

What makes the death of Stephen so satisfying is that in the midst of this gruesome death we see a wonderful picture of life. Stephen said, **"I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."** This is the only time in all of Scripture that Jesus is described as standing at the right hand of God. Why? To welcome his steadfast servant home? To sustain him in his hour of trial? To stand in judgment over his enemies? Probably all of these. To be sure, heaven was just beyond death's door for Stephen, no farther than the angels are from us. There stood Jesus, the One for whom Stephen stayed steadfast, the One who lived for him, died for him, and was raised again. There stood Jesus—very much in control—waiting for his beloved child to come home. As his accusers' stones rained down on him, Stephen prayed, **"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."** In the spirit of his Savior's love, he cried out, **"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."** And then he fell asleep—not afraid, but confident that Jesus would receive his soul. In fact, he didn't really die; Luke plainly says, **"He fell asleep,"** waiting for his body to be awakened in the resurrection on the Last Day. Heaven was—pardon my pun—just a stone's throw away.

What a wonderful role model Stephen is for us. It's not that he was without sin. He needed the active and passive obedience of his Savior, the perfect life and sacrificial death of Jesus, as much as we do. For Jesus makes it abundantly clear that no one comes to the Father except through him. But Stephen was a man filled with the Holy Spirit. He was willing to live for Jesus and ready to die in Jesus. We don't have to dress like him (as I did like Martin Luther), but we do want to speak like him and act like him. We want to keep the cross of Jesus before us and do what Jesus did by speaking the truth in love, befriending people, and making sacrifices to spread the gospel. The last verses of our text reveal something incredible to us. Beneath and because of the steadfastness of Stephen and others, the divine Sower went out to sow. Many of those persecuted left Jerusalem and carried the gospel with them to the rest of Judea and Samaria. May the Holy Spirit use the steadfastness of Stephen to strengthen our faith, increase our desire to share the gospel, and give us the courage to pray, **"Lord, keep us steadfast in your Word"** (CW 203). Amen.

Acts 7:1-8:8 – Act II – *The Rest of Your Story: Steadfast*
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When kids look up to someone, don't they try to imitate them? Think of their music and mannerisms, their make-up and mojo. We tend to emulate our heroes by trying to be like them. Imitation is the highest form of flattery, right? But here's a thought. Do we ever hear our kids asking to get dressed up as Jesus, or Moses, or Paul? For one of my fall festivals in grade school I dressed up as Martin Luther, wearing a costume my mother made for me, but, for the most part, role models in America pretty much stink. They're either arrogant, or violent, or blatantly immoral. We need better role models than today's athletes and actors, politicians and musicians. Perhaps there's no better role model for us than Stephen, **"a man full of God's grace and power"** (Ac 6:8). As we continue to live out Act II of our lives, we today are encouraged to be:

Steadfast Like Stephen

- 1. In that we die like him**
- 2. In that we live with him**

1. I guess we need to start today by asking, "Why would we look up to someone who got stoned? Is that really someone we want to have as our role model in life?" Well, obviously, Stephen didn't intend to get stoned, but it didn't just happen either. To an angry mob, already worked up into a frenzy, he addressed this pointed accusation: **"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."** From Abel to Zechariah, their spiritual ancestors had persecuted and spilled the blood of the prophets. True to form, they had betrayed and murdered Jesus.

Stephen's audience was primarily the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. Their accusations against him included, among other things, blasphemy and promoting the downfall of traditional temple worship. In defense, Stephen reviewed Old Testament history and showed them that they, not he, were guilty of opposing God. The fact of the matter is, he couldn't have hit them any more squarely between the eyes. With a full frontal attack of God's law, he wanted to crack open their hard hearts and lead them to repent of their sins. Ultimately, he wanted to save them. But, when confronted with the law, the Jewish leaders became angry. They were furious with Stephen, even gnashing their teeth at him. Then they stoned him to death. In all of this, Stephen stayed steadfast and strong.

Having said that, isn't it telling that so much of what we hear and see in Stephen we hear and see in Jesus? Could it be that Jesus was Stephen's role model? Did Stephen say to himself, "Jesus wanted even his enemies to repent, so that's what I want?" Did he think, "If they choose to kill me, what an honor to die like Jesus?" As the stones pummeled him to a pulp, did he recall Jesus' words and respond as Jesus did—commending his soul to God and asking him to forgive those who were hurting him? It seems to me that there are way too many similarities here for this to be merely coincidence. Stephen's role model was Jesus, and he wanted to do what Jesus did.

Which makes me think of the WWJD bracelets (the *What Would Jesus Do?* bracelets) that were all the rage a while back. It's not necessarily a bad question, but perhaps WDJ (What Does Jesus Do?) would be a better one. Couples contemplating divorce who say, "God doesn't want us to argue all the time, and it's unhealthy for our kids to be exposed to our arguing, so Jesus wants us to get a divorce, right?" Bumper stickers that state: "Who would Jesus bomb?" Vegetarians who say, "Jesus wouldn't have eaten meat." And it goes on and on. It's easy to know beforehand what we're going to do, find obscure Bible passages that support that action, and then say, "See! That's what Jesus would do!"

Friends, Jesus cracked the whip in church, so am I to hone my whip-cracking skills? He walked on water, so are we to toss out our water skis and wake boards? He was baptized as an adult, so are we to reject infant baptism? In Scripture there are prescriptions, things God tells us to do, and there are descriptions, things God tells us about Jesus and others. There's a big difference between the two. We need to study God's Word to understand why Jesus did what he did and why God tells us about it. And this is where being steadfast becomes really hard, because Jesus did some really difficult things, and he wants us to do some really difficult things—not in some meritorious way to gain God's grace and favor, but to show our appreciation to him for already bestowing his grace and favor on us in Christ.

On the cross Jesus prayed for the very people who were taunting and ridiculing him. Is it easy to pray for your classmate, who's bullying you and making life difficult for you? Is it easy to ask for their forgiveness? In the Gospels Jesus spells out how he wants husband and wife to fulfill their roles of spiritual head and helper in marriage, following his example of submission to his heavenly Father. Is that easy when your spouse isn't loving you or doesn't support you? No, it's a cross, and I don't know of anyone who likes a cross.

The cross offers us no reward in this life. The cross means that we put something in us to death, and that's hard, and it hurts. But do so we must. God inspired Paul to write, "*Put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry*" (Col 3:5). Whether it's our lust, our greed, or our drive for popularity or pleasure, we must put it to death. If your classmates don't like Christians, put your desire for popularity to death. If your appetite for toys won't allow you to give your firstfruits to God, starve it to death. If you'd rather miss an opportunity to worship God to do something else, put your misplaced priorities to death. To be steadfast like Stephen means that we die to our earthly nature and to the sinful cravings of our flesh. So, how are we doing in this regard? If we're honest, isn't it true that time and again we behave like weak and helpless wimps and not like the bold and sacrificial saints God wants us to be? As Jesus so keenly says, "*The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak*" (Mt 26:41).

2. And so, the natural questions for us to ask are these: "Why would we want to put ourselves to death? If there's no earthly reward to be gained by putting to death our sinful nature, what's the use? Why be a Christian? Why fight the battle to stay steadfast?" Stephen knew the answer, and Paul gives us the answer. He says, "*I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead*" (Php 3:10, 11). Do you see it? It was because of the promise of the resurrection that both Stephen and Paul looked forward to their deaths. In faith they looked forward to the day when they would see all of God's promises fulfilled—when they would be raised from the grave and live body and soul forever in heaven. That's what made it all worthwhile for them, and that's what makes it all worthwhile for us, as well.

Jesus once said, "*I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die*" (John 11:25, 26). Jesus made it clear that there's only one way to attain to the resurrection and the life, and that's by believing in him. And the remarkable thing about this resurrection and life is that God gives it to us, free of charge, in Holy Baptism. Already in our baptism we died with Jesus and were raised to a new life in him. In our baptism all that Jesus did—his perfect obedience, his atoning death, and his resurrection—became ours. In our baptism we were clothed in the garments of salvation and given heaven. The same Spirit who worked faith in Stephen and made him steadfast works faith in us and makes us strong and steadfast.