

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this study guide is to facilitate the study of Acts 7:54-8:3 as a supplement to the sermon. It is based on my (Michael's) study and meditation on the passage. This handout can be used for personal study or community group conversation. (I hope you join a group!)

## ACTS 7:54-8:3 ESV

*54 Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. 55 But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." 57 But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. 58 Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep. 8:1 And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. 3 But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.*

## GENERAL COMMENTARY:

This section provides the climactic point of Stephen's long sermon: Jesus, the Son of Man, shares the Father's glory in the heavenly temple.

The first 53 verses of Stephen's sermon displayed how God binds Himself not to a place, but to His people through covenant. After condemning God's supposed covenant people for having "uncircumcised... ears" (7:51), Stephen's enemies confirmed his testimony. They "stopped their ears and rushed together at him" (7:57). This comes in response to Stephen's vision of Jesus at the Father's right hand (7:55-56). In sharing the Father's glory, Jesus is positioned as the king who reigns over not just Jerusalem but all the earth. In addition, Jesus is the priest who intercedes for Stephen from the Father's right hand (cf. Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25) and vindicates him, standing in honor of Stephen. Jesus, our priest-king, stands by those who stand with Him.

Stephen stands with Christ with a remarkably Christ-like death, even mirroring Jesus' final two prayers. Luke interlocks Stephen's final prayer for forgiveness of his enemies with an introduction to the church's gravest enemy, Saul. Jesus will answer Stephen's prayer by forgiving this missionary-of-death and transforming him into the greatest missionary-of-life that the world has ever seen.

### **54 Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.**

--Their "uncircumcised... ears" (7:51) heard sounds, but they did not understand their spiritual meaning. As Paul says of unbelievers (whom he calls, "natural"), "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14).

--"enraged" (Gk. *diaprio*):

- Used also in Acts 5:33 of the apostles' persecutors.
- The word literally means, "to saw asunder." Figuratively, it means the Council was emotionally torn in two by Stephen's words. They were undone.
- Why were they so angry? Because Stephen basically called them unbelievers with righteous blood on their hands (7:51-53). Nobody likes to be told they are wrong. Most people get defensive over the slightest accusation. Their anger is understandable, even if it is rooted in spiritual dullness and moral perversion.
- Preachers of God's Word must be bold enough to call out sin. I am reminded of John Chrysostom, the "gold-mouthed" preacher of antiquity who drew crowds through his verse-by-verse preaching (he preached through books of the Bible like we do, including: Genesis, Psalms, Matthew, John, Acts, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Paul's Epistles), yet he didn't shy away from saying hard things, condemning the greedy aristocrats in his church for abusing wealth and power. Church historian.

- Philip Schaff says of him: "he was a martyr of the pulpit, for it was chiefly his faithful preaching that caused his exile." Chrysostom ended his life deposed of his pulpit, exiled to Armenia. When that wasn't far enough, they banished him to a more remote land, but the exhausting journey killed him.

--"ground their teeth at him":

- You have to be pretty angry to grind your teeth. When you reach this point, you're probably making noises. Stephen's enemies are beastly. I imagine them growling and grunting with rage so explosive that it they can't expel it fast enough.
- Throughout the Scripture, this language only applies to unbelievers (Job 16:9; Ps. 35:16; 112:10; Matt. 8:12; 13:42, 50; etc.).

***55 But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."***

--"But": in contrast to their unrighteous rage, Stephen displays holy calm. Their faces are red with anger, but his is angelic (6:15).

--"full of the Holy Spirit":

- Stephen never breaks character from his table serving days, where Luke describes him the same way. Stephen is the same Stephen he ever was. What you see is what you get.
- Luke does not want us to miss this characteristic of Stephen! He has been described as "full of the Spirit" in 6:3 as a trait belonging to "the Seven" original table servers; of the Seven, Stephen is marked as being particularly "full of the Spirit" (6:5); in 6:10, they cannot withstand the "the Spirit with which he is speaking." Now, Stephen is "full of the Holy Spirit" when he receives a vision.
- Stephen's life is utterly characterized by the Spirit of God. He displays the character fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), and the ministry of the Spirit flows through him—in miracles (6:8), in irrefutable preaching (6:10), and in visions from heaven (7:55).
- O God, give us lives so marked by Your Spirit! May Your Spirit bear character fruit in our lives and empower our ministries.
- The reason Stephen's life looked so much like Jesus is that he was so full of the Spirit. The more we have of the Spirit, the more we have of Jesus. The two—or I should say, the Triune three—are a package deal. To have one is to have all, for God is one.
- Stott: "His death was full of Christ. Luke records three further sentences which he spoke, the first of which referred to Christ, while the remaining two were addressed to Christ."

--"gazed into heaven":

- The Council "gazed" (Gk. *atenizo*) at him, "and they saw his face, which was like the face of an angel" (6:15).
- Stephen "gazed" (Gk. *atenizo*) into heaven "and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (7:55).
- It seems that Luke intentionally links these words. Not only are they the same Greek word, but they come at an intense moment, immediately after strong opposition. Why would Luke link these two verses in Stephen's final moments?
  - First, it shows that Stephen's eyes are on Jesus as his advocate, in contrast to the Council's eyes, which are on Stephen as their enemy. Whenever enemies oppose us, our eyes must stay fixed on Jesus. The temptation is to divert our attention from Jesus and focus on them.
  - Second, it shows that Jesus vindicates us before our enemies if we keep focused on Him and preaching Him.
  - Third, it portrays Stephen as a Moses figure whose face shines—but with even greater revelation. Stephen beholds Jesus at the right hand of God, which Moses did not see. Thus, the revelation of 7:55 rounds out the image of 6:15. Stephen's face shines like an angel because he's looking into heaven's throne room, where the Father and Son dwell in glory.
    - This reminds me of 2 Corinthians. After talking about Moses' face shining with glory, Paul depicts the greater New Covenant glory available to us (2 Cor. 3). Then he says this: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).
    - In other words, we have seen the glory of God in Jesus. The more we behold God's glory in Him—with "unveiled face"—the more we become like Him (see 2 Cor. 3:18 quoted below).

- 2 Cor. 3:18: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."
- Stephen looks like Jesus because he looks to Jesus! When we look to Jesus, He transforms us by the Spirit.

--"saw the glory of God":

- We are reminded of the prior usage of this term in Stephen's sermon. Acts 7:2: "The **God of glory** appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran."
- In context, Stephen was showing that God binds Himself not to a place, but to a people, through covenant. He appeared to Abraham not in a temple, but in Mesopotamia; in Sin City; in Babylon. Furthermore, the language "God of glory" was recognized temple language, which reinforces the point even more that God isn't bound to a temple.
- Now Stephen sees "the glory of God"! Again, this is temple language! He's seeing into the heavenly temple, where the Father and Son dwell and reign. I'm pretty sure the heavenly temple made the Jewish pride-and-joy look drab!
- The Council probably met in the temple precincts somewhere. Yet Stephen saw the true temple in heaven. The contrast between earthly/heavenly temple (or tabernacle) can be seen in the following verses:
  - Heb. 8:1 Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, 2 a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man.
  - Heb. 8:5: They [earthly priests] serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, "See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain."
  - Heb. 9: 11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) 12 he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.
  - Heb. 9:23 Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. 24 For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

--"and Jesus standing at the right hand of God... Behold... I see the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God"

- "Behold":
  - Stephen expects them to be able to see the same vision if they will only look. But they won't look to heaven like Stephen; instead, they only look at Stephen, their enemy.
  - The promise of Pentecost—dreams and visions—is realized in Stephen.
- We typically think of Jesus' position at the Father's right hand as depicting His royal status. This is not wrong—He's on a throne—but it is incomplete. The image likewise indicates Jesus' priestly status. This is clear from the above quote of Hebrews 8:1-2, which itself is rooted in Psalm 110:1. Jesus is a royal priest.
- Typically, priests came from Levi and kings from Judah. But Jesus is both a king and a priest like Melchizedek was (Gen. 14:18; Ps. 110:1).
- In Jewish thought, God's temple was also His throne. We separate the two in our minds, but they could envision no separation. After all, wherever God dwells, He also reigns.
- This is why the ark of the covenant is envisioned as a footstool to God's throne (1 Chron. 28:2; cf. Ps. 99:5).
- Schnabel: "Jewish leaders would have regarded as blasphemy the proposition that Jesus can be seen in God's presence sharing the glory of God."
- The key question, of course, is why is Jesus "standing" at the Father's right hand? In Psalm 110:1, Jesus is *seated* at the Father's right hand. In theology, we call this the "session of Christ." Jesus is seated because His work of redemption is complete. He sits and waits for His enemies to be made a footstool (Heb. 10:12-13), as His finished work on the Cross (Heb. 10:14) consummates upon His return (1 Cor. 15:20-28).
- But why is He standing here?
  - Some people suggest Jesus is standing to help Stephen, like a fellow athlete helping him finish his race. But I don't think so. Jesus is portrayed as interceding for us while *seated* at

the Father's right hand (Rom. 8:34). It is from this position that His priestly intercession continues. There is no indication that Jesus needs to stand to pray. I can only agree with this interpretation insofar as Jesus is helping Stephen—by His priestly intercession—but Jesus did not need to stand to pray. He stands for another reason.

- Jesus is standing in approval of Stephen. He stands like a gallery rises to its feet as the final putt sinks for the win. He stands to receive Stephen. In a related way, He stands to vindicate Stephen in heaven's court, even as the earthly court condemns him.
- Stott (quoting Bruce): "Stephen has been confessing Christ before men, and now he sees Christ confessing his servant before God."
- Schreiner: "he stands as the Son of Man (see v. 56) in a law-court setting vindicating Stephen and declaring him innocent.... A person stands to welcome those with whom they are pleased (1 Esd. 4:47), and those who rendered verdicts did so standing."
- Why is Jesus called the "Son of Man"?
  - Jesus refers to Himself by this name many times (78x)—even more than He calls Himself, "Son of God" (65x).
  - In colloquial terms, "son of man" simply means that Jesus is human (cf. Ps. 144:3). He is born of a woman, like all of us. As such, Jesus' priestly ministry is emphasized, for only a priest could mediate between God and man. 1 Tim. 2:5: "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus." Jesus is God the Son, but He is also a man. Possessing both divine and human nature, He is the perfect mediator. By calling Jesus, "Son of Man," His priestly ministry is emphasized. Jesus is our Great High Priest, who intercedes for Stephen in his final breaths from the right hand of God.
  - The name, Son of Man, comes from 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." Daniel's vision is of Jesus' ascension—one of the great themes of Acts, where Jesus is the ascended One, working and teaching through His church by the Spirit. In Daniel's vision, the "son of man" comes before "the Ancient of Days"—God the Father—and is "presented before him" after ascending from earth to heaven. The Father gives "to him... dominion and glory and a kingdom..." that is "everlasting" and characterized by "all peoples, nations, and languages" worshiping Him. This is a rare glimpse into the Trinity in the Old Testament, where two distinct Persons are portrayed as worthy of worship. Notably, this scene happens immediately after the "beast" is killed (Dan. 7:11). The beast that blasphemed and killed God's people is judged by God the Father and conquered by God the Son. That's the context for Stephen's "son of man" name. Stephen references Daniel 7 because Jesus is the ascended Son of Man who conquered the murderous beast on the Cross. In a way, that beastly life is "prolonged for a time" (Dan. 7:12; cf. Rev. 13:1-3)—which explains Stephen's murder at the hands of beastly rulers—but Jesus has already conquered them. He is "the ruler of the kings of the earth" (Rev. 1:5). Now He waits for His enemies to be made His footstool. (Sorry, I can't get too much into defining the "beast"—that would be a whole book! Which... I am very slowly writing 😊).
  - Thus, not only does "Son of Man" emphasize Jesus' priestly ministry; it also emphasizes His victory over beastly governing powers. It appears that Stephen's (and Jesus') enemies triumphed, but in the courtroom of heaven (7:10: "the court sat in judgment"), victory belongs to Jesus and His worshipers. This understanding validates my interpretation that Jesus stood in to vindicate Stephen in heaven's court.

--"I see the heavens opened":

- One is reminded of Isaiah 64:1-2: "Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence--as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil--to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence!"
- God is rending the heavens to make His name known to His adversaries, like we read in Isaiah 64. Only this time, God's "adversaries" are not the Gentiles, but the Jews! Jesus has, in a sense, redefined God's people. God's people are those who worship the exalted Jesus. The reason I say, "in a sense," is that the Jews always worshiped Yahweh. They just didn't know that Yahweh would become the man from Nazareth (see Phil. 2:9-11, cross-referenced with Isa. 45:22-25, to observe

how Paul refers to Yahweh as Jesus). Thus, there is a sense in which the Jews always worshiped Jesus. They just didn't yet have the revelation we do.

--In light of Christ's position at the Father's right hand, of His title as "Son of Man," and of the rending of the heavens, we should understand this vision as a glimpse of the heavenly temple, where Christ performs His priestly intercession on Stephen's behalf, and where Christ stands to vindicate Stephen from the throne of judgment.

--This vision of Christ in the temple is significant, first, because Stephen's whole sermon was about how God binds Himself not to a place, but to a covenant people. He was never bound to a place. Christ's heavenly temple displays that His priesthood extends to "all peoples, nations, and languages" (Dan. 7:14)—not just the Jews.

--Second, the vision of Christ in the temple is significant because Acts is the story of the exalted Christ who continues "to do and teach" from this location (Acts 1:1). Jesus' temple-throne is the headquarters of planet earth. And the church is His army. As the Father says to the Son in Psalm 110—the same passage that speaks of His session and royal priesthood—"Your people will volunteer freely on the day of Your power." The church is the volunteer army of Jesus. Stephen is its first martyr.

--Schreiner: "Stephen's vision substantiates the argument of his speech: God dwells in heaven and over all creation, not in a man-made temple."

***57 But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. 58 Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.***

--They "stopped their ears" because they had "uncircumcised... ears" (7:51). They "rushed together at him" not as a just jury after careful deliberation, but as a mob so "enraged" they can't even tolerate speech they disagree with.

--While America has not officially reached this level, faithful believers are familiar with mobs that can't tolerate Christian orthodoxy being communicated. For now, these satanically inspired mobs dogpile people digitally. We pray it stops there and even retreats, but the trajectory will have to change, lest online persecution turns violent.

--"cast him out of the city and stoned him":

- Jesus was crucified outside the city; Stephen is stoned outside the city.
- Jews were not technically permitted by Roman law to execute people. Even with Jesus, they sought Roman approval. Here, they just go for it. It is mob violence.
- Stephen lived like his Lord; Stephen dies like his Lord.
  - Stott: "In both cases [that of Jesus and Stephen] false witnesses were produced and the charge was one of blasphemy. In both cases too the execution was accompanied by two prayers, as each prayed for the forgiveness of his executioners and for the reception of his spirit as he died. This is how the disciple – whether consciously or unconsciously – reflected his Master."
- Heb. 13:10-13: "We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned **outside the camp**. So **Jesus also suffered outside the gate** in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore, let us go to him **outside the camp** and bear the reproach he endured."
- Faithfulness to Jesus requires us to be rejected. Not universally—even Jesus "grew... in favor with God and man" (Lk. 2:52). But someone will reject us if we consistently speak truth to a culture that abhors it.
- Bearing His reproach outside the camp requires us to open our mouths. No one gets persecuted for quiet piety.
- The verb tense explains why some translations render it, "they began stoning" Stephen (NASB, NIV, CSB). The same word is used in 7:59, where we read, "as they were stoning Stephen..." We tend to imagine that in a climactic moment, a thousand stones piled over Stephen's head, and he died instantly. In reality, this took a while—probably not hours, but not just a few minutes. Stones pelted his body for some time before someone landed a big one in a crucial place. This was not a dramatic climax. It was tortuously gradual.

--"witnesses":

- The irony! This word has been used throughout Acts of the "witnesses" of resurrection (Acts 1:8, 22; 2:32; 3:15; etc.). Just as Stephen bears "witness" to Christ's resurrection, murderers rise up to bear false "witness" against Stephen.

- The Greek word for “witness” is “martyr.” Appropriately, Stephen is the first Christian martyr.
  - The word “witness” applied then, as it does now, to courtrooms. In the courtroom of man, Stephen was condemned; in the courtroom of God, He was justified. This ironic use of “witness” further supports my interpretation that Jesus was standing to vindicate Stephen in His heavenly court.
- “laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul”:
- Saul is “young,” but he’s a leader. They laid their garments at his feet as though he was their general.
  - Saul would never forget this fact. Acts 22:30: “And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.”
  - Saul stood in approval of those murdering Stephen; Jesus stood in approval of Stephen.

**59 And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 60 And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.**

--“as they were stoning Stephen”: in the height of their rejection and his torment, Stephen’s lips dripped with tender mercy. In our worst moments, we are usually at our worst. Stephen, like Jesus, was at his best. O Lord, may we be so “full of grace” (6:15) that grace drips from us, even in suffering.

--“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit... Lord, do not hold this sin against them”:

- The main point of these two prayers is that they mirror Jesus’ final prayers on the Cross:
  - Lk. 23:34: “And Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ And they cast lots to divide his garments.”
  - Lk. 23:46: “Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!’ And having said this he breathed his last.”
- Stephen’s death looks just like Jesus’. He is the model witness. As followers of Jesus, we should emulate Stephen’s bold proclamation and his faithfulness unto death. To emulate Stephen is to emulate Jesus. As Paul says, “Follow me as I follow Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1).
- Stephen changes the object of His prayer from the Father to Jesus.
  - Stephen shows that it is acceptable to pray not just to the Father, but to Jesus. Jesus Himself teaches us to pray to the Father (Lk. 11:1), but He does not deny that we should pray to Him too. Jesus and the Father are one (Jn. 10:30; 14:9).
  - Stephen’s prayer again magnifies Jesus’ exaltation to the right hand of the Father. Jesus has the authority to both receive the spirits of the dead and to forgive sin. No other man possesses this authority.
- Stephen had volunteered to serve tables so the apostles could devote themselves to the word of God and prayer (Acts 6:4). Now he concludes his life, not with a sermon before men, but with prayers to Jesus. Stephen’s table service was never a prayer-replacement. It’s not as though some (like the apostles) are called to prayer, while others (like deacons) are called to service. We are all called to both, even if it looks different for each of us.
- Stephen’s final breaths vocalized prayers but so did the breaths that preceded his death. Stephen was a man of prayer, so it makes sense that he died this way.
- One difference between the death of Jesus and Stephen: Jesus prays with a “loud voice” for the Father to receive His spirit; Stephen prays with a “loud voice” for Jesus to forgive his enemies. On a related note, the order of the prayers is different. Jesus finishes by committing His spirit to the Father; Stephen finishes by asking Jesus to forgive. Why these differences?
  - The “loud voice” possibly communicates supernatural strength in one’s waning moments. Victims of crucifixion died slowly and quietly, and I imagine it was the same for those stoned to death. If at first there is noise, it dies down as the life ebbs away.
  - I don’t think we can really know why Jesus and Stephen use their “loud voice” for a different prayer. In the narrative of Acts, however, the “loud voice” coupled with the order—where the prayer for forgiveness comes last—leads right into the story of Saul. It facilitates the flow of the narrative in Acts by emphasizing Stephen’s prayer for forgiveness right before Saul is introduced (more on that in a moment).

--Stephen doesn’t wait till his body heals up before forgiving his enemies. Sometimes we think, “I’ll forgive when it doesn’t hurt anymore.” Stephen and Jesus forgave, even as they bled. If we wait till it doesn’t hurt, we’ll never forgive. In fact, we have the order reversed. We don’t forgive *after* we’re healed; we forgive *so that* we can heal. At least, that’s how it normally works. In Stephen’s case, he forgives with his dying breath, so there isn’t a healing process. Healing happens for Stephen as soon as he closes his eyes.

**8:1 And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. 3 But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.**

--"And Saul approved of his execution":

- This was obvious in 7:58, so mention of Saul's name again is strategic.
- Right after the "forgiveness prayer" of Stephen is emphasized—by volume ("loud voice") and placement in the narrative (his last words)—we read, "And Saul..."
- Why is Saul's name so closely linked to Stephen's prayer of forgiveness? Because Jesus answered Stephen's final prayer! The exalted Christ, who rules heaven and earth and who oversees His volunteer army of empowered witnesses, chooses whom to save—and He saves Saul! Saul's (Paul's) conversion will be told in Acts 9, but insightful readers must not miss Luke's message: the table-server-turned-preacher will turn this missionary of death into a missionary of life! How? By praying to the exalted Christ that his enemies be forgiven.
- What if Stephen held a grudge?! What if he refused to forgive his enemies?! Saul would not have been converted, and what would have become of the church?! O, how powerful forgiveness is! O, that we might be a 'forgiven people' who forgives people, even as we were forgiven. Lord, help us!
  - Note: I'm not suggesting that Saul's conversion depended more on Stephen than it did on God or that the church depends on our obedience. Obviously, God is sovereign. But faith in God's sovereignty does not discount human responsibility. Our actions matter!

--"persecution.... scattered": as we have noted on multiple weeks, the persecution of Stephen ignites Jerusalem like a powder keg, catapulting the Gospel and its ambassadors to the ends of the earth.

--"Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him": why does Luke mention this burial, the devoutness of those who buried Stephen, and their great lamentation? Their "devout" spirituality is significant because burying Stephen would be risky. It shows identification with an outcast. Their "great lamentation" intensifies their identification. Stephen's boldness did not die with Stephen.

--"except the apostles": Some have censured the apostles for not fulfilling the rest of Acts 1:8, where the Gospel is to spread beyond Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. They say the apostles resisted the Great Commission, it took a persecution to shake the church from Jerusalem, and the apostles still wouldn't leave. But there's no way this is true. Luke has displayed repeatedly the faithfulness of the church to devote itself to the Big Four (apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayer). They've resisted the devil and stood firm in persecution. True, the persecution catapulted the Gospel beyond Jerusalem, but the church in Jerusalem was by no means unfaithful. God was offering Jerusalem a last chance to repent before the Gospel spread beyond it. This is a testimony not to the unfaithfulness of the church, but to the faithfulness of God to Abraham's descendants. Furthermore, the apostles remained in Jerusalem because countless thousands of believers depended on their shepherding. Not everyone fled Jerusalem. If anything, the apostles' remaining in Jerusalem testifies to their faithfulness. They risked their lives to stay and care for their flock.

--"But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house":

- Believers met from house to house (2:46); Saul attacks them from house to house.
- "ravaging":
  - "made havoc of the church" (NKJV); "began to destroy the church" (NIV); "laid waste the church" (ASV).
  - Stott (quoting Barclay): the Greek word for "ravaging" (*lumaino*) expresses "a brutal and sadistic cruelty."
- In Acts 9, Paul takes persecution global, for it's on the road to Damascus that he encounters Jesus. Jesus turns this missionary of death into a missionary of life. He who once traveled far to imprison would one day travel to set people free.
- This is fascinating to me. Paul was already a "missionary" of sorts. It was already on his heart to travel for God. God did not remove this from his heart but redeemed it. He corrected Paul's understanding of what mission work should look like by transforming his knowledge of who God is. This makes me think about people like CS Lewis, who was already a writer, but became a writer for God. It seems like unbelievers can have an innate sense about their calling, even if they understand it wrongly or don't have words for it. God loves to redeem what He had already placed on our hearts. Another biblical story this reminds me of is Moses, who had a sense of his calling as a deliverer before he met God in the burning bush (it's unclear whether he was a believer before then).

--"he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison": Paul did not just drag off men but women. Luke's mention of women achieves two things. First, it illustrates Paul's ruthlessness. He does not spare even the "weakest" members of society (women were less than second-class in the ancient world). Second, it highlights women's faithfulness. Women must have been a threat, or else Paul would not have arrested them. The Gospel spread on their lips, just as it did on the men's. The promise of a universal Pentecost upon young and old, rich and poor, male and female has been realized. The Spirit has been poured out on all flesh. Everyone gets to play.