fury of the tempest braves; While the fierce billows toiling high, Break at its foot and murm'ring die:" It seems that God specially equipped Newton to write hymns of biblical significance, and He provided him with many turbulent seas as a background. I can imagine John Newton sitting at his desk remembering the great storms at sea and rocky coastlines about which he navigated his ship, or face ruin. That great Rock is Christ which the waves of false religion can neither move nor overthrow. In the end, all error and enemies of Christ die away in a whimper. The enormous waves appear invincible, yet they crash with tremendous force against that Rock and are turned to misty showers on the sea below.

"Thus they, who in the LORD confide, Though foes assault on every side; Cannot he moved or overthrown, For JESUS makes their cause his own." Our Lord does see our fate in the storms of life and comes walking on that same turbulent sea to resolve our fears and terrors. The sea cannot withstand His mighty Voice. It must be subject to Him as all nature must be. He is that great Sea-Stone which followed the Children of Israel, not only in the Wilderness, but across the Red Sea as well. *"1 Moreover, brethren, I would*

not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; 2 And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; 3 And did all eat the same spiritual meat; 4 And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ.” (1 Cor 10:1-4)

“So faithful Stephen, undismayed, The malice of the Jews surveyed; The holy joy which filled his breast A lustre on his face impressed.” I truly wonder how many of the so-called Holy Spirit-filled TV evangelist of our day would confront such a mob of hostile fanatics as those which Stephen courageously confronted. I cannot imagine an Osteen or a Hinn forsaking even the comforts of their plush homes to journey to the Wilderness and preach unthreatened, much less before the Jewish rulers in Jerusalem. The amazing consideration is the fact that Stephen did so with joy and courage. He was truly a Holy Ghost-filled servant of God if there ever was one – so much so that he was blessed to see Heaven opened and the Lord Jesus Christ standing beside the Father. It was not until Stephen proclaimed seeing the Lord that these miserable reprobates rushed forward to stone Stephen.

“Behold! he said, the world of light Is opened to my strengthened sight; My glorious LORD appears in view, That JESUS, whom ye lately slew.” You and I may not have such a stark vision as Stephen, but I believe all who know the Lord as Savior, Redeemer, and King will have had a close experience paralleling this one. On some very sad occasions, when you are alone in heart and body, have you ever broken out to the singing of some grand old hymn? Somewhere in the singing of that hymn, you suddenly realize that your heart is not longer a rock, but has taken on the wings of an angel; and you have forgotten your terrible sorrow. We all have a day appointed when our own curtain of this life will be drawn to, and we will then come face to face with our Friend and Redeemer. At that moment, what joy must flood the soul! I never saw a committed Christian quake at the hour of death, either in bed, or on the battlefield. Even the lost sinner will not utter words of regret at not having hurt more people, or stolen from the widows more, or drank himself to a stupor more often. No! He will then vainly wish that he had done something that might result in some treasure being deposited in Heaven.

“With such a friend and witness near, No form of death could make him fear; Calm, amidst show’rs of stones, he kneels, And only for his murd’ers feels.” What gave courage to Peter in walking on the sea? Was it not the presence of His Lord before him? Certainly, it was; and when he took his eyes off the Lord and focused on the turbid waters of the sea, he began to sink. IT may seems strange to remain calm when showers of great, windborne drops of water beat upon us; but what of showers of granite stone? Stephen died in a manner similar to that of our Lord. He took the counsel of Christ seriously when He had told His disciples to *“take up their crosses daily and follow me.”* You see how far Stephen followed Christ – even to death! And Stephen also offered up a prayer of intercession for his assailants just as our Lord had done when, at His crucifixion, He said, *“Father forgive them for they know not what they do.”* Stephen uttered a like prayer: *“Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.”* A question for thought: Why did Stephen not forgive his oppressors outright; and why did our Lord not forgive those who crucified Him outright? I believe it was for two reasons: 1) the course of the offense had not yet been consummated until actual death had occurred; and 2) the more important reason is that neither our Lord, nor Stephen, could forgive a sin committed directly against the Father. The murder of our Lord was a sin committed directly against God the Father, and the murder of Stephen was against BOTH.

“May we, by faith, perceive thee thus, Dear Saviour, ever near to us! This fight our peace, through life, shall keep, And death be feared no more than sleep.” Christ is

ALWAYS near to those who love and adore Him. Unbeknownst to the two men on the Road to Emmaus, Christ walked right beside in their despondency. Unknown to Hagar, the Lord was right with her by the Fountain in the Wilderness of Paran. The Lord was with the disciples during the storm on the Galilean Sea, and that was all they needed. He is with you, too, always, if you love and seek His face. *“Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”* (Matt 28:20)

If we truly KNOW the Lord Jesus Christ, we will know that death to us is no more than a sleep in His bosom. That is what He has told us even while we could not yet grasp the reality of that promise. But now we have many infallible truths of that promise, and we are made joyful in its realization.