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Easter 5 • Acts 6:1–9; 7:2a, 51–60

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We all like to be a part of a winning team. Up to this point in the book of Acts, the church was the winning team. Yes, there had been arrests and there had been threats. However, the believers were bold, public preaching was well received, and the harvest was bountiful. The nature of “winning” for the church changes with the martyrdom of Saint Stephen. I wonder how many of the disciples reflected back on Jesus’s words, “. . . and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake” (Mt 10:22).

While our text gives us plenty of material regarding this pivotal moment in the life of the young Christian church, I would like to focus on Stephen’s persecution. The church’s response to persecution mirrors Stephen’s response.

The text gives us two words that form Stephen’s response—grace and power. Notice the event begins with, “And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people” (Acts 6:8).

We are told that he had great power. Yet in this tragic event, he does not seem to be very powerful. There are no great signs and wonders to persuade anyone. There are no thunderbolts from heaven to terrify the enemy. In fact, he is taken outside the city like trash and put down like a sick animal. The picture hardly fits the world’s standard of power. Yet there is no greater power than confidence in God’s word to work through our weaknesses. While miracles would continue, increasingly, power among the believers would be understood as a bold witness of Christ in the face of persecution.

Grace is the second word that formed Stephen’s response to persecution. Notice two things about Stephen’s example of grace. First, he had no trouble calling the people out for their sins. He pointed out how their ancestors had rejected God’s prophets. He calls them out for trusting in Solomon’s temple, rather than the God who had made his dwelling among his people. He pulls no punches calling them “stiff-necked” and “uncircumcised.” This would hardly seem to be the words of a “grace-filled” servant of the word. Yet we are reminded in God’s word that we have been called to “speak the truth in love” (Eph 4:15). Grace spoken with his dying breath gained greater significance because he laid the foundation of sin with the law. Stephen called them out for their sin and then released them of their guilt with his final words of intercession.

Finally, notice God’s grace in persecution. Jesus foretold of his death with these words from John’s gospel: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn 12:24). Stephen

scattered the seeds of God's word even as the people spilled his blood. A young man stood nearby as a witness, Saul. God would transform Saul the persecutor to Paul the apostle. Through Paul's preaching, the gospel would go forth to the Gentiles.

This text challenges us to understand our strength in the face of persecution. Our strength is in the power of God's word. We make use of that strength when we are bold to witness to Christ. I am humbled by Stephen's boldness. I think about the times that I was silent in my witness to Christ. Certainly, there were times when my witness was not needed. However, there have been times when I was simply afraid. I was afraid of saying the wrong thing. I was afraid of offending others. I was afraid of getting into a fight.

This text challenges us to let grace define our witness; grace that speaks the truth in love, and grace that sows the seeds of forgiveness. In the martyrdom of Stephen, we are reminded that God's word is always active and effective. We may not see positive effects of the gospel seeds we sow, but the promise is there. By the power of the Holy Spirit, when the time is right, that seed will sprout into faith.