

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Perth

Sunday, August 16th, 2026

Rev. Gerry Gallant

Faithful Service

Proper 15

Acts 6:8-15

Welcome

Announcements

Call to Worship

Our hope is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

We come to worship the living God, who is faithful in all His works.

The Lord does not forget the labor of His saints or the service offered in His name.

We will serve the Lord with gladness and come before Him with joyful songs.

Jesus Christ is our true Temple, our perfect Sacrifice, and our risen Lord.

We come to behold His glory and worship Him in spirit and truth.

Prayer of Adoration and Invocation

Almighty and Everlasting God, we gather before Your throne of grace, humbled by the magnitude of Your love made manifest in Jesus Christ. We praise You that the temple made with human hands was but a shadow of the true Temple—Your Son, who dwelt among us and tabernacled in human flesh. We adore You for the law that served as our schoolmaster, leading us to Christ and His perfect fulfillment of all righteousness.

Pour out upon us this day the grace and power of Your Holy Spirit. Open our ears to hear Your Word, soften our hearts to receive it, and strengthen our wills to obey it. Like Stephen of old, make us faithful in our unseen labors and in our public witness. Grant us the wisdom to recognize that every act of service done in Christ's name—whether noticed by the world or hidden in obscurity—is eternally significant in Your sight. Come, Holy Spirit, and transform us into the image of Christ, that we might shine with His glory and point others to His kingdom. In the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ, we pray. **Amen.**

Call to Confession

We are called to examine ourselves before the Lord. Let us confess honestly the ways we have failed to live faithfully—how we have treasured earthly recognition over Christ, how we have guarded our reputations rather than others', how we have clung to religious forms while neglecting the Living God they were meant to signify. Let us confess the times we have spread rumors, borne false witness, or participated in slander. The Lord hears our confession, and through Christ's blood, His mercy never fails.

Prayer of Confession

**Merciful Father,
we confess that we have not been faithful in the little things You have entrusted to us.
We have sought applause rather than Your approval,
and we have grown weary in well-doing when no one noticed.
We have clung to religious forms and human traditions more tightly than to Christ Himself.
When Your truth has been resisted,
we have sometimes answered with silence,
or worse, with the same spirit of slander that opposed Stephen.**

**Forgive us for bearing false witness,
for speaking without knowledge,
and for protecting our own pride under the cloak of zeal.
Cleanse us by the blood of Jesus,
fill us afresh with Your Holy Spirit,
and make us servants who shine with the glory of Christ.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**

Assurance of Pardon

Hear the good news of the gospel: The Son of God has come in the flesh, lived in perfect obedience, died upon the cross, and risen from the grave. All who trust in Him are forgiven. He is our righteousness and our peace.

Therefore, let it be known to you that your sins are forgiven in Jesus Christ. In Christ, heaven has already rendered its verdict of "Not guilty." The accuser may condemn, but Christ has justified you. Therefore, live in peace, forgiven and reconciled to God.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name
 Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven
 Give us this day our daily bread
 And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors
 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one
 For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory,
 Forever and ever, Amen.

Hymn #410: "Joyful, Joyful We Adore You" (V 1,2,3)

Joyful, joyful, we adore You,
 God of glory, Lord of love;
 Hearts unfold like flowers before You,
 Opening to the sun above.
 Melt the clouds of sin and sadness;
 Drive the dark of doubt away;
 Giver of immortal gladness,
 Fill us with the light of day!

All Your works with joy surround You,
 Earth and heaven reflect Your rays,
 Stars and angels sing around You,
 Center of unbroken praise;
 Field and forest, vale and mountain,
 Flowery meadow, flashing sea,
 Chanting bird and flowing fountain
 Join to praise you joyfully.

You are giving and forgiving,
 Ever blessing, ever blessed,
 Well-spring of the joy of living,
 Ocean-depth of happy rest!
 God Creator, Christ our Saviour,
 all are yours who live in love.
 Teach us how to love our neighbour,
 Lift us to your joy above.

Responsive Reading

Romans 8:1-4

8 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,

⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Anthem (Music Ministry)

Prayer for Illumination

Scripture

Acts 6:8-15

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

Sermon

Have you ever wondered if your quiet faithfulness really matters? You pray, you serve, you give, you encourage others, and yet much of it goes unnoticed. Perhaps no one thanks you. Perhaps no one even sees it. It is easy to wonder whether ordinary obedience really makes any difference.

Acts Chapter 6 answers with a resounding: YES!

Stephen is proof. His public ministry lasted only a short time, yet his faithful life and violent death changed the course of church history. He preached only one recorded

sermon, never planted a church, never wrote a New Testament letter, and held no office higher than that of a practical servant chosen to care for poor widows.

Yet when the apostle Paul later described how the Gospel had come to him, he could not tell his story without returning to the day he stood holding coats while a mob stoned this man:

Acts 22:20

²⁰ 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.'

That is what we are looking at this morning: the first martyrdom in the history of the Christian church.

We should begin by noticing where this passage fits into the unfolding story of Acts.

Before His ascension, the Lord Jesus had told His disciples that they would be His witnesses '**in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.**'

And for the first five chapters of Acts, the church has stayed almost entirely inside Jerusalem, among Jewish believers who shared the same language, temple culture, and historical background as the apostles.

However, God's plan was not to leave His covenant people huddled comfortably together in one city forever. He was about to push the Gospel outward into the wider world, to the Samaritans, the Gentiles, and ultimately to the ends of the earth.

And the man He raised up to begin that outward push was Stephen. Stephen's faithful witness and death becomes one of the hinges on which the book of Acts turns: the church is scattered out from Jerusalem, and the Gospel begins its movement into Judea, Samaria, and eventually to all the nations of this world.

Stephens story also reminds us that God does not measure a life by length or fame. He measures it by faithfulness. Most of us will never be famous, but the kingdom of God has always advanced through ordinary believers quietly remaining faithful to Jesus wherever He has placed them.

So, this passage is not just a minor character sketch.

It actually teaches us several truths we need as Bible believers: faithful service matters to God; Gospel truth provokes opposition; opposition that cannot win by argument often turns to lies and slander; and finally that God never abandons His people in the hour of trial.

However, if we only remember Stephen for how he died, we miss why he died. Before Stephen was a courageous martyr, he was a faithful servant. The Scripture wants us to know that long before God used Stephen publicly, God had been shaping him privately.

So let us begin; not with Stephen's death, but with a look into his life.

Acts 6:8

'And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people'.

To understand who Stephen was, we need to go back to what we learned last week. The early church in Jerusalem was growing so rapidly that the daily distribution of food to widows was being mismanaged, and Greek-speaking Jewish believers, known as 'Hellenists', felt their widows were being overlooked in favor of the Hebrew-speaking widows.

To resolve this practical crisis, the apostles asked the congregation to choose seven men **'of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom'** to oversee this ministry, freeing the apostles for prayer and the ministry of the Word. Stephen was first on that list, described as **'a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.'**

Simply put, Stephen was appointed by the church to serve food.

Do not miss this, brothers and sisters: Stephen was not waiting for a bigger ministry before being faithful. He was faithfully serving where God had already placed him.

In the modern church we would call him a 'deacon', a servant of the church tasked with the practical work of caring for the poor and vulnerable.

Yet within three verses, this servant who had been chosen to care for widows is preaching the Gospel with power, doing signs among the people, and standing before the highest religious court in the land.

Being faithful in small, unnoticed service was, for Stephen, the doorway into a far greater public calling.

That has always been God's pattern. Joseph served faithfully in prison before he governed Egypt. David faithfully cared for sheep before he ruled Israel.

Our Lord Himself taught in the book of Luke that,

Luke 16:10

¹⁰ "One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much

Faithfulness in the unseen places of our lives is often what prepares us for greater usefulness later.

This means that the question every Christian should be asking themselves is not, 'What ministry do I wish I had?' but 'Am I being faithful in the ministry God has already given me?'

Also notice that before Scripture tells us what Stephen did, it tells us what Stephen was. He was, Full of faith, the Holy Spirit, wisdom, grace, and power.

His call to outward ministry flowed from an inward walk with God.

The words the Scripture uses here matter.

Grace (*charis*) is not charm; it is the undeserved kindness of God equipping a man for ministry.

Power (*dynamis*) is not human charisma; it is the Spirit's strength producing what only God can give.

Stephen's effectiveness did not come from his remarkable personality. It came from an ordinary man completely dependent upon an extraordinary God. And what did that divine power produce through Stephen's hands? '**Great wonders and signs among the people.**'

I have explained before how a Biblical "sign" (*sēmeion*) points beyond itself. Stephen's wonders were not meant to make Stephen famous. They were that lighthouse in a dark storm, directing people beyond the servant to the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Like I have said in the past a lighthouse does not exist to be admired. The safest sailor is not the one who admires the lighthouse but the one who follows where its light is

pointing. Biblical miracles work exactly the same way. They never end in themselves. They direct sinners to Christ

And it is here that we find our first practical lesson: godly usefulness in Christ's church rarely begins on a stage. Instead, it begins with faithfulness in the tasks God has placed before you, done in the grace and power that only the Spirit can supply. Stephen did not seek a pulpit. He was found faithful serving widows, and God moved him from there.

Faithfulness and obedience that the world does not see is never hidden from the eyes of God.

It is like a great maple tree. Most people never notice the roots. They admire the height of the trunk, the spread of the branches, and the color of the leaves. Yet the strength of the tree depends on what nobody sees beneath the ground. The Christian life is the same. Long before public usefulness, God is quietly growing deep roots of private faithfulness.

Stephen's greatest qualification was not an extraordinary ability, but ordinary, everyday, faithfulness and obedience to God. God shapes his servants before He enlarges the service.

Public ministry is the overflow of communion with Christ.

And whenever Christ is clearly seen, Satan never remains silent. Every advance of the Gospel is met with resistance. Throughout Acts we have already seen that pattern, and now the conflict becomes even more personal.

Look at what happens when Spirit-given wisdom meets hardened unbelief.

Acts 6:9–10

⁹Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. ¹⁰But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.

Notice it was the Spirit-given wisdom that won Stephen the debate, but the wisdom was not winning him friends. The truth is that the faithful sharing of God's Word sometimes softens hearts; and at other times, it hardens them. The problem was not the clarity of Stephen's argument; the issue was hearts that were unwilling to bow before Christ.

To understand the conflict better, we need a little bit first-century background. Jerusalem was filled with synagogues for Jews of the Dispersion, basically the Jewish communities that were scattered across the Greco-Roman world whose members had returned to worship in the holy city. Each ethnic and linguistic group often gathered in its own synagogue, much like immigrant communities gather in churches that speak their native tongue today.

Stephen's opponents here belonged to '**the synagogue of the Freedmen.**' The Greek word used here is *Libertinoi*, meaning a freed slave. Many Jews had been taken to Rome after Pompey captured Jerusalem in 63 B.C.; later, some were freed and their descendants returned to Jerusalem with their own synagogue.

Because they were Greek-speaking Jews, their synagogue gathered several related regional groups: Jews from Cyrene and Alexandria in North Africa, as well as Jews from the Roman provinces of Cilicia and Asia in what is now modern Turkey.

That geographical detail about Cilicia is not accidental. The capital city of Cilicia was Tarsus; the hometown of a young, brilliant, and fiercely zealous Pharisee named Saul.

Many commentators have suggested that Saul of Tarsus may have been among those disputing with Stephen, since Tarsus was the principal city of Cilicia. Now the Scripture never tells us directly, but as we learned earlier the book of Acts does tell us Saul later approved Stephen's death and never forgot his witness.

It was these learned men that '**rose up and disputed with Stephen.**' The Greek verb used here is *syzēteō* which refers to a formal theological debate.

They were likely arguing over whether Jesus was the Messiah and what His death and resurrection meant for the temple. Stephen was not facing careless critics in this debate; he was facing trained, serious, religious men from respected centers of learning.

They were educated, serious and knew their arguments. Stephen stood before these men, but he did not stand alone.

Look at the outcome in verse 10: '**But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.**'

The Greek verb translated 'withstand' is *antistēnai*, meaning they were utterly unable, completely incapable of resisting or standing against him.

Ask yourselves, 'Why couldn't these brilliant scholars defeat a table-serving deacon?'

The answer is in the Scriptures, because the Lord Jesus had promised to help His people speak when they were called to bear witness.

In Luke chapter 21, Jesus told His disciples:

Luke 21:13-15

¹³ This will be your opportunity to bear witness. ¹⁴ Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, ¹⁵ for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.

Stephen is not coming up with his own clever answers under pressure. Christ is keeping His promise. Every word that Stephen speaks is evidence that Jesus is reigning from heaven exactly as He said He would.

Notice the beautiful balance. Stephen possessed wisdom, and he spoke by the power of the Holy Spirit.

A true Christians witness is never anti-intellectual, nor is it merely academic. Christians need minds that are shaped by Scripture and hearts that are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Superior logic may silence an opponent's argument, but apart from sovereign grace, it often only inflames their wounded pride.

That is a fact, there will be times when speaking Biblical truth clearly and graciously does not soften opposition but instead hardens it. The truth is that the Holy Spirit's wisdom will not convert every enemy, but it will sustain every faithful witness.

And when truth of God's Word cannot be defeated in open discussion, our fallen human nature turns often to deception. Look at verse 11:

Acts 6:11

¹¹ Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God."

Scripture deliberately tells us these accusations were secretly planted. This was not misunderstanding; it was deliberate deception. Throughout history, when opponents cannot answer Biblical truths, they often attack the character of the messenger instead of answering the message.

We need to remember that our goal is never merely to win an argument. Our goal is to bear faithful witness to Jesus Christ. It is only the Holy Spirit that can change a human heart.

And like any effective lie, these accusations contained just enough truth to sound believable. The devil has always preferred distortion of truth to outright invention in his falsehoods.

That is exactly how Satan worked in the Garden of Eden. He did not begin with an outright denial of God's Word. Instead, He began by twisting it, asking 'Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'

Every generation of God's people must therefore learn not just to reject obvious errors and lies, but also to recognize subtle distortions of the truth of God's Word.

The half-truths presented to Christians today that are wrapped up in religious language are often far more dangerous than an obvious lies.

The truths here is that Jesus had indeed spoken of the destruction of the temple. Jesus had indeed declared Himself the fulfillment of the Law.

Stephen had undoubtedly preached those truths. But his enemies twisted the message into something Stephen never actually said.

This is where the opposition changes its strategy. Having lost the theological debate, Stephen's opponents do not repent or reconsider their position, they instead regroup with a calculated conspiracy.

The Greek verb translated '*secretly instigated*' carries the idea of secretly tricking, paying or forcing someone into giving a false testimony. These men were handed a script, and the charge that their false testimony would bring upon Stephen was the most serious available under Jewish law: blasphemy.

Under the Mosaic law, blasphemy was a capital offense. To accuse Stephen of blasphemy against Moses and God was not a minor crime; it was placing his life in immediate danger.

Here is the danger: religious zeal, faith in one's traditions, denomination and position can become a cloak for malice.

People can easily dress up wounded pride in the language of righteous concern. Brothers and sisters, we must guard our hearts. It is frighteningly easy to convince ourselves we are defending God's truth when in fact we are really just protecting our own pride, power and position.

And if this conspiracy sounds familiar, it should. It mirrors what happened to our Lord Jesus Christ, when false witnesses were sought against Him so He might be put to death.

No servant is above his Master. If they lied about the sinless Son of God, we should not be shocked when His faithful followers are also slandered.

I want to pause here and apply this to us.

How often in church history—and even in our own culture—are people wounded by whispered rumors and false accusations? When people dislike a Christian's biblical convictions, they rarely attack the Bible directly. Instead they distort the believer's words, strip statements of context, and spread slander.

We see this repeatedly in every area of life. Words are taken out of context, motives are assumed, and reputations are damaged before the truth is known. Christians must never join that pattern.

I say this because what I am about to say should be something that cuts you to the heart, and I want you to understand the seriousness of the words we choose to use and why we need to be careful about the things we say.

The Ninth Commandment still binds God's people today:

Exodus 20:16

¹⁶ **"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.**

In an age of instant digital communication, where one rumor on social media can destroy a reputation in an hour. This happens constantly today. A story spreads, a reputation is damaged, and only later — if ever — does the full picture come out. By then the damage is already done

Christians must be scrupulously careful never to participate in this sin. Christian courage often looks like refusing to repeat a story we cannot verify. It looks like defending the reputation of a brother or sister who is being unfairly attacked.

And sometimes that means that we have to have the humility simply to say, 'I do not know whether that is true, so I will not speak.'

Too often we speak based on half truths and our own personal feelings rather than facts.

Too often we are more careful to protect our own reputation rather than the reputation of a neighbor?

We need to remember that when human hearts resist God's truth, hidden opposition quickly turns into public accusation, and we can easily fall for those falsehoods if they are repeated in our news and on social media.

Just look at how rapidly the conspiracy in today's Scripture escalates from private slander to an official trial before the council:

Acts 6:12–14

¹² And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, ¹³ and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us."

Notice the progression of sin. It moves from private conspiracy into public agitation and then to official action before the Sanhedrin, Israel's ruling court.

Earlier in Acts, the people had favored the apostles, making the authorities cautious.

And here, just a chapter later, public opinion is turned against a Christian witness.

Their accusation focused on the temple and the law: ***'we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.'***

To first-century Jews, the temple and the law were sacred pillars of national and religious identity.

Why did Scripture call these witnesses *false*?

After all, hadn't Jesus Himself prophesied the physical destruction of the temple?

Yes, He had in Luke chapter 21

Luke 21:5-6

⁵ And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, ⁶ “As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

Hadn't Jesus said, *'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up'?*

Yes—though John explicitly notes He was speaking of *'the temple of his body'*

John 2:18–21

¹⁸ So the Jews said to him, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?”
¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” ²⁰ The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?” ²¹ But he was speaking about the temple of his body.

And what about the law?

Jesus declared, in Matthew

Matthew 5:17-20

¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Their accusation succeeded for the same reason every effective slander does: it was almost true.

What was Stephen actually preaching?

He was teaching exactly what Jesus taught, and what the Epistle to the Hebrews would later make clear: that the ceremonial law; the animal sacrifices, the Levitical priesthood,

the burning incense, and the stone temple; were all only temporary shadows pointing forward to the coming of Jesus Christ.

Do you see the point?

Christ did not destroy God's purposes for those things, He fulfilled them. When the reality arrives, the shadow's temporary purpose is finished.

The entire Bible moves toward Christ. Every sacrifice whispered His name. Every priest pointed to His ministry. Every altar anticipated His cross. Every promise found its "Yes" and "Amen" in Him. Stephen was not preaching something new. He was showing that God's plan had reached its glorious fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

John Calvin wrote that, "In abrogating the law Stephen set the body over against the shadows, and the substance over against the forms. If ceremonies are abolished by Christ, their truth and purpose are established in Him." Calvin reminds us that Stephen was not attacking Moses. He was proclaiming that Jesus was the One to whom Moses had always pointed.

Augustine famously summarized the relationship between the Testaments this way: "The new is in the old concealed; the old is in the new revealed." Stephen understood that pattern. His opponents did not.

The sacrifices, priesthood, temple, and festivals these were all God's signposts along the road to Christ.

Stephen's opponents loved the signposts more than the destination. They treasured the shadow while rejecting the substance, worshipped the building while rejecting the true Temple, and honored Moses while rejecting the greater Prophet Moses himself had promised.

And this is a powerful warning for all of us today.

Even good, Biblical traditions can become idols if we love the form more than the Savior.

When we preach and teach that church buildings, denominational customs, and human rituals save no one, those who build their identity on religious forms will feel threatened.

Having shown how Stephen preached Christ as the fulfillment of the temple and the law, Scripture now shows us another layer of the story: Stephen's trial mirrors the trial of Jesus Christ Himself.

The Scripture wants us to see the resemblance.

Jesus was opposed by religious leaders.
Stephen was opposed by religious leaders.

Jesus faced false witnesses.
Stephen faced false witnesses.

Jesus was accused concerning the temple.
Stephen was accused concerning the temple.

Jesus stood before the council.
Stephen stood before the council.

The servant is walking in the footsteps of his Master.

Stephen is suffering not because he has done wrong, but because he faithfully proclaimed truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This passage is not merely telling us what happened to Stephen. It is showing us what it looks like to follow Jesus when truth is resisted, twisted, and condemned. The servant walks the same road as his Master.

God's Word is quietly reminding us that following Jesus has never meant avoiding suffering. It has always meant following Christ through suffering to glory.

And it is now that the Scripture slows the story down so we can see what heaven sees.

Acts 6:15

¹⁵ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Imagine the atmosphere in that courtroom. The members of the Sanhedrin sit in judgment, looking at the solitary prisoner standing before them. The air is heavy with hostility, false testimony, and the threat of death.

Everything appears to be in favor the Sanhedrin. They have authority. They have witnesses. They have numbers. Stephen has none of these things. Yet the appearances

are deceiving, because heaven has entered the courtroom before the verdict has even been announced.

All who sat in the council *gazed* at him. The Greek verb *atenizō* means to stare intently. They did not see a man trembling with terror or burning with bitterness. They saw a face **'like the face of an angel.'**

What does this imagery mean? In Scripture, angels are heavenly messengers who stand continually in the holy presence of God; their appearance reflects the purity and glory of the King they serve. But even more directly, this language deliberately recalls one major Old Testament parallel: the face of Moses.

This points us back to the story of Moses, whose face shone after he spoke with God in the book of Exodus.

Do you see the mercy and irony? The Sanhedrin accused Stephen of blaspheming Moses, and God marked Stephen with a radiance that reminded them of Moses himself.

Heaven had already rendered its verdict. Long before Stephen was declared guilty by earth, he had already been declared righteous in Christ by heaven.

While the Sanhedrin may condemn him, God approves of him.

Stephen's radiant face should have warned his accusers that heaven itself was bearing witness to him. God was giving Stephen comfort by the Spirit and a taste of the glory to come, so that he might stand firm before his enemies.

Where does that kind of peace come from? Not from personality, but from the Holy Spirit.

The world thinks peace is the absence of trouble. Scripture teaches that peace is the presence of Christ in the midst of trouble.

Several decades after Stephen's death, another faithful witness stood before a hostile court. His name was Polycarp, the aged bishop of Smyrna. When he was urged to deny Christ, he replied:

'Eighty-six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?'

Polycarp did not die because he loved suffering. He endured suffering because he loved Christ more than life itself. The fire could threaten his body, but it could not loosen his grip on Christ.

Those words did not come from natural courage. They came from a heart resting securely in Christ.

That is the same kind of peace we see over and over in the lives of martyrs. When the Judge of all the earth has declared you righteous through the blood of Christ, the hostile verdicts of human courts lose their power to terrify you.

Many believers today quietly live out this same faithfulness. A Christian employee refuses to lie on a report even though it costs a promotion. A teenager stands for Biblical truth though classmates mock them. An elderly saint continues praying faithfully even when no one knows. None of those moments make the evening news, but heaven records every one of them.

The face of Stephen that looked condemned on earth was already approved in heaven.

Stephen shines because Christ shines through him.
The true hero of this passage is not Stephen.
The true hero is Jesus.

Stephen's life is a reflection of the Savior he loved, served, and proclaimed.

And that is the goal of the Christian life: not merely to learn about Christ, but to be conformed to Christ.

So as we come to the end of this passage, the question we face is not, 'What happened to Stephen?' The question is, 'What kind of people is Christ making each of us to be?'

Stephen's face was not merely something we are meant to admire; it is something that calls each of us to examine our own faithfulness before Christ.

So what does faithful Christianity actually look like?

First to always be Faithful in ordinary service. It teaches us to never despise small, unnoticed, practical acts of service in the church. It reminds us that God's kingdom often works through hidden ways, and that the people heaven often uses most are those no

one else notices: quiet servants, faithful elders, godly parents, prayer warriors, and ordinary believers serving without wordly applause.

Stephen was chosen to wait tables and distribute food to widows. Yet because he served full of grace and power, God used him to shake Jerusalem and send the Gospel outward. So that means every one of us should not be waiting for a public stage to be faithful. We should be serving where God has placed us today.

A healthy church is not built only by preaching from the pulpit. It is built as members quietly serving one another and the community in the name of Christ. This is done by arriving early, staying late, praying quietly, noticing the lonely, teaching children, preparing meals, unlocking doors, cleaning kitchens, giving faithfully, welcoming visitors, and encouraging discouraged saints.

I encourage every one of you to find a way to serve in the church and the community. Knowing that much of that quiet labor will never be announced from a platform, yet not a single act of it is ever forgotten by Almighty God.

Second it means understanding that the entire Old Testament points to Christ. The Old Testament is not a book of moral rules or disconnected Jewish history. We need to see that the ceremonial law, the sacrifices, the priesthood, and the temple were all given by God to point us to Jesus Christ. He is our true Temple; He is our final Sacrifice.

And this means that we do not cherish religious traditions or human forms over the Savior to whom they point. When you have Christ, you have the eternal substance of all that God promised.

Third, that we should always expect opposition to God's truth, but stand without slander or compromise. If we faithfully proclaim the Biblical Gospel, if we stand uncompromisingly on the authority of Scripture, the uniqueness of Christ, and God's design for human life, we should never be surprised when opposition comes.

When opponents cannot refute the truth of God's Word, they will often turn to misrepresentation and slander. When that happens, we must not answer sin with sin. We must not retaliate with malice, nor should we retreat in silence. Like Stephen, we must speak the truth with courage, depend on the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, and carefully obey the Ninth Commandment by refusing to participate in gossip, slander, or false witness.

And fourth, we need to learn to rest in the sovereign peace of Christ's presence. When trials, hostility, or suffering bear down upon us, we need to remember that shining face of Stephen. God does not abandon His children in the fire. Even when the world condemns us, heaven vindicates us. The same Christ who stood with Stephen stands

with His people today. The same Spirit who gave Stephen wisdom still empowers the church. And the same Lord who sustained Stephen through trial sustains His saints in every generation.

Stephen served. Stephen spoke. Stephen suffered. And through it all, Stephen shone, not because Stephen was great, but because Christ was glorious.

Stephen shines because Christ shines through him.

However, this passage does not only comfort believers; it also warns the religious heart.

And if you are hearing this today and are not yet trusting in Christ, do not hide behind religion, tradition, morality, or church attendance. Stephen's opponents had Scripture, temple, ceremony, and zeal, but they rejected Christ.

So do not cling to shadows when the substance has come.

Do not trust religion when Christ is offered.

Do not trust your morality when Christ has purchased salvation.

Come to Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for sinners.

There is forgiveness in Him.

There is life in Him.

There is peace in Him.

And there is a righteousness in Him that no accusation on earth can ever overturn.

And may God make us a church that values faithfulness more than success.

May He make us full of grace, full of truth, and full of the Holy Spirit.

May He make us a people who love Christ more than any tradition, and God's approval more than the praise of men.

Brothers and sisters, history remembers Stephen as the church's first martyr. Heaven remembers him as a faithful servant. One day, our names too will be forgotten by this world. But if we belong to Christ, they will never be forgotten in heaven. So let us live, serve, speak, suffer if necessary, and shine as the Salt and Light of Christ in this dark world not so that people remember us, but so that they remember Jesus Christ.

Let us pray

Most gracious God and heavenly Father,

We thank You for the riches of Your holy Word.

Grant that we would not merely hear it with our ears but receive it into believing hearts.

May the example of Stephen remind us that true greatness is found in faithful obedience to Christ.

Strengthen us by Your Holy Spirit that we may serve You humbly, bear witness boldly, love truth sincerely, and endure every trial with steadfast hope.

Keep us from trusting in outward religion while neglecting Christ Himself.

Fix our hearts upon our risen Saviour, that whether in quiet service or public witness, our lives may reflect His grace and glory.

Preserve Your Church in purity and truth.

Gather many sinners to Yourself through the proclamation of the Gospel.

And when our earthly race is finished, receive us into that heavenly kingdom where we shall behold the face of our Redeemer forever.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Adapted from John Calvin

Invitation to Offering

Offering Prayer

Closing Hymn #267: “Rejoice the Lord is King” (V 1,2,3)

Rejoice, the Lord is King;
your sovereign Lord adore;
give thanks, O mortals, sing
and triumph ever more.

Lift up your heart;
lift up your voice; rejoice,
again I say, rejoice.

For Christ the Saviour reigns,
the God of truth and love;
when Jesus purged our stains,
he took his seat above.

Lift up your heart;
lift up your voice; rejoice,
again I say, rejoice.

His reign can never fail;
he rules o'er earth and heaven:
the keys of death and hell
are to our Saviour given.
Lift up your heart;
lift up your voice; rejoice,
again I say, rejoice.

Pastoral Prayer

Our gracious and heavenly Father,
We thank You for the privilege of gathering together this Lord's Day in the name of Jesus Christ. We thank You for Your Word, which is living and active, piercing our hearts, correcting our thoughts, and directing our steps. We praise You for the example of Stephen, not because he was great in himself, but because the glory of Christ shone through his faithful service, courageous witness, and steadfast trust.

Lord, grant that we would be a people who value faithfulness above recognition and obedience above worldly success. Teach us to serve You in the ordinary places of life, knowing that no act of love offered in Christ's name is forgotten before Your throne. Strengthen those who are weary, encourage those who are discouraged, comfort those who are burdened, and establish every believer here more firmly in the grace that is ours in Christ Jesus.

Guard our tongues from gossip, slander, and careless words. Help us to love the truth, defend our neighbors' reputations, and walk in humility and integrity before You. Give us courage to stand for Christ in a world that often opposes His truth, and grant us the peace that comes from knowing that our lives are hidden with Christ in God.

We pray for our church family. Unite us in love, preserve us in sound doctrine, deepen our fellowship, and make us useful servants in Your kingdom. May our congregation be known not for worldly greatness, but for faithfulness to Christ, love for one another, and devotion to Your Word.

And now, Father, as we remain together for food and fellowship, we thank You for every good gift that comes from Your hand. Bless this food to our bodies and bless our conversations to the strengthening of our souls. May our time together reflect the love and unity we have in Christ. Let visitors be warmly welcomed, the lonely encouraged, friendships strengthened, and Christ honored in all that is said and done.

Keep us mindful that these earthly meals are but a foretaste of the great marriage supper of the Lamb that awaits all who belong to Christ. Until that day, sustain us by Your grace and keep us faithful.

We ask all these things through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever.

Amen.

Benediction

May the God of all grace,
who called Stephen to faithful service and sustained him with the light of heaven,
fill you with the same Spirit of wisdom, power, and peace.

May He make you faithful in the little things,
bold in the truth,
and radiant with the glory of Christ,
until that day when faith becomes sight.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with you all. **Amen.**