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Acts / Acts 7:54–60
The King sustains and receives his faithful servant, even as his enemies reject his testimony.

The King Receives His Servant

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Introduction

Good morning Awakening Church. I'd like to start by asking us to think back to where we left off last Sunday. Jon took us through Stephen's defense before the Jewish council in Acts chapter 7. And what we saw was way more than Stephen just defending himself against the accusations that had been brought against him. Stephen took these religious leaders through the history of Israel, reminding them of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and the wilderness generation. And throughout that history, he showed them how God had faithfully dealt with his people, even while they repeatedly rejected his messengers and resisted his Word.

But as Stephen brought his defense to a close, he turned his attention directly to the men standing before him.

If we look back at **verse 51** for just a moment, Stephen said,

Acts 7:51 ""You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you."

And then in **verse 52**, he accused them of betraying and murdering the Righteous One!

Acts 7:52 "Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered,"

Now Awakening… think about what Stephen has just said. These are the religious leaders of Israel. These are men who have devoted their lives to studying and teaching the Scriptures. And Stephen has just told them that they're guilty of the very same rebellion that characterized their fathers! The men who were supposed to recognize the promised Messiah had actually rejected and murdered him!

And that's where Jon left us last Sunday. Stephen has finished speaking, and these religious leaders have been confronted with the truth about their sin and their rejection of Jesus Christ. And church… what should their response have been? These men should have been brought low before God! They should have been cut to the heart by the weight of their guilt, humbled by the wickedness of what they'd done, and crying out to God for mercy! They should have been driven to repentance, pleading for forgiveness through the very Savior they had rejected!

But here's the question before us this morning… **Is that how they're going to respond?** The council has heard the truth about Christ. What will they do with it? Will they humble themselves before God and acknowledge their guilt? Or will they continue in the very rebellion Stephen has just accused them of?

That's where our passage picks up this morning, and as we work through these final seven verses of Acts chapter 7, I want us to **remember** that this account isn't ultimately about the courage or faithfulness of Stephen. It's about the Christ to whom Stephen belongs.

So let's turn our attention to Acts 7:54–60. I've titled our sermon this morning…

The King Receives His Servant.

Sermon Text: Acts 7:54-60

Call: "*The grass withers and the flower fades,*"

Response: "*But the word of the Lord endures forever.*"

1. The Rejection (v54)

1.1 The Truth and the Fury (v54)

Let's begin by looking at **verse 54,** because I think we have our answer to the question we just asked in the introduction! These men have heard Stephen's accusations, they've been confronted with their sin, and rather than humbling themselves before God and seeking his mercy… they're absolutely furious!

Luke tells us that when they heard these things, they were **enraged**. Now remember, Stephen has just accused these men of resisting the Holy Spirit, persecuting God's prophets, and betraying and murdering the Righteous One. And rather than considering whether what Stephen has said is true, their anger is directed toward the man who has confronted them.

And the language Luke uses here is pretty remarkable. The word translated as enraged carries the picture of being cut or sawn through. It's describing this intense inward agitation that Stephen's words have produced in these men. It's almost as though his accusations are cutting right through them! But here's what I want us to recognize… **being deeply affected by the truth doesn't necessarily mean that someone has received it.**

In fact, I want you to think back to something we saw earlier in Acts. Turn back with me for just a moment to **Acts 2:37**. Remember Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost? Peter had just confronted the people with the truth that they had crucified the very Jesus whom God had made both Lord and Christ.

And look at how they responded.

Acts 2:37 “Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’”

Do you see the contrast here, church? Both groups have been confronted with the truth about their sin. Both have been deeply affected by what they've heard. But look at how differently they respond!

In Acts chapter 2, the people are cut to the heart, and they ask what they must do. They're looking for an answer to their guilt. But here in Acts chapter 7, these religious leaders are enraged, and rather than seeking mercy, they turn their anger against the very man who has proclaimed the truth to them!

And Luke tells us that they **ground their teeth at him**. This is an expression of intense hatred and hostility. We see this kind of language throughout the Old Testament when describing the anger of the wicked toward the righteous. Psalm 37:12, for example, tells us that the wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes his teeth at him.

Now think about the irony of what's happening here. Stephen has just accused these men of behaving like their fathers, resisting the Holy Spirit and rejecting God's messengers. And what do they do? They respond by resisting the very testimony Stephen has brought to them! Their own behavior is being stacked up with all of Stephen's accusations as "proof of the truth" of what they've just heard.

And remember who these men are! These aren't people who have never heard of God or who have no knowledge of his Word. These are the religious leaders of Israel. They're supposed to be the ones teaching God's law and leading his people in obedience to it. And yet, when they're confronted with the truth about the Messiah, they're filled with hatred toward the man proclaiming him.

Now Awakening… I think there's an important warning here for us, and I don't want us to miss it.

Being emotionally affected by God's Word is not the same thing as repenting of our sin.

A person can hear the Scriptures preached and become angry. Another person might hear those same Scriptures and begin to weep. But neither anger nor tears, by themselves, tell us whether that person has actually humbled themselves before God.

Paul makes this distinction in **2 Corinthians 7:10**, where he writes,

"For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death."

You see, the issue isn't simply whether God's Word has made us feel something. The question is what we do when his Word exposes our sin.

I understand that probably nobody here would look at the anger of these religious leaders and mistake it for a genuine response of repentance. I mean, these men are grinding their teeth in fury! But I think the point still stands, because we can just as easily make the opposite mistake. We can see someone weeping, or getting excited, or becoming deeply emotional over the preaching of God's Word, and assume that because they've been moved

emotionally, they've somehow been changed spiritually.

But Awakening… it's not the emotion itself that tells us whether someone has received the Word of God. Whether the emotion appears to be against the truth, like the anger of these men, or seems to agree with the truth, like someone weeping over their sin… the emotion itself isn't what we trust.

We trust God's Word, and we trust the God who gave us that Word! And we look for the fruit of genuine repentance and faith, not just the strength of someone's emotional response.

Church… we can cry all the puppy dog tears in the world, or we can grind our teeth in anger. But if neither response leads us to repentance, then neither one is evidence that our hearts have been changed by God.

And that's what we're seeing in these men. They've heard the truth, but instead of receiving it, they're rejecting it. And as we continue through the passage, we're going to see just how far that rejection will go.

2. The Revelation (v55–56)

2.1 The Spirit and the Glory (v55)

Now let's look at **verse 55,** and see how Luke begins to contrast this response. He starts by saying, “But he, full of the Holy Spirit…” In verse 54, we have these religious leaders absolutely consumed with anger and hatred toward Stephen. But here in verse 55, Luke tells us that Stephen is full of the Holy Spirit.

And think back to what Stephen just accused these men of in verse 51. He told them that they always resist the Holy Spirit. And now here they are, opposing a man who is full of that very same Spirit! On one side, we have men resisting the Holy Spirit, and on the other, we have a man who is full of him.

Now this isn't the first time Luke has described Stephen this way. If you remember back in Acts chapter 6, when the apostles instructed the congregation to select seven men to serve

the church, they were to choose men who were full of the Spirit and wisdom. And in **Acts 6:5**, Stephen was specifically identified as a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit.

So this isn't something new that Luke is telling us about Stephen. He's reminding us of something that was already true of him. But here's what I find so remarkable about it… Stephen is still full of the Holy Spirit, even as these men are preparing to kill him!

Now Awakening… I want us to think about that for a moment. Because there's a very popular idea in Christianity today that if we're faithful to God, if we're walking in obedience, if we're full of the Holy Spirit, then somehow God is obligated to make our lives easier. That his blessing will necessarily result in prosperity, happiness, good health, or protection from suffering.

But Awakening… look at Stephen! Here's a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. He's faithfully proclaimed God's Word, and he's standing before these religious leaders as a witness to Jesus Christ. And what is about to happen to him? He's about to be killed!

And Awakening… I think there's something else worth recognizing here. Because we live in a world where, whenever a Christian confronts someone with their sin, we're often told, "You can't judge me! Only God can judge me!" And people will even appeal to Jesus' words in Matthew 7, where he says, "Judge not, that you be not judged."

But that doesn't mean Christians are forbidden from identifying sin or calling people to repentance! Jesus goes on in that very passage to condemn hypocritical judgment, and then tells us to remove the log from our own eye so that we can see clearly to help our brother remove the speck from his.

And think about what we've just read! Stephen is described as a man full of the Holy Spirit, and he's just spent nearly an entire chapter confronting these religious leaders with their rebellion against God! So clearly, being full of the Holy Spirit doesn't mean we never confront anyone with their sin.

But here's the distinction… we don't get to make up our own standard of righteousness, and we certainly don't get to approach others as though we're somehow above them. We confront sin according to God's Word, with humility, and with the desire that sinners would turn from their sin and find mercy in Jesus Christ.

The goal isn't to condemn people according to our own judgment. It's to call them to repentance according to God's Word.

Something else to know about being full of the Holy Spirit is that it didn't mean Stephen was going to escape suffering. It didn't mean God was going to prevent these men from harming him. But it also didn't mean that God had abandoned him.

And that's something I want us to understand. God's faithfulness to his people isn't measured by whether he delivers them from every hardship they face. Sometimes he delivers his people out of suffering, and sometimes he sustains them through it. But in either case, his faithfulness hasn't changed.

Now look at what Luke tells us next. Stephen "gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God."

Think about what that means! While these men are standing before Stephen, filled with fury and hatred, God grants him this extraordinary vision of heavenly glory. Stephen is permitted to see something that would ordinarily be hidden from human sight.

And I think there's a beautiful connection here to the beginning of Stephen's defense. Remember how he opened his speech back in **Acts 7:2**? He said, "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham."

Stephen began his defense by speaking about the God of glory who appeared to Abraham. And now, as his own life is coming to an end, Luke tells us that Stephen himself sees the glory of God!

Now we need to be careful here. This was an extraordinary revelation that God gave to Stephen. We shouldn't read this passage and think that every Christian who suffers persecution should expect to look into heaven and receive a vision like this. God hasn't promised us that.

But that doesn't mean this revelation has nothing to teach us about our own confidence in Christ. Because even though we haven't been given the same vision Stephen received, we have been given the inspired testimony of what he saw! We don't get the same vision, but we have the same Christ! So, through this recorded testimony of Stephen, God is showing us something about the Savior in whom we also trust!

Look at the end of verse 55. Luke tells us that Stephen saw "Jesus standing at the right hand of God."

Awakening… don't miss the significance of that! These religious leaders had rejected Jesus. They had condemned him and handed him over to be crucified. But Jesus wasn't still in the

grave! He had risen from the dead, ascended into heaven, and was now at the right hand of God!

That’s language of authority and exaltation, it's the place of honor and rule. Remember what Peter told us back in Acts chapter 2? God had raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him at his right hand. Jesus isn't waiting until Stephen dies to become King. He's not waiting for his enemies to stop persecuting his church before he begins to reign. He's already reigning, even while Stephen is standing before these men!

Christ is King right now!

And that means the hatred of these religious leaders hasn't changed who Jesus is. Their rejection hasn't overturned his authority. And the suffering of his servant, Stephen, hasn't somehow removed him from his place at the right hand of God.

But there's something even more significant about Stephen's vision that I want us to see. Because in verse 56, Stephen is going to tell these men exactly what he's looking at. And when we understand the title he uses for Jesus, and what Jesus himself had previously told the Jewish council, the significance of this moment becomes even greater.

2.2 The Son of Man at God's Right Hand (v56)

Now let's look at **verse 56**. Now verse 55 told us what Stephen saw, but here in verse 56, Luke tells us what Stephen actually said about it. And I want us to recognize that Stephen isn't keeping this vision to himself. He's declaring what he sees to the very men who have rejected his testimony and are now absolutely furious with him!

He begins with the word “Behold!” In other words... pay attention to what I'm telling you! Stephen is calling their attention to something of tremendous significance. He tells them that he sees the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

Now remember, this isn't Stephen simply looking up into the sky. God has allowed him to see something that would ordinarily be hidden from human sight. And what Stephen sees is the exalted Jesus Christ!

But there's something here that I really want us to understand. Because Stephen doesn't simply say that he sees Jesus. He specifically calls him “the Son of Man.” And Awakening… that title is incredibly important!

If you've spent much time reading through the Gospels, you'll recognize that the Son of Man is the title Jesus frequently used when speaking about himself. But we need to ask, where does that title come from? And... why would Stephen use it here, standing before the Jewish council?

If we want to understand that, we need to turn back to Daniel chapter 7 for just a moment. (Chapter 7 Verses 13-14)

In Daniel 7:13–14, the prophet Daniel describes a vision that God gave him. And listen to what he says.

Daniel 7:13–14 “I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”

Now Awakening… I want you to pay close attention to what's happening in that passage. Because sometimes people read about the Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven and immediately assume Daniel is describing Jesus returning to earth.

But look carefully at the direction he's traveling! The Son of Man is coming TO the Ancient of Days! He's being presented before God, and thats when he's receiving dominion, glory, and an everlasting kingdom!

Daniel is describing the Son of Man receiving royal authority. And that kingdom isn't temporary. It isn't going to be overturned by some earthly ruler. Daniel tells us that his dominion is everlasting and his kingdom will never be destroyed!

Now think about what Stephen is saying in Acts chapter 7. He looks into heaven and declares that he sees the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!

Do you see the connection? The Son of Man that Daniel saw receiving an everlasting kingdom is Jesus Christ! The very same Jesus these religious leaders rejected and crucified has been raised from the dead, exalted into heaven, and given dominion and authority!

And on top of the vision in Daniel, this is where **Psalm 110:1** becomes important as well, because David writes,

“The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’”

So Daniel describes the Son of Man receiving an everlasting kingdom, and Psalm 110 describes the Lord's anointed reigning at God's right hand. And here in Acts 7, Stephen is declaring that Jesus is that promised King!

Now there's something else here that I think makes this even more remarkable… remember when Jesus himself was standing before the Jewish council? He had been arrested, and the religious leaders were questioning him about who he claimed to be...and listen to what Jesus told them.

Luke 22:69 “But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God.”

Now, Awakening… think about that for a moment.

Jesus stood before the Jewish council and told them that the Son of Man would be seated at the right hand of God. And how did those religious leaders respond? They rejected his testimony! They condemned him, and he was eventually handed over to be crucified.

But now, here we are in Acts chapter 7. Stephen is standing before the Jewish council, and what does he tell them?

“I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”

Do you see what's happening here, Awakening?

Jesus was telling the truth!

The very thing Jesus told them would happen is exactly what Stephen now declares that he sees! The man they condemned as a blasphemer has been vindicated by God himself!

And church… think about the contrast. Here on earth, Stephen is standing before men who believe they have the authority to judge him. But in heaven, the very Jesus they've rejected is reigning with all authority!

These men can reject Stephen's testimony, they can condemn him, they can even take his life. But they can't overturn what God has done in exalting his Son!

And that's what I want us to carry with us as we continue through this passage. Because the council has now heard something even more offensive to them than Stephen's earlier accusations. He's not simply telling them that they were wrong to reject Jesus. He's declaring that the Jesus they rejected is alive, exalted, and reigning at God's right hand!

And in the very next verse, we're going to see how they respond to that testimony.

3. The Rebellion (v57–58)

3.1 The Refusal and the Rush (v57)

Now let's look at **verse 57**, and see how these religious leaders respond to Stephen's declaration about Jesus.

And I think it's safe to say they didn't receive Stephen's testimony very well! If we remember, back in verse 54, these men were already enraged by Stephen's accusations against them. But now he's told them that the very Jesus they rejected and crucified is alive and reigning at the right hand of God! And rather than considering what he's saying, they absolutely lose control!

Luke tells us that they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears. In other words, they were shouting and covering their ears because they refused to listen to another word Stephen had to say!

If we think back to what Stephen accused these men of in verse 51. He told them, "You always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you."

And what are they doing right now? They're literally covering their ears to keep from hearing the testimony of a man who is full of the Holy Spirit!

Awakening… they're demonstrating the very rebellion Stephen has just accused them of!

And this isn't the first time we've seen this kind of behavior in Scripture. In **Zechariah 7:11**, God describes Israel's ancestors refusing to pay attention to his Word, turning a stubborn shoulder, and stopping their ears so they wouldn't hear. And here we are, centuries later, watching these religious leaders do the very same thing!

But it doesn't stop with just covering their ears. Luke tells us that they "rushed together at him." Their hatred has now moved beyond angry words and deliberate refusal to listen… they're physically turning against Stephen.

That's where their rejection of Christ has brought them. They hated Stephen when he confronted them with their sin, and now they're moving to kill him after he declares the glory of their Savior.

They may be refusing to hear the truth about Jesus Christ, but their refusal doesn't make that truth any less true! And as we move into verse 58, we're going to see just how far these men are willing to go in their rebellion against God.

3.2 The Stones and the Witnesses (v58)

Now let's look at **verse 58**, where Luke tells us what happens next. This is where their hatred of Stephen finally leads them… They drag him outside the city, and they begin stoning him to death, and I want us to recognize how quickly their sin has progressed throughout this passage.

In verse 54, their hearts were filled with rage. In verse 57, that rage became open hostility and physical aggression. And now, here in verse 58, it has become murder! Phillip so often describes for us the progression of sin, and here we see it in action… because what began as anger has ended with the taking of an innocent man's life.

And Awakening… we shouldn't be surprised by that connection. Jesus himself teaches us in **Matthew 5:21–22** that unrighteous anger and murder come from the same sinful heart.

Now... that doesn't mean every time we get angry we're going to murder someone. But it does mean we shouldn't treat sinful anger as though it's some harmless little problem in our lives!

Because what comes out of us reveals what's going on inside of us! And that's exactly what we're seeing with these religious leaders. The hatred that was already present in their hearts has now revealed itself in the murder of an innocent man!

But there's another detail here that I want us to notice. Luke tells us that the witnesses laid their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. Out of nowhere… Luke mentions witnesses?

And he does this because in the Law of Moses, **Deuteronomy 17:6–7** required witnesses in capital cases, and those witnesses were to be the first to carry out the execution. So when Luke tells us that they laid down their garments, these aren't simply people standing around watching what's happening. They're preparing to participate in Stephen's death.

And they place their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. If you've read through the book of Acts before, you already know who this young man is! This is Saul of Tarsus, the man who will eventually become the apostle Paul!

But that's not who Saul is right now. Right now, he's standing with the men who are killing Stephen. And when we get into chapter 8, Luke is going to tell us that Saul actually approved of Stephen's execution!

Now think this through with me… Here is Stephen, being killed because he testified that Jesus Christ is alive and reigning at God's right hand. And standing nearby is a young man who will eventually devote his own life to proclaiming that very same Christ!

… the King who reigns over Stephen's suffering is powerful enough not only to defeat his enemies, but to save them!

And there's something else here that we shouldn't miss. Stephen has just seen Jesus reigning at God's right hand, but now he's being stoned to death!

How do we make sense of that? Has Christ somehow lost control? Answer… Of course not!

… the King doesn't have to prevent every act of suffering in order to demonstrate that he is sovereign over it!

These men are responsible for their wickedness, but they're not more powerful than the

Savior who reigns over them!

The King who sustains Stephen in his suffering is still reigning, even as the stones are falling!

And as we move into verse 59, we're going to see where Stephen places his confidence while those stones are falling.

4. The Reception (v59–60)

4.1 The Prayer and the Savior (v59)

Here we begin to see something remarkable about Stephen's confidence in Jesus Christ in **verse 59**.

Now Awakening… think about what's happening here. These men are literally stoning Stephen to death! And what does Stephen do? He calls out to the Lord Jesus!

Up to this point, Stephen has been testifying **about** the exalted Christ. But now, as he's dying, he's speaking directly to that same Christ!

And we should notice what he asks... He doesn't ask Jesus to stop the stones, or to punish the men who are killing him. Instead, he prays, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

Awakening… his enemies are taking his life, but Stephen is entrusting himself to his Savior! And there's an important connection here to the death of Jesus himself. Remember what Jesus prayed from the cross? Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!

Now look again at Stephen's prayer. Jesus entrusted his spirit to the Father, but Stephen entrusts his spirit to Jesus!

Do you see the significance of that? Stephen isn't simply remembering the teachings of a man who has died. He's praying to the living Son of God, trusting that Jesus has the authority to receive him even in death!

And Awakening… that's where our confidence needs to be too!

Because… unless Christ returns first, every one of us is going to face death. And when that day comes, it won't matter how strong we thought we were, how courageous we imagined we'd be, or how well we believed we could endure suffering!

ONLY ONE THING WILL ULTIMATELY MATTER… whether we belong to the Savior who has conquered death!

And that's the wonderful hope we have in Jesus Christ! **Philippians 1:23** tells us that to depart this life is to be with Christ!

Death may separate us from the people we love. It may bring an end to everything we've known in this life. **But death can't separate a believer from Jesus Christ!**

And that's what we're seeing with Stephen! His enemies can take his life, but they cannot take his Savior!

Stephen isn't being delivered from death. He's being received by the King who has already conquered it!

That's where our hope must rest. Not in our ability to endure death, but in Christ's power to receive us through it!

And in verse 60, we're going to hear one final prayer from Stephen before Luke tells us that he falls asleep.

4.2 The Mercy and the Sleep (v60)

Now we're almost at the end, let's look at **verse 60**, where Luke records Stephen's final words.

These verses have been filled with contrasts, and I want you to think about the contrast here. Remember back in verse 57, when these religious leaders cried out with a loud voice? They were shouting in anger, refusing to hear another word about Jesus Christ… but here in verse 60, Stephen also cries out with a loud voice. And what does he say?

“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

Awakening… they're crying out in hatred against Stephen, but Stephen is crying out to God for mercy upon them!

Remember what we said earlier about what comes out of us revealing what's going on inside of us? Well, think about what's happening to Stephen. These men are literally crushing him with stones! And when Stephen is pressed to the very end of his life, what comes out of him?

Not hatred.

Not a demand for vengeance.

But a prayer for mercy upon the very men who are killing him!

Doesn't that remind us of someone? Remember what Jesus prayed from the cross? “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Now we all know that Stephen isn't another Savior. His death isn't accomplishing redemption for anyone. But what we're seeing here is the grace of Jesus Christ at work in a man who really belongs to him… the same Holy Spirit who has filled Stephen throughout this account is producing in him a response that reflects the character of his Savior!

And did you notice that Stephen doesn't pretend these men are innocent? He calls what they're doing **sin**! He's asking God to show mercy to men who are guilty of murdering him!

Can we take one moment and really think about what Stephen is actually asking God to do?

How could God possibly forgive men who are guilty of murdering an innocent man?

It’s not because this sin isn’t that serious, and it's not because God simply overlooks their wickedness!

It's because Jesus Christ has accomplished everything necessary to save even the worst

of sinners!

And here's the thing… the very Savior these men are rejecting is the only Savior through who they could ever receive the forgiveness Stephen is praying for!

We don't know the story of everyone in the crowd here in the text… But we know that Christ will eventually show that kind of mercy to at least one man associated with Stephen's death… Saul of Tarsus!

What a Savior!

Look at how Luke ends this account… he doesn't say Stephen was destroyed, he doesn't even just say that Stephen died, he says, "he fell asleep."

That doesn't mean Stephen's soul became unconscious. We just heard him ask Jesus to receive his spirit, and the scripture teaches us that believers who die are with Christ.

But why does Luke describe his death as sleep? Answer… because death isn't the end of the story for those who belong to Jesus Christ!

Death is still an enemy! But for those who belong to Christ, **it's a defeated enemy!**

Just like someone who falls asleep will wake up, those who die in Christ will one day be raised bodily from the grave!

Awakening… that's the promise of the resurrection!

Stephen's enemies have taken his life. From their perspective, they've silenced him. They've won!

But I ask you… have they?

They've killed his body, but they haven't separated him from his Savior!

And the very King who receives Stephen in death will one day raise him from the grave!

Because Awakening...

5. Application And Call To Christ

As we bring this sermon to a close, I want us to think about something… because after everything we've just seen, it would be really easy for us to walk away from this passage thinking primarily about Stephen.

We could walk away talking about how courageous he was, how faithfully he stood before these religious leaders, or how remarkably he prayed for the very men who were killing him!

And Awakening… those things are remarkable!

But who is the book of Acts about?

If we walk away from this text impressed with Stephen and not overwhelmed by Jesus Christ, then we've missed the greatest truth in this account!

Because… Stephen isn't the Savior in this story!

He's the servant who belongs to the Savior!

And that's why his final prayer is so important.

He didn't cry out, “Lord, look how faithfully I've served you!”

He didn't plead with Jesus to remember how courageously he'd stood before the council!

He cried out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!”

And that's where our hope must rest too!

Not in the strength of the servant, but in the faithfulness of the King!

I pray that each of us would honor Christ in our final moments, whether that comes under the stones of persecution or under the sheets of our own beds.

But our confidence isn't in how courageously we might face death.

Our confidence is in the King who has already conquered death!

And if you're here this morning and you don't belong to Jesus Christ, I want you to consider something.

The religious leaders in this passage heard the truth about Jesus, and they rejected him. They refused to hear the testimony of the very Savior they desperately needed!

And that same Jesus is alive and reigning today!

The question isn't whether Jesus Christ is King, because he is!

The question is whether you belong to him!

One day, every one of us will stand before the King whose testimony these men rejected.

And apart from Jesus Christ, we have no hope of forgiveness, no hope of escaping the judgment our sins deserve, and no hope of everlasting life!

So don't harden your heart against him!

Repent of your sins and trust in the crucified and risen Savior!

And for those of us who belong to Christ… hear this...

The King who sustained Stephen in his suffering is the same King who will receive us when we die!

And one day, that same King will raise us bodily from the grave!

And that's **the great hope** of every Christian… of Stephen… of you… and of me!

And Awakening… **WHAT A WONDERFUL THING IT IS TO HAVE HOPE!**

I can't think of a more damnable word than hopelessness!

To have no hope! No promise of anything better! Nothing to look forward to but the judgment of God!

HOPELESSNESS BELONGS IN HELL!

That's where it belongs… captured there for all eternity, away from Christ and those who belong to him!

BUT CHURCH… WE BELONG TO CHRIST!

And in Christ, we have the very opposite of hopelessness!

WE HAVE HOPE!

Just as darkness is the absence of light, hopelessness is the absence of hope!

But Christ is a **FOUNTAINHEAD OF HOPE!**

Not some wish that things might work out, but the sure promises of God! Promises that are just as certain today as they will be when we stand before him in eternity!

That's where Stephen got his hope!

AND THAT'S WHERE WE GET OURS!

Stephen died with that hope!

And I intend to live in it until Christ calls me home!

Because even as the stones were falling, **HE WAS STILL KING!**

And Awakening… that same Jesus is reigning today!

The King who sustained Stephen in his suffering!

The King who received him in death!

And the King who will one day raise him from the grave...

IS THE VERY SAME KING IN WHOM WE HAVE OUR HOPE!

AND THAT KING, RECEIVES HIS SERVANTS!

6. Questions For Study

Please be encouraged to use these questions for reflection throughout the week and Awakening discipleship group discussions.

1. When God's Word exposes our sin, how can we distinguish genuine repentance from simply being emotionally affected by what we've heard?

2. How should the fact that Jesus Christ is reigning right now change the way we understand suffering, especially when God **doesn't** deliver his people from it?

3. What does Stephen's prayer for the men who were murdering him show us about the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, and how should that challenge the way we respond when others sin against us?

4. Stephen's final prayer was, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” What does that teach us about where our confidence actually rests, both in life and in death? What things in your life are

in sinful competition with Jesus for our confidence?

5. If we can walk away from Stephen's martyrdom impressed by Stephen rather than overwhelmed by Jesus Christ, how might we be making that same mistake in other areas of our Christian lives? (Fathers, Mothers, Husbands, Wives, Pastors, Online Bible teachers?)

Questions for small children during family devotion:

Please be encouraged to use these questions in family devotion throughout the week, especially for young minds learning about Christ.

1. Why were the religious leaders so angry with Stephen?
   Parent guided answer: Because Stephen told them the truth about their sin and about Jesus Christ. Instead of listening and repenting, they became angry. When God's Word shows us that we've sinned, we should humble ourselves, repent, and ask God for forgiveness.

2. Who did Stephen see when he looked into heaven?
   Parent guided answer: Stephen saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God! Jesus had risen from the dead and was reigning as King.

3. Did Jesus stop the men from hurting Stephen? Does that mean Jesus had stopped caring for him?
   Parent guided answer: No, Jesus didn't stop the men from killing Stephen. But that didn't mean Jesus had stopped loving or caring for him! Jesus was still King, and he was still in control. Sometimes God allows his people to suffer, but he never abandons those who belong to him.

4. What did Stephen ask Jesus to do when he was dying?
   Parent guided answer: Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Stephen knew that even though his body was dying, he would be with Jesus. Everyone who trusts in Jesus Christ has that same wonderful hope! And one day, Jesus will raise his people from the dead!

5. Who is the real hero of this story, Stephen or Jesus? Why?
   Parent guided answer: Jesus! Stephen was a faithful servant, but Jesus is the Savior! Stephen couldn't save himself from death, but Jesus had already conquered death through his resurrection. Stephen's hope wasn't in how brave or good he was. His hope was in Jesus Christ! And that's where our hope must be too!