

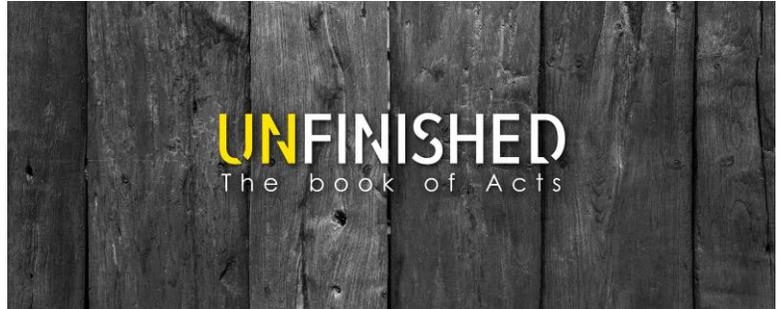


# VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

## SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

## Unfinished

Part 12: Lifetime Achievement Award  
Acts 6:8–15 | Tim Badal | November 26, 2017



In our series “Unfinished,” we’ve been learning how the early church operated and how the Holy Spirit empowered them to do mighty works. Yet we know their work is still unfinished, and we are to take up that mantle today. They have given us a great model to follow. Last week Pastor Steve spoke on how the church dealt with the problem of the neglect of the Greek widows.

As he often does, Luke then shifts to a contrast in Acts 6. After the temporal needs of the church were met through appointing deacons, the scene turns to things outside the church. The story of Stephen takes us to more eternal matters. At the end of Stephen’s speech that we’ll learn about next week, we’ll see that he gives his life for the calling of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This emphasizes that we have both the temporal need for bread and also the eternal need to trust and hope in the Lord Jesus. Sometimes churches get these things out of balance. We can often put the temporal over the eternal, but as followers of Christ, our eyes should focus on the prize that calls us heavenward, as Paul would say.

The book of Acts is mainly about the stories of two men. The early part of the book deals with the life and ministry of the Apostle Peter—a man who walked with Jesus. We’ve seen his growth from a point of denying Jesus on the night He was betrayed to now standing and proclaiming the greatness of Christ’s glory and His resurrection.

The latter part of Acts is dedicated to the life and exploits of the Apostle Paul. This coming fall we’ll be studying the life and times of Paul and how he reached the entire Roman Empire with the gospel of Jesus Christ. But in between those two pillars of the church is a transitional section in chapters six and seven, where a third character enters the scene and then exits almost as quickly as he enters.

His name is Stephen. We were introduced to him last week when he was among the seven men appointed to care for distribution of bread to the widows. Stephen is named first and he is said to be faithful and trustworthy. So we’ll see that while God sometimes uses big names to accomplish big things, He also uses the less significant—like the short ministry of Stephen—to change the world.

God will do this both through Stephen’s message and through his martyrdom. He is the first recorded person to give up his life for Christ. This didn’t just change the church—it also changed world history as we know it. This week we’ll focus on the man Stephen, and then next week we’ll look at his message and martyrdom in chapter seven. Let’s pick up his story starting at Acts 6:8:

<sup>8</sup> And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup> Then those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. <sup>10</sup> But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. <sup>11</sup> Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” <sup>12</sup> And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, <sup>13</sup> and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, <sup>14</sup> for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.” <sup>15</sup> And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Whether in the movie arena or the music industry or even in social groups, when award ceremonies take place—like the Emmys, the Oscars, the Grammys or the Espys for the sports fanatics out there—the last award of the night is always given to a person who seems to personify the sport or the art or the industry in which they’re involved. And these are not just flash-in-the-pan

involvements, but they are being honored for a lifetime of giving themselves to their particular arena. Someone will stand up to great fanfare to give the award and it's usually accompanied by a video montage of the achievements of the winner, depicting their dedication to their skill or art. In each scenario, this is called a "Lifetime Achievement Award."

In the spiritual realm, while we know we can do nothing to earn our salvation, God still gives Lifetime Achievement Awards. When we come to the cross, we receive His grace and mercy without any merit of our own. However, Scripture also indicates we are to do good works that God has prepared for us as His followers (Ephesians 2:10). As we strive to build God's Kingdom in this world, we can look forward to a day when we will receive a crown. We will also hear Jesus speak words that will be sweet to our ears: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Here in Acts 6 we see a recipient of God's Lifetime Achievement Award, but Stephen isn't the only person who seems to win this award. In fact, Hebrews 11 is dedicated to honoring others in Scripture in what is known as the "Hall of Faith." Not only will these awards be given to people we know about, but there will be myriads of people who worked behind the scenes and in the shadows of more well-known people who will also be honored for their faithful endurance in serving the Lord Jesus Christ.

Stephen is an Award winner because even as he was dying, he was fully dedicated to the work of the gospel. So we need to ask ourselves: how can we be like Stephen? I'm going to leave some aspects of our text until next week, but today I'm going to focus on this man who wins God's Lifetime Achievement Award.

In all of what Luke shares in these two chapters, not a single bad word is said about Stephen. Suppose you were to go to Thanksgiving dinner and you were able to tell all your family and friends, "I made it into the Bible." Your mom responds, "Well, did it mention the time you got an F in class?" No, they didn't bring that up. "How about the time you TP'd the neighbors' house and got caught by the cops?" No, they didn't bring that up. "How about these other times you messed up?" No, they didn't catch that.

Stephen would be able to say, "Mom, everything they say about me is all good." Not a bad thing is said. Yet we know Stephen was a man who was born a sinner in need of God's grace—just as we are. Paul tells us, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Stephen certainly also fell short of God's glory.

But God had captured his heart, very likely on the day of Pentecost, and by His grace Stephen was won to Christ. Now Stephen was fully dedicated to giving his all for the work of God's Kingdom. In the same way, we should be captured for the gospel as well. But in order for that to happen, we need to do some rethinking and some responding as we look at this great man. We too can aspire to have a Lifetime Achievement Award, which is available to all those who call on the name of Christ.

In some ways it's appropriate for Stephen to win this award because his name comes from the Greek word *stephanos*, which means crown or victor. He's living up to his name, being crowned with the Award. If we want to be crowned with the same Award, I see three things in the life of Stephen we need to do.

## **Receiving this Award involves remembering an important principle.**

Even before we look at Acts 6, we need to recognize an important principle regarding how we view Bible characters. Our church often studies different Bible characters. We've look at the life of Elijah. We've studied the life of Joseph. It's easy to look at their lives and ask, "Why does God devote so much time and attention in His sacred Scriptures to the comings and goings of ordinary people?" Other religions don't give much attention in their writings to the lives of their followers. For example, the Buddhist writings contain mainly proverbs. The Bible includes these as well, but it's only one book out of 66. Rather, the Bible devotes most of its pages to the lives of people like Stephen. So it's good to ask why God chose to do this.

### **The reason we study biblical characters**

Let's leave Acts for a moment and turn to Romans 15, where the Apostle Paul tells the church in Rome why these things are written. In verse four we see his three-pronged reasons for including character studies in the Scriptures. He writes, "*For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*"

These stories are given to us not to hinder our walk. God's not writing this as if He's pointing to one of His kids at the Thanksgiving table and gushing over them, so you will feel like a jerk. Some of you might read about Stephen and think, "Man, he's got it all going for him—and I'm nothing. If I was honest, my week really stunk. I did not do a good job of following Christ. And now we have the golden child, Stephen, who's doing it right." God has not written this to hinder you in your walk. Rather, Paul says these things are written for our instruction, that is, to help us. He realized something I've also learned.

Have you ever put together furniture from Ikea? Have you had difficulty doing that? The instructions are in a different language and they make no sense. They say if you follow the directions, by the time you reach step 358 that little cabinet you saw in the showroom is going to be sitting in your living room. The problem in the Badal family is that it never happens, because the instructions are so hard to follow.

I believe God, in His grace, knew that holiness, obedience and godliness would be difficult for us to grasp while in our sin. So instead of just giving us a long list of instructions, He essentially included YouTube videos of people's lives who were also trying to live these things out.

Here we have Stephen demonstrating what it means to follow Christ well. The Bible is very honest, so we see some people who live well, yet it also includes people who live life poorly. These stories are not intended to hinder us, but to help us, instructing us on how things are done so we might have hope. What is our hope? Our hope is that you and I can do what Stephen did. We can hope because the same Holy Spirit Who lived in Stephen lives inside us today, thus we too can change people through the gospel of Jesus Christ. The reason we study Bible characters is not to hinder us, but to help us and give us hope.

### Our response to them is critical

Going back to Acts 6, we meet Stephen. He steps onto the stage quickly and then quickly steps off. His time in the show is very brief. As baseball people say, he had a cup of coffee at the dance. That was it. But what he does in that short amount of time takes our breath away.

We see in him a man about whom the Bible has nothing but positive things to say. He is filled with the Holy Spirit. He serves widows well. He's affirmed by the congregation. He's out preaching. He's out performing signs and wonders. He's able to stand before his old buddies in the synagogue and preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. Good—good—good—good. Stephen does everything well. If you would read that as I do, your human response might be, "Gag—are you kidding me? He can't be real. All good, no bad?" When I read Acts 6:1–15 and consider Stephen, my human nature brings up jealousy and anger. How did he do it?

As a kid, I had a gagging reflex when a car would drive by with a bumper sticker that said, "Proud parent of an honor roll student." They didn't have a bumper sticker for my 1.3 GPA. I imagined my mom wishing she could have a bumper sticker like the one on the car. So one year I found a bumper sticker that fit my persona a little better, so I bought it for my parents that Christmas. It said, "My kid can beat up your honor roll student."

Some of us today have that response when we read about certain characters in the Bible. We tell ourselves, "I can't do that, so I'll just beat them up. I'll find something wrong with them. I'll make their accomplishment seem insignificant. I'm going to give you three ways we could approach the life of Stephen.

Our first response could be complacency. In spite of all we learn about Stephen, we're still complacent. We figure he was living back in the first century when miracles were happening. We're not doing signs and wonders these days. "God gave him something I'm not getting, so therefore I don't have to accomplish what he did. I'm not even going to try. In fact, I'm going to put away my notes, because this sermon isn't for me. I'll just keep living my ordinary Christian life and not even try to do what he did."

The second response might result in being critical. We might think, "Well, if he had written the whole story about Stephen, we would have seen that he struggled the same way we do. It's nice that Luke only talked about the good things, but he left out the real-life parts of him." Others of us might be saying, "I want to hear what his life is, so I can be what he was." We get up tomorrow, and we're excited to do things like he did. But then we walk into our schools or our offices, and we begin to cower in fear. What looked good on paper isn't the same when the rubber meets the road with our fellow students or employees next to us. Or there's that guy who keeps mocking Christianity, or that student who used to follow Christ but no longer does. So we decide that what Stephen did is too scary for us.

Yet the Bible tells us these are not good responses to what we learn from the lives of its characters. The reason the Holy Spirit inspired Luke to write about Stephen was not to cause us to criticize, or to be complacent, or to cower in fear. Rather, God is using this story to challenge us to emulate Stephen, even as he emulated Christ, for our good and for the glory of God's Kingdom. But how do we get there?

## Receiving this Award involves resembling an influential person.

We need to ask ourselves in what ways our lives resemble those of influential people like Stephen. So let's consider what our text actually tells us about Stephen. Who is he? Actually, we know very little about him. Before Acts 6, we know nothing at all. We don't know about his upbringing or his parents or his home town. We don't know if he was married. He's not mentioned as one of the original 120 church members. We do know he's a Hellenistic Jew, so we can presume he was probably one of those who came to Christ on the day of Pentecost. He had come to Jerusalem for the festival and more than likely witnessed the coming of the Holy Spirit with a rushing wind. He heard the people speaking the gospel in many languages, including his own.

Over the one-year span between Acts 2 and Acts 6, Stephen joined the early church in being devoted to the Apostles' teaching, the breaking of bread, prayer and fellowship. This kind of devotion to godly teaching, fellowship, prayer and service brings anyone to a place where God can use them in His Kingdom—and this is what God did with Stephen. Even though he was new to Christianity, he obviously grew quickly and had an opportunity to use the gifts God had given him.

At some point the church recognized Stephen's sincere heart for others and realized that he was trustworthy and faithful. Thus when the assembly of believers realized their need to appoint deacons, Stephen was the first of the seven men they selected to serve in that way. He was a cut above. While he wasn't perfect, he had been brought to a place of trustworthiness by the same gospel that has changed and is changing us.

### Stephen is a great example of how to walk like a Christian.

What does Stephen do for us? He models what it means to walk like a Christian. That doesn't mean he "walks like an Egyptian"—for those who are my age—but he walked like a Christian. In this short passage, we are taught what it means to be a follower of Christ. I'm struck by how Luke's description of Stephen provides us with a textbook example of how we ought to live. That leads me to ask: if someone was to put pen to paper about my life, could people use that as a textbook for Christian living? I'm not sure they could. But Stephen gives us a wonderful example of how to walk like a Christian.

First, he shows us that a Christian is controlled by the right Person. We're told specifically that he is "*full of the Holy Spirit*" (Acts 6:5). That control is seen in a couple ways. First, verse eight describes Stephen as being "*full of grace and power.*" Full in this case implies that he was overflowing. He wasn't simply filled to the brim with grace and power; they were splashing on to those around him.

So if we are truly Spirit-filled, we are so controlled and filled with Him that our love for Christ spills out in ministry to those who are near us. There was something contagious about Stephen's faith. Christ had worked so powerfully in his life that it impacted others with whom he was involved.

We see that Stephen was full of grace, or said another way, Stephen was a gracious man. His demeanor and countenance caused others to want to be near him. We might think this was simply the result of his personality. There are people I know who make me sick, because they are just happy all the time. They smile and say, "Isn't the joy of the Lord our strength?" I begrudgingly respond, "Yes." But some of you are like me, with rough edges. We can be a little more curmudgeonly.

But is Stephen just a man with a great personality? I don't think so. I think he was so enchanted by the gospel of Jesus Christ that he was filled with inexpressible joy. This begs the question: as we go to work or school tomorrow, will our boss or our teachers or our fellow employees or students say we're filled with joy? Is our joy overflowing and impacting our relationships and our words? Are we filled with that kind of joy? Stephen was and we should be as well.

Not only was Stephen filled with graciousness, but he was also filled with power—*dunamis*, dynamite power. Yes, that power enabled him to do things that we probably won't be able to see in our day. He was "*doing great wonders and signs among the people*" (Acts 6:8).

Even if we aren't seeing miracles today, we should realize it was more than just miracles which resulted from the power Stephen had. There are other forms of ministry that are less than miraculous and maybe that's what God is calling us to as well. Do we start our days by asking God, "Would you do a work in me among the people, so they might not see me, but Jesus"?

Remember, at the end of today's text we learned that when people looked at Stephen, they saw the face of an angel. There was something in his life that was so contagious and transforming that it changed not only how he lived, but even how he looked. He had spent so much time with Christ through the Holy Spirit that his whole being radiated God's beauty. This should be true of us as well, if we are controlled by the Spirit.

In addition, Stephen was confident. We'll see more evidence of this in his speech next week. But in today's text we read, *"Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen"* (verse nine).

Many scholars believe Stephen was actually part of this group of people. These could have been his former temple associates and friends. After he was changed by the Spirit, he spent a year learning what the gospel was about, then he returned to his former community. Friends and family are by far the most difficult people to evangelize—but Stephen started there.

These people respond by rising up and disputing him. Literally, they're debating him. It's not yelling and screaming, but rather a strong dialog, going point and counterpoint against the claims of Christ as being the Messiah. We don't do this kind of debate very well. A recent study revealed that 75% of us are specifically afraid that a discussion of politics will rise up at our Thanksgiving tables. Why are we afraid of this? Because we don't debate well. We aren't able to dialog over serious things with one another, because we are too busy yelling and screaming and demonizing one another. But Luke is describing an orderly debate about the things of Christ.

I think this is an excellent model of how we should discuss the things of Christ with those who disagree. We should allow them to ask questions, even to challenge us. Allow them to say, "Yeah, but...what about this?" We should then respond with graciousness and truth concerning why we have this hope in Jesus Christ, just as Stephen did. Stephen was confident, even as he stood against a group—one to 20. Again you might say, "I can't do that." Well, some of us probably need to be asking for a little more confidence than what we have now.

Finally, Stephen is a conduit of God's grace—and we are to be that as well. Notice that he does all the signs and wonders "among the people." He has proven his ability to serve the church well, taking care of the orphans and widows. But it appears he has moved on from this position to the public ministry of the Word in similar fashion to the Apostles. It's important to realize that Stephen's best ministry as a Christian didn't take place in the church—it happened out in the world.

If we are a church that does its best work on Sunday, then we're not really living out what it means to be the church. What happens here on Sunday should merely be a springboard for what we do the rest of the week. Even though people in the world don't see us leading Sunday school classes or small groups or worship, they should realize that what we do on Sunday is the same as what we are to do every day. But many of us are keeping our best work for Sundays.

Stephen and the disciples model for us how the church should leave the building and should be the church among the people outside. We should be doing our best work in our neighborhoods and schools and workplaces. Stephen was a conduit of God's grace for those who needed it most, which is what we're called to as well.

Finally, we see that Stephen is so committed to spreading the gospel that he's willing to give up his life for his faith, as we'll see next week. This challenges us to ask how much we're willing to give up for the gospel. He gave his life. Are we willing to give up some of our popularity? Are we willing to be the recipient of joking and mocking? Are we willing to miss out on a promotion or even lose our job? Are we willing to be imprisoned, beaten or even killed for the sake of the gospel?

I'm going to be honest. I really doubt that any of us are going to be martyred for our faith this week. But that doesn't mean we simply lurk in the shadows and never step out to do what God has called us to do. Because we think we're not going to be martyred, should that not give us more confidence and a stronger commitment to serving and honoring Christ with everything we say and do this week?

Stephen was willing to lose his life; we struggle to give up some possession or a period of time, because we think this is a price too large to pay. He had it right. He was committed. He walked like a Christian.

**Stephen is a great example of how to witness even when challenged.**

Second, as we'll see next week, a problem arose that challenged his ministry. Stephen models for us how to continue witnessing even when we're challenged, when people come against us. What should we do in this situation?

First, we need to be strong. We cannot wilt when people oppose our message about Jesus Christ. We need to have confidence. If we don't, we should remember what we learned to do in Acts 4: pray for boldness. Ask the Spirit of God to embolden you so you'll be able to stand strong when the pressure comes. Stephen stood before a group of men who were probably more educated than he was, who may have known more about the Scriptures than he did. Still, he stood strong.

Second, we need to be aware of the schemes with which we'll be confronted. We see in verse 11 that they "secretly instigated men" to falsely accuse Stephen. Why did they have to do this? Because even these learned men "*could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which [Stephen] was speaking*" (verse ten). They were losing the fight. What does the unbelieving world do when it doesn't have an answer? It goes to nefarious means to bring a good person down. These men created a list of accusations against Stephen that were designed to nullify the gospel he was preaching.

Some of us may have encountered this same tactic in our workplaces and schools. We've proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ, then we've been cut off by people who accuse us of hypocrisy or speak other untruths in order to invalidate our message. We need to beware of schemes the unbelieving world brings to us that will try to block the spread of the gospel.

For example, watch the reactions on media when Jesus' name is brought up. I'm no conspiracy theorist, but I can't tell you how many times on news networks someone has proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ, only to have the color bars come up when they start to speak. The reception is crystal clear when they're talking about sex or rock and roll, but when Jesus is mentioned, the feed goes away.

Be strong, be aware of the schemes and then stay true to the Scriptures. Acts 7 is a whole chapter dedicated to the story of the origins of Christianity. Stephen begins with the life of Abraham, moves through the patriarchs and goes all the way to the announcement of Christ as Lord, Savior, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Our proclamation is not about our politics or our opinions. We must stay true to the Scriptures. Stephen is careful to preach only Christ.

Finally, we need to show love to all. Stephen never yells at them. He is not dishonest with them. He doesn't speak ill of them. He talks about hard things—the hardness of their hearts and their rebellion—but he does so in love. His countenance is like that of an angel. It takes their breath away. He's a loving man. This reminds us that no matter what opposition comes our way, we must always show love to people, because love is the way we are to speak the truth of God's grace so they might receive it. Stephen lived out the proverb that says, "A gentle answer turns away wrath" (Proverbs 15:1). To be sure, he himself will experience their wrath, but it's not because he himself was angry. Their rebellion and hard-heartedness bring them to the point of putting him to death. Yet even as Stephen is dying, he shows love, asking God to forgive them.

## **Receiving this Award involves running the individual path God has for you.**

So what do we do with this great biography which we'll continue to look at next week? If we want to win this Lifetime Achievement Award, as Stephen did, we must run our own individual path that God has for us. We can't run Stephen's race. You can't run my race and I can't run yours.

The Apostle Paul says each of us has a race to run, one that Christ sets before us. Stephen isn't the victor—Jesus is. He led the way by running His own race, and we follow in the footsteps of great men and women who have run their races before us. But we need to remember a couple things.

First, when we are imitating biblical characters, we should not expect perfection, but rather seek after progress. We might look at Stephen's amazing example and think, "I'll never be able to be like him." That's okay—be you. But be a better "you" today than you were yesterday. Allow the grace and mercy of God and the empowering of the Holy Spirit to bring you to greater maturity today than you had a week ago. Progress is the key. God demands perfection, but He knows it's a lifetime process.

Second, don't imitate their performance, rather imitate their practices. We aren't called to do the mighty signs and wonders Stephen did. We won't spend our days debating with synagogue leaders. These things are hard to come by in 2017 in the Fox Valley. Nevertheless, we are to imitate the way he practiced his ministry.

So ask yourself, "Am I controlled by the Spirit? Am I confident in the Spirit? Am I a conduit of God's grace? Am I willing to stand strong in the middle of troubled times, as Stephen did?" How do we do this? Let me close with four ways Stephen showed his godliness that will be helpful to us.

**We must figure out what it means for us to serve God and others.**

At the beginning of Acts 6, we see Stephen waiting on tables and taking care of widows. He's helping people using the gifts God has given him. Then he later goes into the synagogues and preaches. God has called each of us to find unique ways to serve Him and serve others. Some, like me, will be in front where people can see what we do. Others will serve behind the scenes, perhaps by making meals or caring for people in other ways, with no one seeing what they do. One of the reasons we do our week in pictures is to allow others to be recognized for what they do. God is using people to serve Him and others in small ways that

sometimes get overlooked. But you need to ask, “Where has God uniquely called me to serve?” and then do what He gives you to do.

**We must figure out what it means for us to seek greater opportunities.**

Second, we should always be looking for greater opportunities. Stephen was ministering to the widows, but that was really the first step in what God had in mind for him. God then sent him back to his home church, to his friends in the synagogue, to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to them.

**We must figure out what it means for us to be stretched at times.**

To be honest, I'm sure it was a lot harder to preach the gospel than it was to hand out meals. If we seek greater opportunities, it will mean we will be stretched. God will take us out of our comfort zones. I imagine that when Stephen was preaching he was out of his element. Especially when his audience started yelling and gnashing their teeth at him, he realized how much it was getting out of hand. Nevertheless he stayed true to the word and true to his calling, because he was willing to be stretched. Some of us also need to be stretched out of our comfort zones, going into our schools and workplaces and neighborhoods, not knowing what the result will be.

**We must figure out what it means for us to see our life in Christ as a blessing and not a burden.**

All the while, we must learn to see our life in Christ as being a blessing and not a burden. As Stephen's life was nearing its end, we don't hear him saying that following Christ was not worth it. This morning I read how David Cassidy—a well-know actor, heart-throb for everybody who was living in the '70s, Partridge family guy, artist, a man who had fame and fortune—died this week at age 67.

His daughter, who was interviewed in a reputable magazine, said his final words were these: “What a waste.” No doubt he was speaking of his life. “What a waste of a life. What a waste of all I've done.” I'm sure in his day that David Cassidy won many Lifetime Achievement Awards—but what a waste.

In contrast to David Cassidy, Stephen gives his life in faithfulness to God, remaining faithful even in his death. We never at any point hear him say anything like, “What a waste.” Rather, he says in Acts 7:56, *“Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”* Amen!

What type of lifetime achievement are you pursuing? If you're pursuing the things of this world, then at your death you will echo the words of many: “What a waste.” But if you, like Stephen, choose to imitate Christ, you will be able to stand, forgiving the people who have hurt you. You'll be eager to share the gospel with anyone within hearing. And on your deathbed, you will see Jesus Christ at the right hand of the Father—and with joy you will enter into your eternity. You will not have wasted your life, but rather will have received an awesome blessing that will last forever.

Which will you choose? I pray that Stephen's example will encourage many of us to gravitate to the grace of God as seen in Jesus Christ and as it was lived out in the life of Stephen, so we might experience that Lifetime Achievement Award. I pray that we will hear from God, not “What a waste,” but rather, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:14–30). That's my prayer for myself and for you.