

Dying a Faithful Death Acts 7:54-60

My niece, Karen Kayser, died in an auto accident when she was 14 years old, and it was due to the careless driving of another girl. Of all my brother's children, she seemed to have the most spiritual sensitivity. She may have even had a premonition of her death because shortly before, she wrote in her diary entry that she was looking forward to seeing the Lord soon. She was deeply burdened for the salvation of two of her friends, and in her diary asked God that He would do anything needed to bring them to Christ. In fact, the night of her death she invited her friends to church. They came under such conviction of sin that they wanted to leave early. So she got permission to ride home with them. On the way back from church, the car was struck head on by another vehicle. I think one of the girls was killed instantly. By the time Karen's mother got to the scene of the accident, a farmer had pulled the girls out of the car, and they were lying on the side of the road. And my sister-in-law (Marilyn) was able to cradle her daughter's head in her lap and sing hymns to her in her last moments before she died. There were many who thought that this was such a wasted life. Here was a talented girl, a girl with Christ on her heart, a girl with ministry in her bones, snuffed out before she could do much. Why would God allow that?

There may have been similar thoughts that went through the minds of some in the church of Jerusalem when Stephen was murdered. In chapter 8:2 it says, **And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.** And you can appreciate their grief. *They* sustained a great loss, and there can be a place for such grieving. But it was not a waste. God knew what He was doing. God had planned this homecoming for Stephen to strategically advance the cause of His kingdom. For example, it stirred up the persecution in chapter 8 which caused the Gospel to go into pagan lands. It may not otherwise have done so. It stirred up Saul's conscience and eventually led to his conversion. It precipitated a mass exodus from Judaism. But most importantly, it ushered Stephen into God's presence in a most glorious way. It testified to us the power of God's grace in death. My niece's death may have seemed ill timed, but her unsaved friends walked away from the accident alive and came to Christ (which was her heart's desire). The funeral was broadcast over three networks (perhaps the first time in decades that people heard the Gospel over those secular TV stations). 1200 people attended her funeral and 600 received Christ. You see, God's ways are not always our ways. And I want us to think of death not just as a loss, but also as one more manifestation of the glory of His grace.

If I could have any wish granted that I desired, it would be to live as significantly as Stephen did (even for such a short time), and to die as gloriously as he did. Every time I read the story of Stephen, my heart yearns for the significance of both his life and his death. To die in the arms of Jesus is every bit as glorious to me as to live in the arms of Jesus. It is not a morbid thing to think about your death. You need to prepare for your death. In fact, I think that Spurgeon was correct when he said, “To be prepared to die is to be prepared to live.” It was precisely because Stephen was so prepared to die that his life had such power. Those left behind in chapter 8:2 may have been mourning, but Stephen was not mourning. He went from one glory to another. So let’s look at the faithful death of Stephen. I’m not going to follow the outline. I think the outline helps to summarize the differences between the Sanhedrin and Stephen. But I just want to go through the passage phrase by phrase.

Verse 54 says, **When they heard these things they were cut to the heart...** Stephen’s speech brought incredible conviction. The Greek word for “cut to the heart” is literally to be sawn in two. And it indicates pain. It would be very painful to be sawn in half, wouldn’t it? God’s Word brings pain, with one of two results. When Peter brought pain to the Jews in Acts 2, it says, **Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?”** Peter calls them to repentance; they repent, put their faith in Christ and find forgiveness and peace in their Savior. In this passage we get quite an opposite result. It says, **When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth.**

And there are five lessons that I would like to develop from this verse. The first is that when God’s Word is properly applied to sin, there will always be pain. Galatians 5:17 says that the flesh and the Spirit fight against one another, and since the Bible is the Word of the Spirit, the flesh tends to fight against the Bible. This conflict brings pain. We think of it as conviction, but it is a painful thing. Don’t be surprised when you occasionally feel pain from the preaching of the Word, or when you feel pain while reading the Bible. It is one of the works that the Scripture is called to do. And sometimes it feels like being sawn in half.

The second lesson is that we all tend to be pain averse, don’t we? So any time God’s Word brings pain into your life, you need to analyze your reactions. One way of getting past the pain is to acknowledge your wickedness, to repent and to seek cleansing and help from our risen Lord. That immediately brings relief from the pain. But that is not the first impulse of an immature Christian. The first impulse is to do what you have always

done as a pagan – to avoid pain by denial or by going on the attack. Realize that your own heart is as capable of irrational aversion to pain as these men's hearts were. I have seen Christians convicted of sin and yelling, "I don't care; just leave me alone." That's an ungodly aversion to pain, and because God is faithful, it is an unsuccessful aversion to pain. The only lasting way to avoid that pain is through repentance, restitution, forgiveness and reconciliation. So guard your heart; analyze your reactions. In which of these two ways do you respond to pain? If you know ahead of time that you will always be pain averse, it will help you to analyze which is the better way. It's God's way.

The third lesson is that there will always be a risk of backlash when you bring God's Word into *other* people's lives, because you don't know which ones the Spirit will make soft. Some people are nervous about my bringing God's Word to closed countries. But let me tell you, the flesh of an American is just as opposed to God's Word as the flesh of a Chinese person. For that matter, there is even a risk in sharing reproofs with those that we love and with those who are believers. There is always risk in following the Lord. But certainly, we should not be surprised when pagans do not respond happily to the Scriptures. Only God's Spirit can enable them to do so.

The fourth lesson is that we need to pray that the Spirit would accompany that Word and enable people to repent rather than attack. We need God's Spirit when we preach and share the Word.

The fifth lesson is that it is doubtful you will be faithful in bringing God's Word in life if you are not already prepared to die a faithful death. And the reason I say that is that if you do not die to self day by day you will still be self-absorbed on the day of your death. Like Stephen we must start now by dying to our own desires, rights, will and ways.

Verse 55: **But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven...** Notice that "but." When people are furious at you and gnashing at you with their teeth, it would be very easy to lose focus and begin to fear the fury that is about to be unleashed against you. Like Peter, who lost faith when he started looking at the waves, we too often lose faith, boldness and all heart when we look at the opposition around us. That's natural. It's easy to give in to the enemy. What is strange, and what shows the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit in his life is that Stephen's gaze is not on his tormentors, but is on Christ. He doesn't even seem to notice what is going on around him. God helped Stephen to see the things around him as transient and to see heaven as permanent. The more transient earth appears to you, the less it will grip you. The more real eternity becomes to you, the more you will do things in a way that counts for eternity. The problem that we often face is that our gaze

is 99.9% on things below, rather than having our gaze on Jesus, so that we do everything down here below in light of eternity. I'm not talking about escaping from the earth. I'm talking about an eternal perspective on what we do. Once again, it is only the Holy Spirit that can give this eternal perspective and this supernatural boldness. **But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.**

Now God does not always give people a literal vision of Jesus, but if our life is governed by His authority, and we have learned to have that daily union and communion with Jesus, then we can have the same results. Let me give an example, using Hugh Latimer's testimony. He was a Protestant reformer in the time of King Henry VIII, and he ended up being martyred under Queen Mary. But Latimer was bold in his call to Henry for reforms. Let me give you one example that infuriated Henry.

"Hugh Lattimer once preached before King Henry VIII. Henry was greatly displeased by the boldness in the sermon and ordered Lattimer to preach again on the following Sunday and apologize for the offence he had given. The next Sunday, after reading his text, he began his sermon this way: "Hugh Lattimer, dost thou know before whom thou are this day to speak? To the high and mighty monarch, the king's most excellent majesty, who can take away thy life, if thou offendest. Therefore, take heed that thou speakest not a word that may displease. *But then* consider well, Hugh, dost thou not know from whence thou comest—upon Whose message thou are sent? Even by the great and mighty God, Who is all-present and Who beholdeth all thy ways and Who is able to cast thy soul into hell! Therefore, take care that thou deliverest thy message faithfully."

He then proceeded to preach exactly the same sermon that he preached the previous Sunday, but with a great deal more energy. And you can see what he was doing. He was giving himself and King Henry perspective. Yes, King Henry was a fearful monarch, but God was more so. Yes, King Henry could take away his temporal life, but what was that compared to eternity? Yes, he could see the wrath of King Henry sitting in front of him with all of his courtiers, but Latimer felt even more powerfully the presence of Christ, around whom his whole life revolved. In a similar way, we need to have a focus upon Christ like Stephen did. Certainly, we are probably not going to have visions like Stephen did. But it doesn't have to be a literal vision. If our mind's eye is set on Jesus, we can walk despite the waves; we can preach despite the anger; we can die well and live well. We need the hymn, "Be Thou my vision" to be a reality in our lives.

Verse 56. **And said, “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”** Heaven has become so real to him that it’s almost as if he is oblivious to the fact that they cannot see what he sees. It’s almost as if he is partly detached from what is happening around him. But it’s not really detachment, because he addresses them, doesn’t he? He is so enthusiastic with what he is experiencing that he wants them to share in seeing the splendor of God the Father and God the Son. And so he is aware of what is going on around him, *but he is far more aware of the realm of the eternal*. He is interpreting history, in light of eternity. It’s not escapism, because he does interact with the things below, but the things below do not drive him.

If we could always be so clear sighted as Stephen was here, we would always make the right decisions. But it is all too easy to interpret eternity in light of the earthly and (as a result) to have grossly misplaced priorities. John 3:31 says, **he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth**. Apart from the Spirit there is no way that we can transcend the earthly in our thinking. It takes the Holy Spirit to enable us to think from an eternal perspective. Sometimes the Spirit gives remarkable experiences of His presence, love and peace in the face of death. And I have read many such testimonies and even witnessed them as people were dying while I was in the room. Sometimes God’s presence to take His child home is so strong that you don’t want to leave. At other times he does so during devotions where we almost lose touch with earth we are so caught up in the beauty of God’s presence. Other times it simply manifests itself in wisdom – making the right choices. But the contrast between their blindness to Christ and His awareness of Christ’s presence is a ministry of the Spirit that we should long for. This world is constantly pulling us away from that eternal perspective.

Now you may wonder why Jesus is standing. Eight times Jesus is said to sit at the right hand of the Father, but there are only two places where Jesus is said to stand at God’s right hand, and interestingly, both places refer to Him as the Son of Man. The first is in Daniel 7 where the Son of Man enters heaven and comes before God’s throne and where all authority, power and dominion in heaven and on earth are given to Him. That passage speaks of any nations who resist His dominion coming under His judgment. So He is no doubt standing as Judge. This is an incredibly powerful ending to his speech. He has demonstrated the universal character of God’s kingdom, Israel’s worthiness of judgment, their murder of their Just One, now the Just One’s standing in judgment against these judges. And by the way, Daniel also prophesies the destruction of the temple in the same time period. Men

may judge Stephen, but Christ's approval of Stephen is what will ultimately count. If only we could value the approval of Christ more than the approval of men!

But verse 57 shows the blindness of depravity that they still rebel and still close their ears in the face of such overwhelming evidence. It says, **Then they cried out with a loud voice** [I think in part to overwhelm his words – they don't want to hear any more], **stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord**; Talk about irrational rage and suppression of the truth! It would almost be comical if it weren't so serious. *Dignified men shouting at the top of their lungs and sticking their fingers in their ears so that they won't hear Stephen.* It reminds me of kids. Lalalalalalala! I'm not listening! I can't hear you. Why is it that some people just won't hear? You can have all the good arguments in the world, and they still don't buy into what you say. I think there are three reasons why people won't listen.

Sometimes people don't listen because they are filtering out what they hear based on what they *want* to hear or what they expect *should* be said. You probably occasionally accuse your husbands of selective hearing. And maybe the accusation is true. We do tend to filter things through an interpretive grid, or sometimes simply ignore it because of all the white noise coming at us. We're not interested. The story is told that Franklin Roosevelt was getting tired of the mindless reception lines at the White House. But what irked him more than the boring lines was that no one really heard anything he said. So one day he tried an experiment. He quietly muttered under his breath, "I murdered my grandmother this morning." And he mumbled that to everyone who shook his hand. And he wrote that guests responded with things like, "Marvelous! Keep up the good work. We are proud of you. God bless you, sir." And the way he writes it, it was not until the end of the line that anything was different. He said the same thing to the ambassador from Bolivia. The ambassador leaned forward and whispered, "I'm sure she had it coming." But there is that tendency to tune out and to filter out because we are not really interested. I would call this the mild manifestation of our total depravity. I should have thrown in that some people have a one-track mind. It has nothing to do with depravity – just with getting old. But there are those who deliberately tune out.

Another form of not hearing is more perverse. It knows exactly what you are saying, and even knows that it is true, yet refuses to listen. It is a passive resistance. They may have a smile on their face and nod, but they go on their way and ignore what you said. Passive resistance is a second

manifestation of depravity. When Jesus said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear,” He implies that not everyone has spiritual ears.

The third form of not hearing is people who angrily go on the attack. And I have seen this, even with Christians. Sometimes it is manifested when the person confronted amazingly turns the tables and brings up accusations against you that are utterly irrelevant to the subject at hand. I know one man who amazes to this day – he so successfully takes the heat off of himself by asking probing questions of your own problems or at least purported problems. But you can’t ever get them back to the subject. At other times it is angrily saying that they don’t care or demanding that you be quiet. Or sometimes people will actually get verbally or physically abusive. And many times they don’t care that they don’t make sense. They simply don’t want to be told the truth. It is this kind of blind rage that sometimes makes government officials in other countries beat Christians so viciously that they end up killing them. But is this not a great picture of depravity? Yelling with closed ears. It’s the state of the natural man.

Verse 58 –**and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.** I want you to notice that though they show lack of self-control in their hatred, they are still in enough self-control that they don’t kill him on the spot. They follow all the rules on how stonings should take place – they had to be outside the city, the witnesses had to cast the first stones, and they voted on it. It’s amazing how legalistic rebellious sinners can be.

And by the way, the reason we know they voted on it is the words in 8:1. **Now Saul was consenting to his death.** He was obviously on the Sanhedrin, or he could not have given his consent. His training under Gamaliel was obviously already finished. So, though he was still somewhat young (perhaps in his late 40s), he had to have been married with grown children, because Pharisees didn’t allow you to be a certified rabbi before the age of 40. According to Pharisaic tradition, he probably married at age 16, and later lost his wife. So this is the first mention of Saul, and later in the book we will see that this scene must have had an impression upon him because his conscience had been bothering him ever since. In chapter 9, Saul’s conversion chapter, Jesus says to Saul, “**It is hard for you to kick against the goads.**” Goads were sharp instruments that were jabbed at cattle to get them moving – sort of like a cattle prod. The point was that God’s Word had been causing pain for Saul ever since this execution. And there have been numerous persecutors of Christians who have been converted by the godly way that Christians have handled themselves under torture and

interrogation. There are public officials in _____ who are Christians today because they could not get away from the goads of God's Word that had come from the lips of the Christians they were abusing. Praise God!

But back to the issue of self-control, isn't it interesting that lack of self-control is often selective. People who yell at their spouses and kids at the top of their voices find themselves able to miraculously stop shouting when the doorbell rings or control their voice and sound sweet when they answer the phone. Those who show no control at home can control themselves with the boss, because their job is at stake. And I point that out because people often use the lame excuse, "I can't help it" when they get unduly angry with a family member. Yes you can help it. You help it when others are involved. You just don't want to help it. Depravity is not a physical incapability – it is a moral incapability because of a wicked heart. But praise God; His grace overcomes that because God works in us both to will and to do of His own good pleasure. He gives us the "want to."

But this verse brings up another question that is often asked, "How could these guys get away with stoning Stephen?" The Romans had taken away from Israel the right to the death penalty. It was illegal for them to exercise capital punishment. And at the trial of Christ before Pilate, they say so. They say, "**It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death**" (John 18:31). That's why they had to bring Jesus to Pilate. Only a Roman governor could sentence someone to death. And so this has been a real puzzle for some people. They kill Stephen, and they get away with it. Well, I have recently discovered that there was one exception. Rome allowed the Jews to give the death penalty against anyone who defiled the temple. IN fact, written right into the dividing wall between the court of the Gentiles and the inner courts of the temple were these words: "No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the sanctuary and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death." Now perhaps you can see why in chapter 6:13-14, it was essential that they get Stephen to say something against the temple. This is why their charges revolve around the temple. Without a valid charge regarding the temple, they could not put Stephen to death. And by the way, this is what stymied them at the trial of Jesus. They brought false charges against Jesus with regard to the temple, but were not able to get Him to admit to anything, or to make the charges stick since the witnesses kept contradicting themselves. The Gospel of John shows that God deliberately made it this way so that Jesus would be crucified instead of stoned, in order to fulfill prophecy. And so, with Jesus, the frustrated Sanhedrin finally settled for the charge that He called Himself the Messiah and the Son of God, which would require the OK of the Roman

governor before any death penalty could be given. And even there, they know that Pilate won't enforce a charge of blasphemy, since he could care less. So they changed the charge last minute to saying that Jesus was guilty of revolt against Caesar. They had numerous charges according to Matthew, hoping that one would stick. But in Luke 23:2 they say, **'We found this man inciting our people to revolt, opposing payment of the tribute to Caesar, and claiming to be Christ, a king.** They knew they couldn't stone Jesus unless He defiled the temple, so they were forced to use Rome. And so, Stephen is put to death for one thing, and one thing only: he warned the Jews that the temple was in danger of being destroyed along with the people. Hardly blasphemy! But it was enough for them to get away with the death penalty. All they would have to say to Rome is, "Hey, he defiled the temple."

Verse 59: **And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."** FOUR things to notice: First, it is OK to pray to Jesus. Stephen prays to Jesus here. Paul prays to Jesus in 2 Corinthians 12. Ordinarily our prayers are to the Father, in the name of the Son and by the power of the Spirit, but we can commune with and address all three Persons of the Trinity. We need to make sure that we are not legalistic on this issue. I have heard some people say that it is unbiblical to address Jesus or address the Spirit in the songs that we sing. But read the Psalms. The Psalms are addressed to all three Persons, and you can find other prayers addressed to all three Persons. It is perfectly appropriate. And so, where Jesus addressed the Father when giving up His spirit ("**Father, into your hands I commit my spirit**" Luke 23:46), Stephen addresses the one who is standing up to receive Stephen's spirit – the Lord Jesus Christ.

Second, this implies that Stephen understood that Jesus was divine. The doctrine of divinity of Jesus was not invented in the third century as some cults claim. It was held from the earliest times.

Third, this shows that we are more than just body. There is a movement in Christianity called "evangelical monism" which says that man is a unified whole and cannot exist apart from body. McKay, one proponent claims that until the resurrection, we do not exist, once we die, except for our body. We exist in God's mind, and that on resurrection day God can recreate every cell the way it needs to be, mapped from His mind. But he says, that's all body and soul is – material. His view of man is pure materialism, yet he claims to be an evangelical. Other proponents say that our spirits are so tightly connected to body, that our spirits could not survive unless they were immediately given a different heavenly body. But that is simply not true. It is the spirit as spirit here that goes to Jesus. It is true that

our spirits feel incomplete until the resurrection. But our spirits will have consciousness, rationality, joy and all the expressions of humanity even though they are separated from the body at death.

Fourth, that is the definition of death – separation of body from spirit. Death is not cessation of being, but separation of being. So Adam died on the very day that he ate of the forbidden fruit because his spirit was separated from God. His body began to die, and at physical death, there is a separation of body and spirit. In hell, which is called the second death, there will be a forever separation that the wicked will have from God and all other social interactions. And so, you can see that this little section here has got so much practical and theological content.

Verse 60: **Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin.”** Notice that Stephen had no bitterness against his enemies. He is so filled with the Holy Spirit that God communicates the same forgiving love that Jesus had for His enemies. Now let’s think about that for a second. The only way that this prayer could be answered is if these people were saved. The only way that God could be a just Judge and not charge them with every crime that they had committed in their entire lives would be if Jesus had already become their substitute. So in effect, Stephen was praying for their conversion, which is a remarkable thing. God gave Stephen a love and a burden for their salvation even while rocks are breaking his bones, damaging his internal organs and causing pain. This is the same burden for the lost that God gave to Paul in Romans 9. And only the Spirit of God could give such a burden. But wherever the Spirit is, such a burden will be aroused to some degree. It’s one of the evidences of being filled with the Spirit – a burden for the lost. And when I think of Paul having this same burden for the lost, it reminds me of what a remarkable change the Spirit brings into His people. Chapter 8:1 says, **Now Saul was consenting to his death.** The Spirit changed him from this murderous rage to a compassion for the lost that made him willing to lay down his own life.

Back to verse 60 again: it says that **he knelt down.** He wanted to die in a position of prayer. What an awesome way to go. I would love to go in the middle of preaching or in the middle of prayer. If it is natural for you to commit your ways to God in prayer while you live, it will be natural to commit your life to God when you die. I know some Christians who struggle at the time of their death, and I have known other Christians who radiate the joy of a homecoming at their death. They are so used to communing with God in life that communing with God in death comes easily and they are ushered into God’s presence peacefully.

And that last phrase of verse 60 shows how Christ has conquered the great enemy death for the believer. It is no longer something to be feared. It is like falling asleep. **And when he had said this, he fell asleep.** I love that description of death. This does not mean that Stephen has been unconscious for the last 2000 years, only to be awakened at the resurrection. That is a false doctrine that Seventh Day Adventists and some others teach. They believe in soul sleep. But it's not the soul that is unconscious; it's the body. What happens when you sleep? You are not totally unconscious. You dream, right? You think in your sleep. You are unconscious to the world, but you are conscious in your dream world. You fall asleep to one world and you awake to another. And I think it is such a beautiful analogy. When we die, we fall asleep to our loved ones on earth. We can no longer communicate to them, or them to us. Our eyes are closed to this world. But we awake in the arms of Jesus. We are conscious in the new world of heaven. And what a beautiful image of peace. Stephen did not fear death. One East Indian writer said, "Death is not extinguishing the light; it is only putting out the lamp because the Dawn has come." (Rabindranath Tagore) Stephen did not need to fear the darkness when his lamp went out. He was entering into the glorious light of heaven. He was going from one glory to another.

How do we die a faithful death? Well, I would suggest that you die a faithful death by dying as Stephen did. If you learn to be full of the Spirit daily now, the Spirit will usher you into death from His perspective. If you learn to conquer bitterness now, your death can be sweet in any circumstance. If you learn to have peace in the midst of turmoil now, you will be able to go through the valley of the shadow of death knowing that the God of peace is with you. If you learn to have gracious boldness in standing up for what is right now, you will be able to die without compromise later. And if you walk as Stephen did, you won't worry about how short your life on earth may be. You will already be walking in the light of heaven as you move from glory to glory. The deep desire that I have is to know Christ and the power of His resurrection now so that I can die a faithful death.

Jim Elliott was a missionary who was martyred by the Auca Indians in his 20's. He was a remarkable man who also died young. And on July 7, 1948 he wrote this in his journal.

"July 7, 1948, Psalm 104:4: 'He makes His ministers a flame of fire.' Am I ignitable? God deliver me from the dread asbestos of 'other things.' Saturate me with the oil of the Spirit that I may be a flame. But flame is transient, often short-lived. Canst thou bear this, my soul, a short life?" I can bear a short life if I have the power of Christ within me. My prayer for you is

that you would be ignitable like Stephen. That your life would count, no matter how long or short it might be. Make it so Lord. Amen.

I charge you to let your life be ignitable by the oil of the Holy Spirit – that you prepare to die a faithful death by dying to self now and gaining an eternal perspective. Amen