

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Perth

Sunday, September 20th, 2026

Rev. Gerry Gallant

When Heaven Stands Open

Proper 20

Acts 7:51-60

Welcome

Announcements

Call to Worship

The Lord reigns; let the earth rejoice!

We come to worship the God of glory.

Lift up your eyes and behold Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, exalted at the right hand of God.

He is our risen Lord, our faithful Advocate, and our eternal King.

Come, let us worship the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

We will praise the Lord, for His steadfast love endures forever.

Prayer of Adoration and Invocation

Almighty and most gracious God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, You are holy, glorious, and worthy of all praise. Heaven is Your throne, the earth is Your footstool, and yet You draw near to Your people in mercy.

We adore You for Your perfect righteousness, Your sovereign power, and Your steadfast love. We praise You for Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, crucified for our sins, raised in victory, and exalted at Your right hand.

Send Your Holy Spirit among us now. Open our hearts to receive Your Word, loosen our tongues to sing Your praise, and fix our eyes upon Christ. May everything we do in this hour honor You and build up Your church. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Call to Confession

God's Word warns us not to harden our hearts or resist the Holy Spirit. Yet we have often been slow to listen, quick to defend ourselves, and unwilling to obey. Because our

gracious God receives all who come to Him through Christ, let us draw near with humility and confess our sins together.

Prayer of Confession

Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against You in thought, word, and deed. We have resisted Your Spirit, closed our ears to Your Word, and stiffened our hearts against Your will. We have feared the judgment of others more than we have trusted You. We have answered hurt with bitterness, withheld forgiveness, and failed to love our enemies. Forgive us for the sake of Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, who died for sinners and rose again. By Your Spirit, soften our hearts, strengthen our faith, and teach us to speak the truth in love. Fix our eyes on Christ, that we may follow Him with courage, mercy, and hope. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, bore our guilt upon the cross and rose in victory over sin and death. To all who repent and trust in Him, God grants full forgiveness and everlasting life. In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.
Thanks be to God!

Children’s Hymn #441: “Can A Little Child Like Me”

Can a little child like me
thank the Father fittingly?
Yes, O yes! be good and true,
patient, kind in all you do;
love the Lord and do your part;
learn to say with all your heart,

Refrain:

Saviour, we thank you,
Spirit, we thank you,
Great God our Maker, we thank you!

For our playing, for our rest,,
for the earth in beauty dressed,
for the moon and sun so bright,
for the day and for the night,
for your patient, loving care,
for thy bounty everywhere: [Refrain]

For the laughter, for the tear,
 for the love that meet us here,
 for the lessons of our youth--
 honor, gratitude, and truth--
 for the great gift of your Son,
 for your work in us begun, [Refrain]

School Year Blessing (After Song all kids to the front)

Gracious God, as a new school year begins, we commend to Your loving care all the students of our congregation, from those beginning preschool and kindergarten, through elementary and secondary school, to those studying at college and university. Bless each one according to their age, their needs, and the path You have set before them. For our youngest children, grant a sense of safety, wonder, and joy as they learn and make new friends. For our elementary students, give curiosity, kindness, and growing confidence. For our secondary students, grant wisdom, courage, good friendships, and strength to resist harmful pressures. For our college and university students, give discernment, perseverance, humility, and a steadfast faith as they encounter new ideas, responsibilities, and opportunities. May every student know that they are loved by You and by this church family. Protect them in their going out and coming in. Help them grow not only in knowledge, but also in kindness, honesty, humility, and love for their neighbors. Bless also their teachers, educational assistants, administrators, support staff, parents, and caregivers. Grant them patience, wisdom, and grace as they teach, guide, encourage, and serve. Above all, keep the eyes of our students fixed on Jesus Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. May every classroom be marked by respect, every friendship by compassion, and every day by the assurance that You are near. Bless this school year and use it for Your glory and for the good of all. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

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 #389: "Breathe On Me, Breath of God" (V 1,3,4)

Breathe on me, breath of God;
 fill me with life anew,

that I may love what thou dost love
and do what thou wouldst do.

Breathe on me, breath of God,
till I am wholly thine,
until this earthly part of me
glows with thy fire divine.

Breathe on me, breath of God,
so shall I never die,
but live with thee the perfect life
of thine eternity.

Responsive Reading

Psalm 27:1–6

¹The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

²**When evildoers assail me
to eat up my flesh,
my adversaries and foes,
it is they who stumble and fall.**

³Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war arise against me,
yet I will be confident.

⁴**One thing have I asked of the Lord,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord
and to inquire in his temple.**

⁵For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover **of his tent;**
he will lift me high upon a rock.

⁶**And now my head shall be lifted up**

above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the Lord.

Anthem (Music Ministry): “It’s In His Name”

Prayer for Illumination

Scripture

Acts 7:51-60

⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

The Stoning of Stephen

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.

Sermon

In the passage before us today, we witness the final earthly moments of Stephen. An ordinary believer, chosen to serve the church, filled with the Holy Spirit, and made faithful by the grace of God and this passage is meant to show us where Christian courage comes from.

Over the past few weeks we have witnessed Stephen patiently reminding the Sanhedrin of God’s covenantal faithfulness to Israel. He spoke of God appearing to Abraham in Mesopotamia, sustaining Joseph in Egypt, raising up Moses in the wilderness, and guiding the nation through the tent of witness.

However, Stephen was not just giving them a historical overview. He was showing them that God has never been bound to a single physical building like the Jerusalem temple,

and that throughout history, the human heart has consistently resisted the deliverers God provided.

In the Scripture we read today, having traced God's faithfulness throughout Israel's history, Stephen now brings that history directly to bear upon the council. Stephens shows them that the pattern of resisting God's messengers has reached its climax in their rejection of Jesus, the Righteous One.

Stephen turns to the council and speaks with remarkable clarity:

Acts 7:51–53

⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

Stephen does not speak gently, these are piercing words, but they are not spoken out of personal anger or bitterness. And this is a way of speaking that many Christians in the world today need to master once again. God's truths need to be spoken, and Stephen speaks them here with the faithfulness of a believer who refuses to treat a fatal spiritual wound with light, surface-level words.

To fully understand the weight of Stephen's speech, we need to understand the words that he chooses to use.

When he calls these respected religious leaders 'stiff-necked,' he uses the Greek word *sklērotrachēloi*. This is not a word Stephen invented on the spot; it is drawn directly from the Old Testament Greek translation called the Septuagint.

It is the exact term Jehovah used at Mount Sinai when Israel made the golden calf: *'I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people.'* The word paints a vivid picture of a stubborn ox that stiffens its neck muscles and flatly refuses to yield to its master's yoke.

Next, when Stephen addresses them as 'uncircumcised in heart and ears,' he is pointing at the very center of their spiritual pride. The Sanhedrin placed immense confidence in the physical marks of the Abrahamic covenant. Yet Stephen reminds them of what God had declared through Moses in Deuteronomy 10:16 and Jeremiah 6:10; that physical signs are meaningless if the inner man remains cold, deaf, and unchanged by God.

The Apostle Paul later expanded upon this exact truth in

Romans 2:28–29:

²⁸ For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. ²⁹ But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

Everything that Stephen has said is meant to expose a tragic pattern of behavior: ‘As your fathers did, so do you’. The prophets of old pointed forward to the coming of, ‘the Righteous One’, a messianic title rooted in the Suffering Servant prophecy of Isaiah 53:11.

Yet Israel’s history was marked over and over by the rejection of those messengers. Now, when the Righteous One Himself stood in their midst, they did not just reject him, they betrayed and murdered Him. The Sanhedrin prided themselves on being guardians of the Law; a Law ‘delivered by angels’; yet they were the ones who broke it.

This gives each of us something important to consider. It reminds us that it is possible to attend a faithful church, to know Scriptures, know catechisms, hold sound doctrine, and sing the great hymns of the faith—and yet, if you are not careful, your hearts can still not be obedient to the living voice of God.

It might sound like it is not possible; however, it is.

Picture a heavy stone resting at the bottom of a clear stream. Water flows over it day and night, year after year. The outside is continually wet, but break the stone open and its center remains dry. John Flavel used this picture to describe a hardened heart. In the same way, a person may sit beneath faithful Gospel preaching, hear the Word week after week, and remain outwardly familiar with divine truth while the heart remains untouched.

The real question is not merely whether the Word has passed over us, but whether the Spirit has carried it into us, bringing repentance, faith, and obedience.

John Calvin made a vital point in his writings on the book of Acts: when God’s Word is faithfully proclaimed, it never leaves us neutral. It will either soften the heart into genuine repentance and obedience or harden it into deeper excuse and resistance.

When the council heard these things, the Scripture records their immediate response:

Acts 7:54

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

The Greek phrase rendered ‘were enraged’ is *dieprionto tais kardiais autōn*, which literally means ‘they were sawn through to their hearts’. The truth had pierced their

defense, but instead of bowing in brokenness, they gnashed their teeth like wild animals cornered in the dark.

Their blinding rage was proof that Stephen's words were entirely true; error can ignore false claims, but an unrepentant heart cannot bear the piercing light of divine reality.

This passage helps us understand why the truth of the Gospel meets resistance. The light of Christ exposes the darkness of the human heart, and apart from God's grace, sinners do not naturally welcome that light.

As Jesus said, people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. Yet our calling is not to answer hostility with hostility, but to speak the truth in love and pray that God will soften resistant hearts.

However, look at the contrast in response between earth and heaven:

Acts 7:55–56

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."

While the courtroom below was consumed with furious noise, Stephen was granted a vision of deep peace and majesty. He looked up and saw the *doxa Theou*—the glory of God—and he saw Jesus.

Notice the posture of our Savior. Throughout the New Testament, Jesus is almost universally described as *seated* at the right hand of God; in Psalm 110:1, Colossians 3:1, and Hebrews 10:12 each signifying that His priest-kingly work of atonement is finished. But here, in this singular passage, Stephen sees Jesus *standing*.

Ask yourself, why is the Lord Jesus standing?

In ancient legal proceedings, an advocate or witness would stand to give testimony or defend the accused. The earthly court of the Sanhedrin was condemning Stephen, but the heavenly King stood up to vindicate His faithful servant. Jesus stands as the divine Advocate, receiving the testimony of His martyr and stepping forward to welcome him home.

Notice also the title Stephen uses: 'the Son of Man.' This is the only time in the New Testament outside the Gospels that this title is used on human lips. It points directly back to Daniel 7:13–14, where the Son of Man approaches the Ancient of Days to receive an everlasting kingdom and universal authority. By declaring this vision aloud,

Stephen was proclaiming to the very council that crucified Jesus: The One you condemned is currently reigning on the throne of the universe.

Stephen's eyes were not fixed on the gnashing teeth of his executioners; his gaze was anchored on his exalted King. Swiss Reformer Heinrich Bullinger wrote of this text that true comfort in the hour of trial comes not from looking at our own weak resources, nor at the hostility around us, but from beholding Christ exalted in glory.

Stephen's confession was more than the council could bear.

Acts 7:57–58

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.

The formal council meeting dissolved into a violent mob. Under Roman occupation, the Sanhedrin did not possess the legal authority to execute capital punishment on their own authority. What took place was an irregular, chaotic lynching cloaked in superficial religious forms. They covered their ears to shut out what they considered blasphemy, shouted to drown out his voice, and rushed upon him, the word here is *hormēsan*— this is the same word used to describe the violent rush of demon possessed swine down a steep bank in the Gospels, meaning they attacked him as if possessed by demons.

They dragged Stephen outside the city walls to execute him by stoning, maintaining an outward nod to Levitical procedure. According to Jewish custom, the primary witnesses were required to cast the first heavy stones. To do so with maximum efficiency, they stripped off their heavy outer garments and laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul.

It is here, that the scriptures quietly introduces a figure who will dominate the rest of the book of Acts. Saul of Tarsus was standing there as an official supervisor, giving full consent to Stephen's murder. The Greek word used later in Acts 22:20 is *syneudokeō*, meaning to agree whole-heartedly, to approve completely. Saul was young, brilliant, zealous for the traditions of his fathers, and convinced he was serving God by eradicating this movement.

Augustine famously observed, 'If Stephen had not prayed, the Church would not have had Paul.' We should not treat this statement as a direct explanation of how Saul was converted, for Scripture does not say that Stephen's prayer caused his conversion. Yet the observation beautifully draws our attention to God's providence: while Stephen prayed for his enemies, the Lord was already preparing to transform one of those enemies into an apostle of grace.

Tertullian, writing in the second century, famously declared: *‘The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church’*. What appeared to be a tragic defeat for the early church in Jerusalem was, in God’s sovereign providence, the exact catalyst that would scatter the believers, carrying the Gospel into Judea, Samaria, and to the very ends of the earth.

As the heavy stones came crashing down upon Stephen, Luke records his final words:

Acts 7:59–60

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.**

Look carefully at how Stephen dies. His final moments echo the death of his Savior on Calvary.

When Jesus hung upon the cross, He prayed to the Father:

‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit’

Now, Stephen prays:

‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit’

Stephen’s prayer is a clear testimony to the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ. As a faithful Jew who worshiped the one true God, Stephen entrusted his spirit directly to Jesus. His prayer therefore reveals that he understood Jesus not merely as a departed teacher or prophet, but as the divine Lord who has authority to receive and keep the souls of His people.

Stephen knew his soul was not departing into a void, nor was it falling into unconsciousness; it was passing immediately into the safe keeping of his Savior.

As the Westminster Larger Catechism (Question 86) reminds us, the souls of the righteous are at death made perfect in holiness and received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory.

Then, under the impact of the stones, Stephen drops to his knees and cries out with a loud voice:

‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them’

Just as Jesus prayed on the cross,

‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do’

So Stephen prays for his executioners. He does not call down vengeance. He asks that God would extend forgiving grace to those who were taking his life. This is the fruit of genuine faith: faith looks up to Christ; love reaches outward to neighbor—even to enemies.

When Stephen finished this prayer, the Scripture adds a tender phrase: ***'he fell asleep,'***

What a gentle word to describe a violent death. For the unbeliever, death is a terrifying enemy. But for the child of God, because Jesus bore the true sting of sin upon the cross, physical death has been transformed into a temporary sleep. The body rests in the earth until the day of resurrection, while the soul enters immediately into eternal joy.

Stephen's death is recorded as a perpetual comfort for all believers, showing us that death has lost its power over those who belong to Jesus. Death does not destroy us; it merely closes our earthly eyes so that we may open them to the face of Christ.

Brothers and sisters, the Holy Spirit does not give us this passage just so that we will admire Stephen's courage. He gives it to us so that we will look to Stephen's Savior. The same Jesus who stood to receive Stephen reigns today, intercedes for His people, and gives grace to every believer who must suffer, forgive, speak the truth, or remain faithful in a hostile world.

Most of us will likely never be called to lay down our physical lives under a shower of stones. But every one of us is called to take up our cross daily and follow Jesus. We face daily temptations to compromise our convictions, to soften the edges of the Gospel to avoid disapproval, or to harbor bitterness when we are mistreated.

Where do we find the strength to stand firm? Where do we find the grace to forgive those who hurt us?

We find it in the exact same place Stephen found it: by being filled with the Holy Spirit and keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

When you face suffering, lingering illness, financial hardship, or opposition for your faith, do not gaze inward at your own weak resources. Do not fix your eyes solely on the trouble around you. Look up! Look up by faith through the Word of God. Behold your Savior. He is not helpless; He is exalted at the right hand of the Father. He stands as your Advocate, your Intercessor, and your heavenly King, holding your life safely in His hands.

So, let us live with the courage that comes from looking to heaven and beholding Christ by faith. Let us speak God's truth in love, without fear and without bitterness. Let us go into this dark and broken world as Salt and Light, holding forth the life-giving Word of God with courage, compassion, and hope. And when suffering comes, when opposition

risers, or when death draws near, let us rest in the sweetness of His grace. The Jesus who stood to receive Stephen still reigns, still intercedes, and still holds His people safely. Whether we live or die, we belong to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

Let us pray,

Lord our God, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You. Lift our eyes above the noise, fear, and opposition of this world, and fix them upon Jesus Christ, standing in glory at Your right hand. Where our hearts are hard, soften them by Your Spirit. Where we are afraid, make us courageous. Where we have been wounded, keep us from bitterness and teach us to forgive as Christ has forgiven us. Give us grace to speak Your truth with love, to endure suffering with hope, and to entrust both life and death into the hands of our faithful Saviour. Let the beauty of Christ so fill our vision that we may follow Him gladly, serve Him faithfully, and rest in Him completely. Receive us, keep us, and use us for Your glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Adapted from a prayer of Augustine of Hippo.

Invitation to Offering

As an act of worship and gratitude to God, you are invited to place your offering in the offering box at the back of the church, as you leave today. We now offer our thanks to the Lord for His abundant grace and faithful provision through song and prayer.

Offering Hymn #830: "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow"

Praise God from Whom all blessings flow,
Praise Him, all creatures here below:
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

Offering Prayer

Closing Hymn #471: "We Are One in the Spirit" (V 1,3,4,)

We are one in the Spirit,
we are one in the Lord,
we are one in the Spirit,
we are one in the Lord,
and we pray that all unity
will one day be restored

Refrain:

and they'll know we are Christians
by our love, by our love,
and they'll know we are Christians
by our love.

We will work with each other,
we will work side by side,
we will work with each other,
we will work side by side,
and we'll guard each one's dignity
and save each one's pride. (Refrain)

All praise to the Father,
from whom all things come,
and all praise to Christ Jesus,
who is God's only Son,
and all praise to the Spirit,
who makes us one. (Refrain)

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious and sovereign God, we come before You through Jesus Christ, our risen and reigning Lord. We thank You that heaven is not closed to Your people, that Christ stands as our Advocate, and that nothing can separate us from Your love.

We pray for Your church. Fill us with the Holy Spirit, keep us faithful to Your Word, and deliver us from hard and resisting hearts. Give pastors, elders, teachers, missionaries, and all who serve courage to proclaim Christ with clarity, humility, and love. Strengthen believers who face opposition or persecution. Let them know that the Lord Jesus sees them, stands with them, and will safely receive them.

We pray for those who govern and exercise authority. Grant them wisdom, justice, restraint, and concern for the vulnerable. Restrain violence, expose evil, protect those in danger, and bring peace where there is conflict. Teach us to be faithful citizens of Your kingdom, praying for all people and bearing witness to the truth without fear or bitterness.

We remember before You those who are sick, grieving, lonely, anxious, or weary. Be near to those facing pain, uncertain diagnoses, financial burdens, family troubles, or the

approach of death. Give healing according to Your will, daily bread for every need, comfort to the sorrowful, and courage to those who are afraid. Help us to care for one another with practical kindness and patient love.

We pray for those who oppose the gospel and for those who have wounded us. Keep us from hatred and revenge. As Stephen prayed for his persecutors, teach us to pray for our enemies. By Your saving grace, turn resistant hearts to Christ, as You once transformed Saul from a persecutor into an apostle.

We also thank You for the time of food and fellowship that will follow this service. Bless the meal to our nourishment and bless the hands that have prepared it. Use our conversation to encourage one another, deepen our fellowship in Christ, and help us warmly welcome every guest and member of this church family. May our table be marked by gratitude, kindness, and joy.

And now, Lord, send us into the week with our eyes fixed on Jesus. Make us steadfast in trial, gentle in speech, generous in service, and joyful in hope. Whether we live or die, remind us that we belong to our faithful Saviour. We ask all these things in the name of Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Benediction

Now may the God of peace sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it. Go in the grace of Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**