

WHAT A WAY TO GO!

Acts 7:54-60 | Seventh Sunday of Easter | May 17, 2015

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Jesus

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

If you could choose the manner of your own death, what would you pick? How would you shuffle off this mortal coil? Most of us dream of a pain-free death. We'd like to just go to bed one night and not wake up. Others don't care how they go, just as long as they go quickly. "I'd rather get hit by a bus, than slowly waste away from some disease," some will say. Adrenalin junkies would choose an exciting end after a long and fulfilling life. A skydiving accident at the age of 100 would fit the bill for them.

Did you notice what those three examples had in common? They all seek to avoid the pain and suffering that is often associated with death. No one says, "I want to die from lung cancer." No one says, "I want to linger for years in a nursing home." No one says, "I'm hoping for a slow, agonizing death."

Most certainly, no one would ever say, "I want an angry mob to throw fist-sized rocks at me until I'm dead." What a horrible, violent way to die! What a way to go! None of us would choose to die like Stephen did. And yet, if we look carefully at his death, we'll put a positive spin on that old phrase: WHAT A WAY TO GO! We might even ask God to allow us to go like Stephen. You see, when Stephen died (1) he was **full** of the Spirit, (2) he was **focused** on Jesus, and (3) he **fell asleep** in peace.

I. Full of the Spirit

Our text begins with these words: **When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.** What got them so hot under the collar? Here's what happened. Stephen performed miraculous signs in support of the gospel message. This got the powers that be upset. They arrested him and recruited false witnesses to accuse him. Stephen made his defense in the form of a powerful sermon. In it he reviewed this history of God's grace to his chosen people, Israel, and his promise of a Savior. But he didn't just talk about the good stuff. He talked about Israel's unfaithfulness and idolatry. He closed his sermon with these words: **"You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him!"** (Acts 7:51-52).

Such boldness! Where did that come from? Twice Stephen is described as a man **"full of the Holy Spirit."** In other words, the Spirit was at work in his heart through the gospel. He was a believer in the Lord Jesus, empowered by the Spirit to confess his faith with great courage and conviction.

Great courage and conviction: Could those words be used to describe us? Maybe sometimes, but certainly not always. Is it

because the Holy Spirit isn't at work in us? No, it's because – like the religious leaders of Stephen's day – we often resist the Spirit's work in our hearts.

Stephen was willing to lay down his life for his faith. Sometimes we aren't willing to experience any discomfort at all. We want things to be easy. And so we say nothing as the professor expounds on evolution, because admitting that we believe the Bible's account of creation would make us look weird and foolish. We keep quiet when hot topics like gay marriage come up at the office, because we don't want to offend anyone – really, we just don't want to be put in the position of defending our faith. We keep our thoughts to ourselves when a family member is living in some sin, because we don't want to be accused of judging. Eighth graders and adults alike stand before the congregation and promise to be faithful even to the point of death, but often it's not something as awful as the threat of death that keeps us from confessing our faith. It's the simple desire to avoid the cross. We don't want to pick it up, deny ourselves, and follow Jesus. We all need to remember our Savior's warning. **Whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven** (Matthew 10:33).

Praise Jesus that his Spirit is at work in our sinful hearts! Through the gospel in Word and sacrament, the Spirit does for us what he did for Stephen. He focuses our hearts on Jesus.

II. Focused on Jesus

We turn again to our text: **Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.** "Look," he said, "I

see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

During Israel's desert wanderings God led them with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. That pillar was the sign of God's gracious presence among them. Stephen was given a similar assurance. He looked up into an open heaven and saw his Savior at God's right hand, interceding for him. What a glorious and comforting sight! Stephen looked into an open heaven and saw the reason that heaven was open to him: Jesus Christ, Son of Man and Son of God.

Jesus is the Son of Man, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, born in human flesh to take the place of human beings. Jesus is also the Son of God, himself true God from eternity. Only this unique individual, this God-man, could save Stephen and us and the world. And he did.

His human nature allowed him to live under God's law in our place and his divine nature empowered him to keep that law perfectly for us. His human nature enabled him shed his blood, suffer and die on the cross. His divine nature filled that sacrifice with value. It was not just a man who died on that cross, but the God-man. His sacrifice counts for all people. His holy blood washes away all sin. Even yours and mine!

We know that all this is true, that it all worked, that Jesus, the God-man, accomplished his mission because his tomb his empty. He rose to seal his victory. And he ascended to heaven to prepare the place that his life, death and resurrection secured for us.

As Stephen gazed up into heaven he could see all of this in the face of his Lord. He

looked at Jesus and saw God's love and mercy. He looked at Jesus and his heart was filled with comfort and courage. Stephen died focused on the One who destroyed death.

God grant us such a death! When the day of death draws near, it's so easy to cling what you are leaving behind: the life you have built, the place you call home, the people you love. It's so easy to focus on the things you didn't get to do: the places you haven't visited, the grandchild you haven't held, the bucket list that remains incomplete. None of those things really matter. All that matters is Jesus and his salvation. That's what Paul wrote: **To live is Christ, and to die is gain** (Philippians 1:21). For the believer, death is no loss. It's pure gain. It's claiming the ultimate victory. It's finally going home. All because of Jesus. My friends, in life and in death keep your focus on him. The beloved hymn says it so well, "**Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes**" (CW 588:7). As death draws near, like Stephen, fix your eyes on Jesus.

III. Falling Asleep in Peace

Listen to what Stephen's Spirit-worked focus on Jesus enabled him to do. **While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.**

Cool as a cucumber. And so very Christ-like. At his death Jesus prayed, "**Father, into your hands I commit my spirit**" (Luke 23:46). Stephen's prayer is an echo: "**Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.**" As soldiers pounded the nails, Jesus prayed, "**Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing**"

(Luke 23:34). As stones pounded his body, Stephen sounded a lot like his Savior. "**Lord, do not hold this sin against them.**" No bitterness. No rage. Stephen was calm and confident in Christ.

And then comes the best part of all. **When he had said this, he fell asleep.** Stephen didn't yawn and stretch and reach for his pillow. He died. And he died about as violently as anyone can. Multiple blunt force traumas. People picked up rocks and threw them at him until he was dead.

So then why does it say he "fell asleep"? Is this just a euphemism for death, a way of making it go down a little easier, kind of like when we say someone "passed away"? No. It's much more than that. Those words "fell asleep" reveal for us a wonderful, biblical truth.

Think about it. Do you like to crawl into bed at night? Isn't that just a comfortable and comforting place to be? Sleep is a beautiful thing, isn't it? It's a part of the day that many of us look forward to. And when you close your eyes in sleep you expect to open them again in the morning. You expect to get up, rested and ready to go.

Isn't that the sure hope of every believer, who falls asleep in Jesus? We go to sleep, we close our eyes in death, confident that when we open them again we will gaze on wonders beyond our imaginations, all pain and sorrow will be gone, and we will see Jesus as he is (1 John 3:2).

A little boy was in the hospital, dying of rare disease. His mother spent every moment she could with him, reading to him, playing with him. One day as he colored a picture, he asked, "Mommy, what's it like to die?" She

choked up for a moment, but then she said, "Do you remember when you were little, and you would play so hard that you fell asleep right in the middle of your toys? In the morning, you woke up in your own bed. How did you get there? You got there because your dad picked you up in his strong arms, carried you to your room, dressed you in your jammies, and tucked you into bed. Dying is a little like that. One day we close our eyes and we wake up where we belong. We wake up in heaven with Jesus."

What a way to go! Lord, give us a death like Stephen's. Fill us with your Spirit through Word and Sacrament. Focus our faith on Jesus, our Substitute and Savior. And help us finally to fall asleep in peace. Yes, Lord, grant this to us all for Jesus' sake. Amen.

S.D.G.