

Grace and Power Amidst Persecution

Acts 6:8-12; Acts 7:54-8:1

Key Idea: Stephen shows us that power with grace is the foundation of a faithful witness—even when the stones are raised. His story calls us to live courageously as public witnesses for Jesus Christ and to stand with those who face persecution today.

I. Introduction: The Reality of Persecution

Why this message now? Because persecution is not just a biblical theme—it's a present-day crisis. Over 70% of the world's population faces high restrictions on religious practice. Christians are the most persecuted religious group globally, but they are not alone.

Question: When the crowds form, the culture turns, and the rights are reversed—how will we, as followers of Jesus, respond?

Let's look to Stephen, the first named martyr of the Christian church, and draw strength and guidance from his witness.

II. The Character of Stephen (Acts 6:8-12)

Stephen was described as **full of grace and power**. This combination is rare—even in Scripture.

Reflection:

- How often do we associate "power" with aggression or dominance?
- How often do we associate "grace" with passivity?
- Stephen embodied both. That's what made his witness compelling.

Even when false accusations were hurled at him, Stephen remained composed and faithful.

Questions for Us:

- What kind of words do we use in the public square today?
 - How can we, like Stephen, make grace the flavor of our speech, especially on social media or in conflict?
 - Are we prepared to face opposition with both truth and tenderness?
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III. The Witness and Death of Stephen (Acts 7:54-8:1)

Stephen's message enraged his listeners. They gnashed their teeth, covered their ears, and stoned him. But even in his final breath, Stephen reflected Jesus:

"Lord, do not hold this sin against them." (Acts 7:60)

This is not weakness. This is Spirit-filled power.

Modern Parallels:

- **Nigeria:** A young Christian girl praised Jesus as she was stoned for refusing to renounce her faith.
- **Eritrea:** A university student survived a stoning by a mob and continued to speak of Christ.

Clarification: This isn't about vilifying any one group or religion. All traditions have both persecutors and peacemakers. This is about **power** used without grace—and the call for Christians, when in power, to lead differently.

IV. Lessons from Stephen

1. Lean into a Witness of Grace

Stephen started by feeding the hungry. Public service in Jesus' name can lead to public resistance. Will we keep serving?

2. Lean into a Vision of the Kingdom

Stephen looked up and saw Jesus. He defined victory not by survival, but by faithfulness.

3. Lean into the Fruits of the Spirit

Even as stones flew, Stephen remained filled with grace and joy. Real power is Spirit-filled.

4. Lean into Active Prayer

Stephen prayed to Jesus and for his enemies. That's not passivity—that's power.

5. Trust the Holy Spirit to Change Hearts

Only two people are named: Stephen and Saul. Saul, the persecutor, would become Paul, the apostle. God can redeem any story.

6. Stand with the Persecuted

Acts 8:2 says that believers buried Stephen. They publicly stood with the persecuted. Will we?

V. Conclusion: A Call to Action

There are three types of leaders in this passage:

- **Stephen:** Full of grace and power.
- **The Accusers:** Full of rage and self-preservation.
- **The Mourners:** Courageous enough to be publicly associated with the persecuted.

Which one are we?

Practical Steps:

- **Pray** for persecuted believers and their families.
- **Learn more:** Visit www.SpeakFreedomTexas.org or www.21wilberforce.org
- **Give:** Consider monthly support for ministries working with the persecuted.
- **Share:** Be a voice on social media.
- **Go:** Consider mission trips to high-persecution areas.
- **Engage:** Build friendships with refugees or invite someone of another faith to your home.
- **Advocate:** Use www.IRFscorecard.org to track how your representatives support religious freedom.

When the fists are clenched and the stones are raised, how will we respond?

Let us respond like Stephen: with grace, with power, and with eyes fixed on Jesus.