

The Mission of My Church: “A great persecution.”

Focus Passage: Acts 7:54–8:8

Larger Context – Acts 6:8–7:53 ... Stephen was one of the seven Hellenistic Jews chosen in Acts 6 to oversee the food distribution to the Hellenistic Jewish widows. He was filled with grace and power and performed signs and wonders among the people, taking advantage of opportunities to preach the gospel. In one of those preaching occasions, his audience became enraged and accused him of blaspheming the Law of Moses, leading to the stoning we read about in our focus passage.

Other Passages Referenced: Genesis 1:1; Psalm 23; Isaiah 64:1; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21; 22:69; Romans 5:3–5

Comment

This Sunday’s sermon and passage provide great reinforcement for 2019’s annual focus on the Bible and seeing Jesus throughout the Scriptures. You may also want to direct people to the E100 series and study helps [here](#).

Sermon Recap

The Big Idea of the sermon based on Stephen’s speech and martyrdom was, “Say what you’ve seen and suffer like Jesus so others can see.” After declaring how Jesus was the fulfillment of God’s promises throughout the Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures, Stephen accused his Jewish audience of generally rejecting God’s word and Jesus. As the angry crowd rushed to stone Stephen, he saw the heavens opened and saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God the Father (Acts 7:55–56).

The heavens had not been opened since Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, after rebelling against God. God, in His mercy, closed off access to His presence in the garden so that Adam and Eve did not eat from the Tree of Life and live eternally in their corrupted state. Isaiah 64 offers a prayer that the heavens might be opened once again. In Jesus’ baptism, heaven opened.

Jesus made open access to heaven possible through His sacrifice on the cross and resurrection. He took upon Himself the penalty we deserved that we might receive the eternal life that He deserved. Stephen said what he saw. When we fail to see how the heavens have been opened to us through Jesus, we are unable to witness about that truth to others.

Stephen had clearly learned to suffer by seeing Jesus’ suffering on the cross. Both Jesus and Stephen looked to God’s word and prayed for God to forgive their executioners. “Forgive” means “to release” or “not hold against.” What could the world learn about God’s forgiveness if we released those who caused our suffering?

When persecution came against the Church in Acts 8, the Church scattered except the apostles who stayed in Jerusalem. The gospel spread through the scattered followers of Jesus who said what they saw and often suffered like Jesus so that others would see heaven opened by Jesus. Stephen’s vision is the only mention in the New Testament of Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Perhaps Jesus was standing to welcome the martyr Stephen into heaven.

What invitation do you need to accept so that you can see heaven opened? What time do you need to carve out in order to see Jesus standing at the right hand of God the Father? What is shaping our response to suffering—feelings or God’s word? Are we forgiving others amid our suffering?

Group Gathering

Group Check-in — Care, Celebration, Encouragement (About 1/3 of meeting time)

1. Informal conversation to allow individuals to catch up with one another.
2. Ask if anyone would share how they've been hearing and obeying God's direction.

Allow the Word to Speak — Be Hearers of the Word (About 1/3 of meeting time)

READ Acts 6:8–8:8

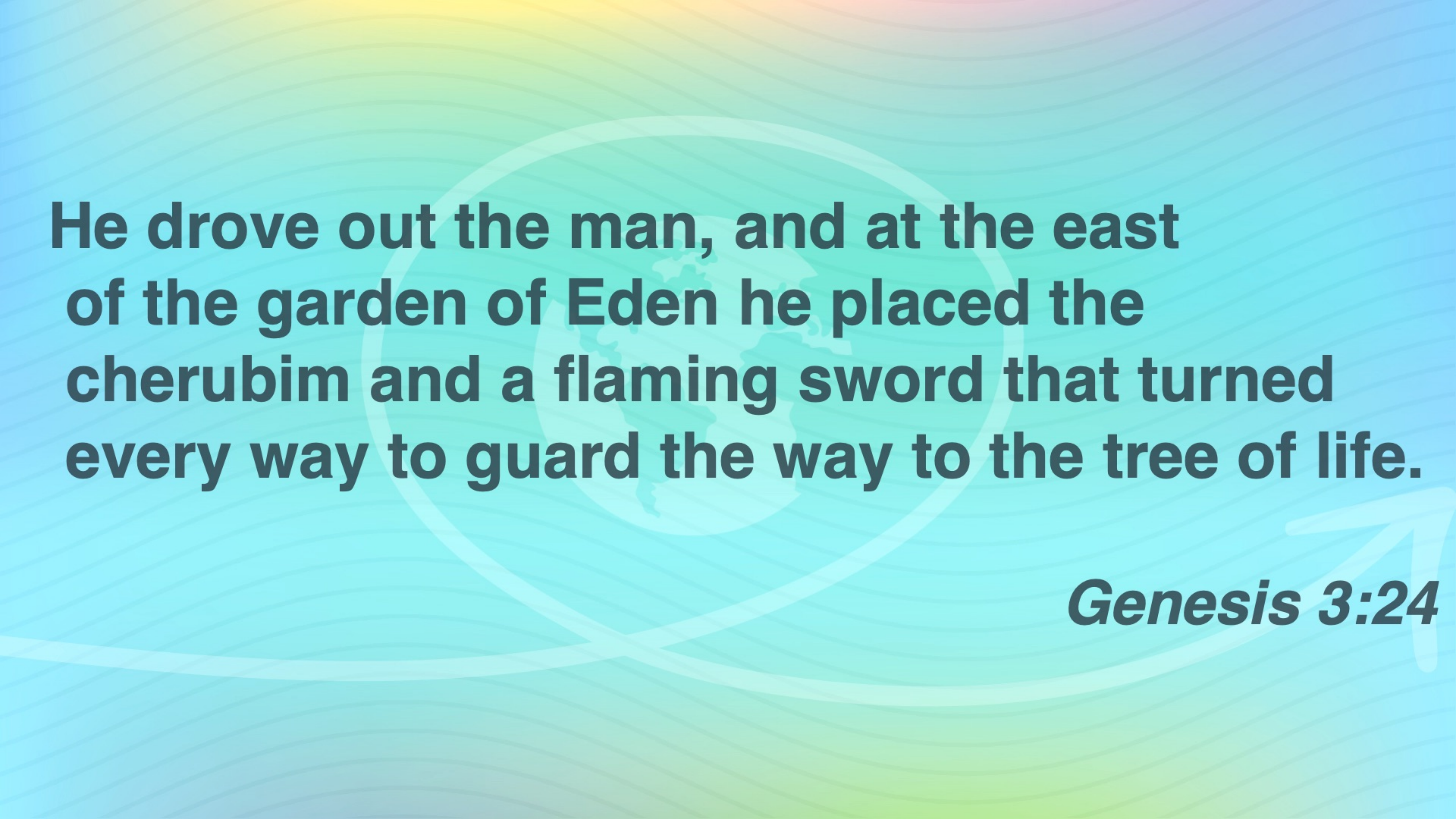
1. What from the passage or sermon was most impactful to you?
2. Were you left with any questions or confusion about the passage or sermon?
3. Acts 7:54 says, "When they heard *these things*, they were infuriated." What things did Stephen say that upset them so? Review Acts 7:1–53 and list the names of the Old Testament figures Stephen spoke of along with the importance he gave them.
4. As Stephen was being stoned, how did he reflect Jesus at the time of His crucifixion?
5. What roles did Saul, who was first introduced in Acts 7:58, play in Acts 7:58–8:3?
6. Where was Philip first introduced in Acts?

Put the Word into Practice — Be Doers of the Word (About 1/3 of meeting time)

1. In 53 verses, Stephen gives a concise survey of God's promises and redemption narrative from the Old Testament leading up to and including Jesus. Rehearse in your mind or write on paper, how you would explain the biblical narrative of from Abraham to Jesus as promise and fulfillment of God's promises. This will be a good exercise for your group to do together, telling God's story from Abraham to Jesus with the characters in Acts 7.
2. Imagine in your mind how you might model Jesus if you were to suffer mistreatment or attacks for faithfully sharing the good news of Jesus. How would your envisioned response compare to your natural response if you were not consciously trying to model Jesus?

The Big Question: What do you sense God's Spirit saying to you and what concrete action will you take in response? Share your answer with the group or another trusted Christian and ask them to pray for you.

SERVICE OPPORTUNITIES: Click [here](#) for some good opportunities.

The background features a light blue and green color scheme with a subtle globe in the center. Concentric wavy lines in shades of blue and green surround the globe, creating a sense of depth and movement. The text is overlaid on this background.

**He drove out the man, and at the east
of the garden of Eden he placed the
cherubim and a flaming sword that turned
every way to guard the way to the tree of life.**

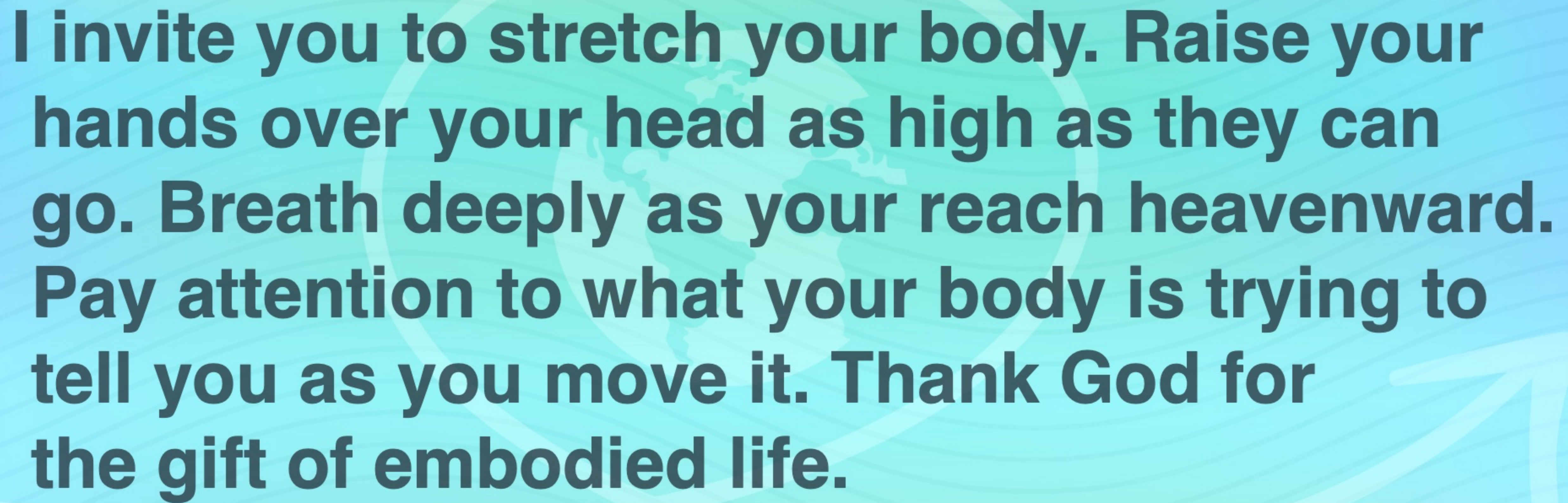
Genesis 3:24

**Oh, that you would rend the heavens
and come down, that the mountains
would tremble before you! As when fire
sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil,
come down to make your name known to
your enemies and cause the nations
to quake before you!**

Isaiah 64:1-2

I invite you to read the Bible without thinking about sermon illustrations, exegetical observations, or comparing translations. You are invited to listen to God's Word for no other reason than to enjoy the sound of God's voice—a voice like a grandmother offering encouragement to a grieving grandchild. Then, keep listening as if you're listening for that moment in a well loved song that makes you smile.

I invite you to eat, eat slowly, eat something healthy, then savory, then sweet. Take your time. Taste each flavor. Consider Jesus' words in Revelation 3:20, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me." You are invited to eat with Jesus.

The background features a light blue and green gradient with a faint, stylized globe in the center. A large, white, upward-pointing arrow is positioned on the right side of the image, pointing towards the top right corner.

I invite you to stretch your body. Raise your hands over your head as high as they can go. Breathe deeply as you reach heavenward. Pay attention to what your body is trying to tell you as you move it. Thank God for the gift of embodied life.

I invite you to seek enjoyment in something you cannot pay for—a walk in the woods, the sound of the ocean, a sunset from the front porch, a walk with your neighbor, a good book from the library. Allow your joy in what you cannot pay for point you to God's free gift of grace, "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost." —*Isaiah 55:1*

I invite you to be honest about you're ability to change others. "You're not, but Jesus is and you're in him, and he is in you. You can't, but Jesus can and you're in him and he is in you. You may not even want to, but he wants to, and you're in him and he is in you. Finally, as you pastor, always remember, you didn't, but Jesus did, and you're in him and he is in you." I am the vine; you are the branches. —*John 15:5*

One sentence to restart the church – *Acts 7:54-8:8*

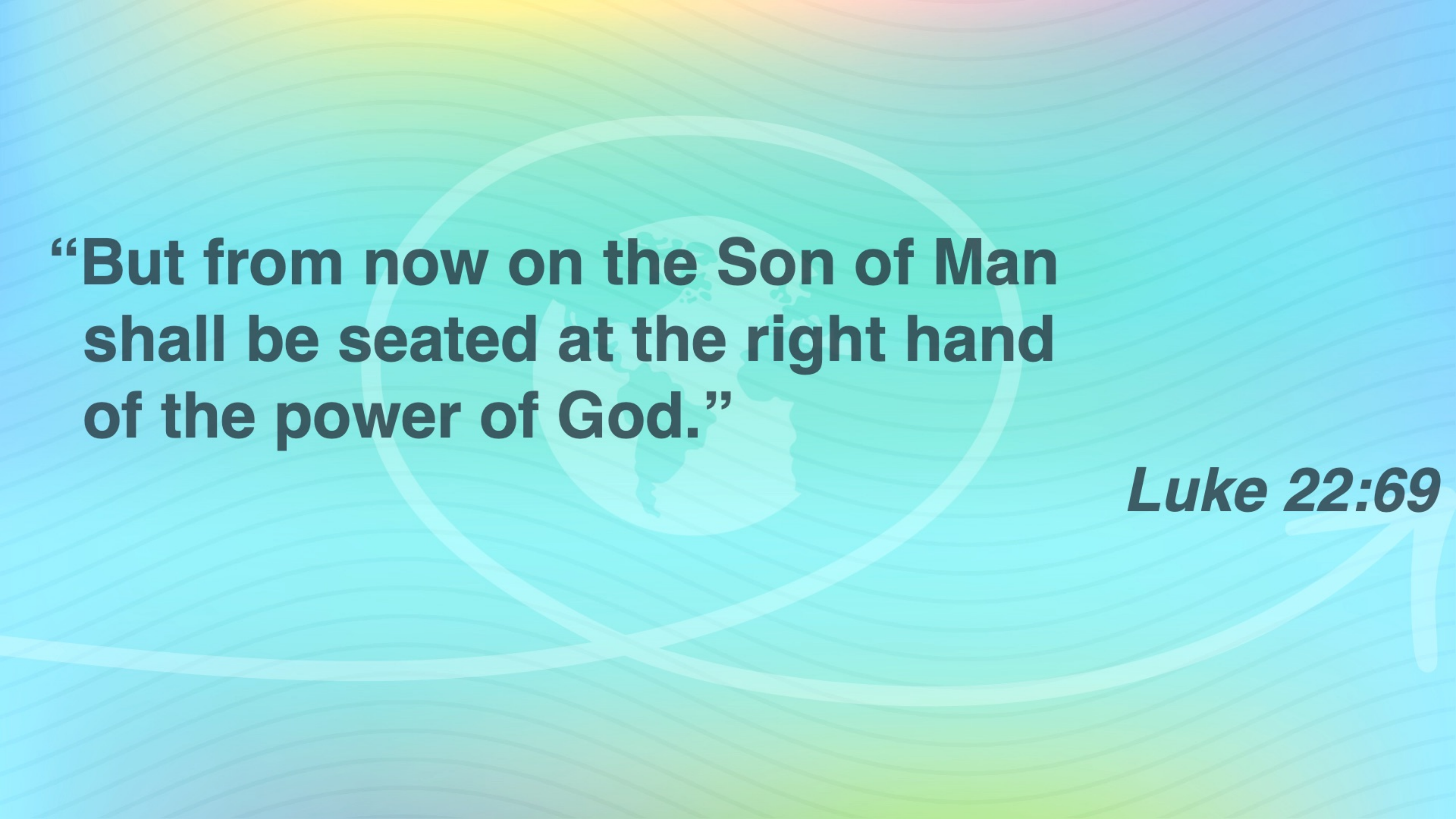
- **Say what you've seen, and suffer like Jesus**
 - **Look to God's Word**
 - **Pray for God's forgiveness**



**“Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me,
O LORD, faithful God.”**

Psalm 31:5

“Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. —*Romans 5:3-5*



**“But from now on the Son of Man
shall be seated at the right hand
of the power of God.”**

Luke 22:69

