

Don't lose that last stanza:

*Should all the hosts of death
And pow'rs of hell unknow
Put their most dreadful forms
Of rage and mischief on,
I shall be safe, for Christ displays
Superior pow'r and guardian grace.
(Christian Worship 359, st. 4)*

ENCOURAGEMENT GIVES STRENGTH

A few years ago, I thought I'd try out running as a form of exercise. Maybe you can tell from looking at me it didn't work out. But I did sign up for one race, and I trained and researched. One piece of advice stuck with me. "No matter how you feel during your training, you will have more energy on race day. People will be clapping and yelling, and that will give you a jolt of strength." That's why competitive runners work so hard on pacing. They don't want to get too excited and go out faster than they should.

So on race day, the one long-distance race I've ever run, it was true! I was used to training alone, in the woods, and getting tired and grumpy halfway through. But on race day, I came around a corner, and family and friends were cheering, and they made little signs. Sure enough, I got a little jolt of strength, and I took off! You see the same thing at a kid's soccer game or t-ball. When you yell a kid's name, zoom! He takes off.

STEPHEN'S STRENGTH

Whenever I see that, I think of Stephen and his spiritual strength. Whether you're a runner or a t-ball player or not, we all need spiritual strength in our inner life. Not physical life, but to tell the truth, serve others, stand up for your faith takes spiritual strength. So here's our theme today:

SPIRITUAL STRENGTH COMES FROM JESUS.

Remember when Jesus ascended into heaven? His disciples were crushed. He was their strength, their defender. So he made them a promise, **“Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.”** (Matthew 28:20) See what he’s saying? If your life is a long race, Jesus will be there at every turn to encourage you and give you a jolt of spiritual strength.

That’s what Stephen saw. He saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. We have that promise in Jesus’ words, and Stephen verified it with his own two eyes.

WHAT DID STEPHEN DO?

So let’s look, what did Stephen do? Well, Stephen was a layperson in that Jesus did not train him as a preacher or apostle. But in the days after Jesus ascended, there were accusations of racism in the church. The Greek-speaking people complained against the Hebrew-speaking people that when a Greek person was in need, they didn’t get help. So they picked seven laymen to manage Church resources while the apostles focused on preaching. Stephen was one of those managers. He was so strong spiritually that God even gave him the power to do miracles.

Until the enemies of the church noticed his work. The leaders of the synagogue arrested him, just like they arrested Jesus. They found some shady characters to make false accusations against him, just like they did to Jesus. In fact, they made they used the exact same lie. At the trial of Jesus and Stephen, they said they were trying to destroy the temple. Which was controversial because there was a building project going on to expand the temple. So Stephen stood in the same temple courtroom where Jesus stood. And instead of being his own lawyer, Stephen becomes a witness for God, just like Jesus.

He told the whole story of the Israelite nation. It was like a Sunday school highlight reel. Kids, you might recognize some of these stories. Parents, if you need a refresher, Acts chapter 6 is your Old Testament cheat sheet. Stephen starts with Abraham, how God called him to a foreign land, then

Isaac and Jacob. And Jacob's 12 sons—that's where the 12 tribes of Israel come from. And those sons turned on their little brother, Joseph. They sold him into slavery. God's people can do some nasty things. But God still loved them, forgave them, and used their evil for good.

Stephen tells about Moses, the great leader who took God's people out of Egypt. But before that, Moses killed a man! God's people can be violent. But because of his love, God still used Moses to lead Israel through the Red Sea and up to the promised land. But the Israelite people rejected Moses. They rebelled against him. God's people can be pretty thick-headed- the Bible's term for it is "stiff-necked," like a stubborn old ox. But God still loved them and forgave them and sent prophets to call them to repentance.

Stephen quotes the prophets who stood in the very temple where he was. The prophets told how worshiping God isn't about being in the right building or coming from the right family. Instead, it was about loving him and trusting his word. But ancient Israelites rejected God's prophets.

You can see the theme in Stephen's testimony. God's people reject his word and messengers, and God loves them enough to try to win them back. So now's the time for Stephen to apply that message to his audience because they rejected God's messenger Jesus and were currently persecuting God's messenger Stephen. Will he love them enough to call them to repentance?

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Would you? If you were standing in that temple, staring down the religious leaders, would you have the spiritual strength to accuse them? To tell the truth and try to win their souls from the devil? Or would you, like I would be tempted to do, save your skin?

You do face that decision, just with lower stakes. You have to decide between lying to your parents or your supervisor or owning up to your mistakes. That takes spiritual strength. You have to decide between saying no to your boyfriend or girlfriend or giving in to what you both want. That takes spiritual strength. You have to decide whether you'll serve others or look

out for yourself. That takes spiritual strength. Do you see why we need a boost of strength from Jesus on our journey?

Here's what Stephen said. **"You stiff-necked people! You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit!"** (Acts 7:51) That is spiritual strength. And it got Stephen killed. Read this with me.

ACTS 7:54-60

⁵⁴ When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But 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. ⁵⁶ "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ 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.

Stephen imitated Jesus to the end. As he was dying, he prayed the same prayer Jesus prayed on the cross, "Lord, receive my spirit." Then, when he looked at the people who were killing him, he said what Jesus said. "Lord, forgive them." That's like spiritual powerlifter strength!

So how did he do it? How did Stephen get that strong? I noticed it didn't say, "Stephen mustered all his passion from deep inside him." But that's the way our culture talks about inner strength. It's as if it lives in your intestines—or your heart. But I've got to tell you, I've looked pretty deeply into my own soul, and some of you have let me pretty deep into your own hearts, and it's not pretty in here. It's not strong. Maybe stiff-necked but not spiritually strong. There's a reason that when we were locked in our houses,

and people were left alone with their own thoughts and feelings, we had a mental health crisis. Our congregation has paramedics, firefighters. Police officers and they've seen depression, drug abuse, and suicides all go up when people are left to themselves. That's because inner strength doesn't come from within. No amount of soul searching will turn you into a spiritual Stephen.

Where did Stephen get strength? Jesus. **"Stephen... looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God."** (Acts 7: 55) Stephen looked to Jesus. Spiritual strength comes from Jesus.

WHAT DID JESUS DO?

While Stephen was dying, what was Jesus doing? Interceding. Just about the only place I ever hear that word is in this room. After the sermon, when we announce who we are praying for, the pastor says, "In our *intercessions*, we include..." Intercede means you pray for someone. It's a concept that has super ancient roots, to the very beginning of organized worship. Back then, a high priest had the unique privilege of asking God to help all the people from his tribe or nation.

Well, as stones are crunching Stephen's orbital bones, he needs some help. And he sees heaven open, and who does is praying for him? Not a priest, not a pastor; it's Jesus asking God to help his people.

That's what Jesus is doing for you right now. He's praying for you. He started praying when he was still on earth. In the gospel today, you and I were eavesdropping on Jesus' conversation with his Father. He prayed, **"I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one."** (John 17:14-15)

And while Stephen was being stoned, Jesus was answering his own prayer. He didn't take Stephen away from trouble or protect him from the rocks. But Jesus saved him from the devil. He gave him superhuman spiritual strength

to be a man of God. Spiritual strength comes from Jesus, so Stephen looked to Jesus.

THE SOURCE OF YOUR SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

What about you? As you face choices this week to be a man of God or save your skin, to be a woman of integrity, or concede to the devil, you will need the spiritual strength that comes from Jesus. I doubt you'll see the clouds part and find Christ in heaven with your eyeballs. I've never seen that. So, how will Jesus give you strength?

I'll share with you an illustration from one of Mount Olive's third-grade teachers, who may or may not live in my house. She asked the class, "How are you going to know what God wants for you? Will he open the clouds, and you'll see him?" "Probably not." "Will he whisper in your ear or come in a dream?" That's what some people think. So she used this illustration: Imagine your mom and dad leave you at home, and before they go, they say, "There's a note on the table that says what you can do, what's for dinner, everything you need." They leave. You get hungry, and you walk to the window and stare at the driveway for 3 hours. When they come home, you say, "I'm starving! I've been waiting and waiting for you to appear to tell me what I can eat. Why didn't you help me?" Well, could they have come and told you? Yeah, but they didn't say that's how they'd help you! What did they tell you? Read the note!

That's how Jesus gives spiritual strength today. Could he appear in the clouds? Sure! But he never told us that's how he'll communicate. What did he tell you? Read the note! Read the words he preserved for you! Jesus gives us spiritual strength through his word. In fact, that's what he prayed for you and me before he died. He said, **"Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth."** (John 17:17)

This week, when you feel tired, look to Jesus for spiritual strength. He is praying for you right now in heaven! And his word will make you strong.

Amen.