

When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.⁵⁶ “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

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

⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep. (NIV84)

Theme: Jesus has not Left You Alone

1. Our Ascended Lord is watching over you
2. Our Ascended Lord will take you home

It was Maundy Thursday. Jesus was sitting in the upper room with his disciples. He knew that in less than a day he would be betrayed, arrested, beaten, flogged, and eventually murdered on a cross. He wanted to comfort his disciples and prepare them for his departure. That night he told them our verse of the day, **I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.**

Orphans are those who are all alone. Their parents and other close family members are gone. They have no home and no one to really look after them and take care of them. No one wants to be an orphan. No one wants to be all alone. And yet, from time to time, we may feel that way. But today we see proof that Jesus has not left us as orphans. Our Ascended Lord has not left you alone. Right now he is watching over you, and he will take you home.

In the years after Christ ascended into heaven, the Christian Church was growing rapidly. It was getting too large for the 12 Apostles to take care of everything. So they could focus on spreading the gospel, they chose seven men to run the everyday operations of the Church. These men were to have a **good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.** Stephen was the first one called. And he didn't let the

people down. God blessed Stephen and gave him to the power to perform miracles. But some of the Jews did not like a Christian doing such things. And they began to argue with Stephen. And made false accusations against him. He was arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin, the same Jewish legislative body that was responsible for putting Jesus to death.

They asked him about some reports that he was bashing Holy Places, the Law, and Moses, while boasting about Jesus. Stephen responded with a long sermon on the history of the Jewish people. He mentioned God's promise to Abraham, that he would inherit the Land of Canaan, be a father or many nations, and that all nations would be blessed through him. But some of his descendants didn't like one of his other descendants, Joseph, and they sold him into slavery. God used this to save his people from a famine, but this also forced the people to be slaves in Egypt for 400 years. Then God sent Moses to save the people. But God's children again rejected their God appointed leader and constantly disobeyed him. God even dwelled among them in the tabernacle and later, the temple. But the people failed to worship him and went after false gods.

Then standing before the very same group that put Jesus to death, Stephen didn't hold back. **You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!** The Jews of his day were just like the Jews of old. God again and again showed them grace, but they rejected it. They went after false gods and pursued their own interests. Stephen went on, **Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him.** The Jews persecuted prophets like Jeremiah who foretold about the coming Messiah. But they didn't stop there. They killed the Messiah himself. Everyone knew who Stephen was talking about. They murdered Jesus.

Here was Stephen standing alone before the Jewish Sanhedrin and accusing them of murdering the one they had been waiting their whole lives for. And he wasn't afraid. He knew that he had essentially two choices. He could stand up and defend the truth—showing the Jews their sins. Or he could have backed down and played it safe. But

Stephen wasn't concerned about his own welfare. He was concerned with the truth.

How do you respond when faced with a spiritual dilemma? At times, it may seem as if you are all alone, standing before your spiritual enemies. As if you have to fight your spiritual battles all by yourself. You think that it's you against the world. Your family doesn't care about the truth. Your friends mock you for going to Church. From all sides people are trying to persuade you to go against God's will. Like Elijah you cry out to God that you are one of the only believers left and that you are all alone. So instead of fighting the battle, you give up. You cave in. "Why fight the battle all alone?" you ask yourself. Or perhaps you feel all alone in a different way. You don't have many friends. No one to lean on, no one to care for you. Perhaps someone has recently passed away. You enjoyed their company for many years. But you will never enjoy their company again. Perhaps you are alone for a different reason. You are by yourself all day and all night. Instead of talking, laughter, and maybe even some crying, there is just dead silence. And the loneliness just eats at you. You long for someone—anyone to talk to.

But remember what Jesus promised his disciples that Maundy Thursday night, **I will not leave you as orphans.** The story of Stephen is proof of this. When Stephen accused the Sanhedrin of murdering the Messiah, Jesus, they were understandably furious. They took hold of him and forced him out of the city so that they could stone him to death. Luke tells us what happened next, **then Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.** God gave Stephen and us a glimpse of what goes on in heaven. Jesus was at God's right hand, watching over his creation. From his heavenly throne Jesus rules over all things. He knows every single one of us. He was there watching Stephen—he knew what he was going through. He not only saw it, but he also understood. For Jesus too was rejected by his fellow Jews and was put to death by this same group. Since Jesus was a man just like us, he is able to sympathize with what we go through here on earth. And since he is God he is able to do something about it, if he so chooses. For our Ascended Lord has all the power in the world. He has power over the whole world. And yet

as powerful as he is, he cares about a little insignificant person like you. He knows your individual needs. Although he is in heaven, he is still here with you. He lives in our hearts through faith. He has certainly not left us alone.

Yet, Jesus is in heaven, and we are here on earth. Only a few people have seen him since he went up into heaven 2000 years ago. It may seem as if we will never see him again. But as Stephen also reminds, we will see Jesus again when he takes us to our heavenly home.

The Jews began to hurl stones at Stephen. They were large enough to do some major damage, but small enough to throw hard. The idea was to make an offender suffer. No head shots so that they wouldn't be knocked out and avoid the pain of being pelted with stones. Gashes, broken bones, contusions, you name it—it was all part of the process. Eventually Stephen was knocked to his knees. And he cried out to Christ, **Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.** No complaints from Stephen. No asking Jesus to save him.

He was asking Jesus to take him home. He had been looking at Jesus standing in heaven. And Stephen wanted to join him. So he cried out to the one who alone could make that happen. He prayed to the God-man, Jesus Christ. Stephen knew that he was nothing but a sinner. He constantly disobeyed God's will. He deserved God's wrath and punishment. And there was nothing he could do to save himself. So he called out to Christ. Stephen knew that through his death Christ paid the price for our sins. He removed them far from us. And through his resurrection Jesus assured us that we too will arise. Even though we die we will live. For our bodies will join our souls on the last day. And our bodies won't be covered in sin and its effects. No bruises, broken bones, and so on. But we'll have a glorious body just like our Savior.

And now Stephen is in heaven. For Christ interceded for him. He made sure that when the Father looked at Stephen, he did not see a sinner. Instead he saw his own Son. For Christ took Stephen's and all of our places on the cross. And he clothed us in a robe of his righteousness. And he welcomed Stephen to his heavenly home. And there he dwells in the company of the Savior forever.

He still intercedes for us today. He serves as a mediator between us and God. He prays for us. He pleads our case before God. He prays that God would have mercy on us. That he wouldn't treat us as our sins deserve. He makes our prayers acceptable to God. As an Old Testament priest offered up prayers to God on behalf the people, so does Jesus offer up prayers for us. As a result, we are able to cry out to God and know that he hears us. For through his Son, we are now his children. And soon he will take us home—no longer orphans in the world. But heirs of eternal life.

Stephen understood this. Through the gospel the Holy Spirit had worked faith into his heart. And he had strengthened that faith. This faith was so strong that Stephen didn't feel alone at the time of his death. He knew he wasn't fighting the battle against his enemies and death alone. He had God. He was ready to go to his eternal home. Like Stephen, you are not alone. At times, it may seem as if you are all alone. You may feel lonely and that you have to fight your battles by yourself. When you feel like that, you can go to God in prayer. And know that he hears you through his Son, Jesus Christ. But most importantly, when you are all alone in this world, get into the Word. For through it the Holy Spirit talks to you. God assures you in his word that you are not alone. That is he always with you and is looking out for you. And that no matter how your life is, no matter how people treat you in this life, your sins are forgiven. That no matter who has left you, God has not left you. You have a room waiting for you in heaven.

Through the gospel, we know what Stephen knew. Stephen's faith was so strong that he was even able to mimic the Lord in his death. Twice Stephen made references to Jesus on the cross. On the cross Jesus said, **Father into your hands I commit my spirit.** And Stephen said, **Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.** This is a not-so-subtle reference to Jesus being God and able to receive us into heaven. When Jesus was nailed to the cross he prayed for those who crucified him. **Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.** Stephen's prayer was similar. **Lord, do not hold this sin against them.** Stephen's prayers were marks of faith that Jesus is God and that he serves as our intercessor up in heaven. Stephen knew that Christ forgives sins. And he takes people to heaven. And like Stephen, we

too are able to mimic Christ. For we have that same confidence in Christ through the gospel. Those who cause us harm don't bother us. Those who left or abandoned us are no longer a worry to us.

Human beings will always let us down. But Christ does not. Even while he is away, he is always with us. He is watching over us. He makes sure no real harm can come to us. He has come to us in his Word; we can talk to him through prayer. And we know that we will no longer be alone, for soon our Father will call us home where we will enjoy his company forever. Amen.