The Stoning of Stephen



Scripture Reference: Acts 6:8- 8:4

Suggested Theme: Trusting in Jesus gives us power

Memory Verse: "'I told you these things so that you can have peace in me. In this world you will have trouble. But be brave! I have defeated the world!'" John 16:33, ICB

Story Overview:

Stephen preached to people about Jesus and God. Some of the Jews got so angry about this that they told lies about Stephen and had him taken before the Jewish court (Sanhedrin). Stephen bravely preached a sermon about how people like them had rejected God and Jesus. God wanted Israel to follow Jesus as their leader and king. Some of the Jews became so angry at Stephen that they threw stones at him until he died.

Stephen was the first martyr of the Christian faith. From this time forward, followers of Jesus were treated very badly, and many left Jerusalem to live in other places. Everywhere they went, Christians told about Jesus.

Background Study:

Click here for an overview of the Book of Acts

Stephen was a man who was respected and had a very good reputation. He was one of the Seven appointed by the apostles in Acts 6:1-7 as a servant. Acts 6:8 tells us that he was full of God's grace and power and performed miraculous signs. Acts 6:10 indicates that Stephen was a dynamic speaker with wisdom. He went to the synagogue to teach about Christ.

A synagogue was a building that Jewish people used to teach the Scriptures and gather to worship. The "Synagogue of the Freedman" was one such place in Jerusalem. The name is thought to refer to its members having been freed from slavery.

Although many Jews in Jerusalem had become followers of Christ, the Jews at this synagogue spread lies that Stephen was blaspheming (speaking sacrilegiously about God or sacred things; profane talk) against Moses, God and the temple.

The Sanhedrin was the Jewish Council that administered justice. The Sanhedrin comprised Pharisees and Sadducees, Elders, Scribes and priests. The High Priest oversaw the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin had the power to carry out justice for all matters of Jewish law. At this time, historically, the Sanhedrin had a great deal of independence and could judge all cases not involving capital punishment.

(Acts 7:1-53) When the High Priest asked Stephen if the charges were true, Stephen went on to show his devotion to God by telling the story of how God worked through His people to bring Jesus to the world even though throughout Israel's history, they kept rejecting those God sent to lead and rescue them. This is the

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longest speech in the Book of Acts.

- His accusers said that Stephen taught against the Jews.

  Response: Stephen talked about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and pointed out that the Jews were God's nation.

- His accusers said that he was blaspheming Moses.

  Response: Stephen outlined how the law was handed down through Moses and that God told Moses that a prophet (Jesus) would be sent from among the Jews. Instead of accepting this, God's people rejected both Moses and God.

- His accusers said that Stephen taught against the temple.

  Response: He reminded them that before Solomon built the temple, there was the tabernacle. God could never be contained in a house made with human hands. Stephen also implied that they treated the Temple as an idol.

To put someone to death, approval was required from the Roman Procurator. In most cases, though, the Roman procurator bent to the demands of the Sanhedrin. The stoning of Stephen was most likely illegal, as there is no indication of the Sanhedrin seeking the confirmation of the Roman procurator.

At the end of the story (Acts 7:57-8:1), Saul is mentioned for the first time in the New Testament. At this time, he is zealously opposed to followers of Jesus, but later, his life and even his name would be changed. He would go on to become the Apostle Paul and write many of the books that make up our New Testament bible. You can learn more about the dramatic change in his life from the lesson: Paul (Saul) Becomes a Christian.

After the Stoning of Stephen, followers of Christ began to leave Jerusalem to escape further persecution. The good news about King Jesus began to spread because, wherever they went, they told others about Christ (Acts 8:1-4).

Stephen was a faithful follower of Christ whose only crime was obedience to the Lord. He is referred to as the first Christian martyr (a person who is killed because of their religious or other beliefs) because he is the first person mentioned in the bible who died because of the conviction of his faith in Christ. Stephen's courage to continue to preach even when facing death in an unjust trial inspires and encourages many suffering Christians to do what is right. When encouraging children to stand up for God and be obedient to Him, remind them that God is always with them, just as God was with Stephen when he stood up for Jesus..

Way to Introduce the Story:

What would you do if someone came up to you and said, "Only stupid people believe in Jesus"? Would you be quiet or tell them that you believe in Jesus? What if they laughed at you? The book of Acts tells us about a man named Stephen who believed in Jesus even when people said they would hurt him if he did.

The Story:

Stephen was a Christian man in the city of Jerusalem who loved God and Jesus very much. He understood the power of the Holy Spirit in his life. He was a helper in the Jerusalem church and helped ensure the poor widows received their fair share of food. He taught many people about Jesus and even performed miracles in Jesus' name.

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Stephen wanted everyone to know the good news about Jesus. He knew that there were many Jews who followed God but did not yet believe in Jesus, so he went to a synagogue to preach. A synagogue is where Jewish people gather.

The leaders of the synagogue became very angry. They did not believe what Stephen was saying about Jesus. They became so angry that they began telling lies about Stephen to make everyone else hate him. They said Stephen was saying bad things about the Jews and God. They said he wanted to destroy their temple and stop them from worshipping God.

Because they were so angry at Stephen, they took him to the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was a group of Jewish religious leaders who could make decisions like in a courtroom.

Even when the Jewish leaders of the synagogue were saying all of these lies in the courtroom, Stephen continued to trust in God. He had so much faith in God that his face was peaceful. The people said, “His face is like the face of an angel” (Acts 6:15).

When the High Priest (the judge) asked Stephen if these things were true, Stephen had a very good answer. He answered by telling everyone the story of God and how God had sent His Son, Jesus, to save His people. He talked about many people in the bible, such as:

- Abraham, who was the very first Jew and the father of a great nation. Stephen also spoke of Abraham’s descendants, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph.
- Moses, who helped save God’s people from Egyptian slavery and then recorded the Ten Commandments and the rest of the law.
- David and Solomon and how Solomon built the temple.
- Jesus, whom the non-believing Jews killed

Stephen talked about how God sent His Son, Jesus, and how the Jews had rejected Jesus as they have always rejected those God sent to lead and save them. Stephen spoke the truth, but it made the people in the Sanhedrin very angry.

They took him out of the city to throw stones at him to make him die.

It must have been a very frightening time for Stephen. The Bible says the people were so furious that they were “grinding their teeth” and yelling at him. However, the Bible also records that this group of angry people was not all that Stephen saw before he died.

> “But Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit. He looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God. He saw Jesus standing at God’s right side. He said, ‘Look! I see heaven open. And I see the Son of Man standing at God’s right side!’” Acts 7:55-56, ICB

While they were throwing stones, Stephen prayed, *“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!”* He fell on his knees and cried loudly, *“Lord, do not hold this sin against them!”* After Stephen said this, he died. (Acts 7:59-60, ICB)

A martyr is a person who is killed because of their religious or other beliefs. Stephen is remembered as the first Christian martyr. He is the first person mentioned in the bible who was killed because he believed in Christ.

Stephen is an amazing example of someone who stood up for their belief in Jesus even when it meant they would suffer.

In this story, one more person would become a very important person in the church later on. He wanted Stephen to die, too. He even held the cloaks for the leaders so they could throw more stones. This man’s name was Saul, who was later known as Paul.

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Many followers of Jesus began to leave Jerusalem after Stephen's death because Paul and others began to persecute them, too. This was a very dangerous time for followers of Jesus.

But even though the Christians were afraid, they continued to tell people about Jesus everywhere they went.

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Ways to Tell the Story:

This story can be told using various methods. Always remain true to the facts found in the Bible, but help children connect to its meaning by using drama, visual aids, voice inflection or other group participation.

Be selective. Each teacher is unique, so only use the illustrations that best relate to how YOU tell the story in THIS lesson. Too many illustrations can be confusing, so eliminate any that cover other stories or details you do not wish to emphasise in this lesson.

Click here for visual aids and more storytelling methods.

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Review and Reflection Questions:

Review questions help children remember and know the facts of a story. Reflection questions encourage them to internalise the meaning and implications for their lives. Asking at least one of each type of question can help strengthen a child's spiritual development and help them connect to God. Click here to learn more about review and reflection questions.

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Review:

- Who helped Stephen speak with wisdom to the Jewish leaders? (The Holy Spirit)
- What did Stephen see when he had finished speaking to the Sanhedrin? (He looked up to heaven and saw Jesus standing at God's right side)
- What is a martyr? (A person who chooses to die rather than give up his belief)
- Who was the first Christian martyr? (Stephen)
- Why was Stephen killed? (Because he taught people about Jesus)
- How did Stephen die? (He was stoned; rocks were thrown at him until he died)
- What did Stephen say as he was dying? ('Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,' and 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them')
- Do Stephen's last words remind you of someone else's last words we've read about in the Bible? (They are similar to Jesus' final words on the cross)
- What do you think other Christians learned from this story?
- What does this story show you about God?
- What does this story show you about other people?

Reflection:

- What colour do you think the stones the people used were?

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- How do you think it felt for Stephen as he was being stoned?
- What do you think it felt like for Stephen to see God and Jesus before he was stoned?
- Why do you think Stephen was able to stay true to Jesus and not deny Him even as he was being killed?
- If you were dying, what would your last words be?
- Have you heard other stories of people who died for following Jesus?
- Has God given you power through His Holy Spirit to do, see, or say something? Do you know other people whom God has worked through by the Holy Spirit?
- What is the Holy Spirit like?
- The Bible says Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:55). What might it mean to be full of the Holy Spirit?
- Which part of this story surprised you most? What question would you ask God about this story?

Prayer:

It is important to guide children in learning how to pray. In prayer, children can connect with God and learn that He hears and answers them. God can become a lifelong friend who is with them every moment of their lives. Try using a variety of prayer methods from time to time so that the children can learn to connect with God in different ways. Note that you can pray at any time throughout your lesson. A variety of prayer methods are found here.

Song Suggestions:

- I am a C-H-R-I-S-T-I-A-N (Song)
- ABC: Jesus Died for You and Me Song
- J-E-S-U-S Song
- Goodbye World Song
- Books of the New Testament Song
- Refer to the Song Page on this website for more song options.

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Activities and Crafts:

- How to choose the best learning activities for my teaching situation.
- Visit the activities and songs pages for additional activities and crafts.

Activities:

- Let children act out situations where they would need to be brave (at school, playing a game, with children at church). Examples might include:
  - Someone at your school is spreading rumours about one of the unpopular girls. How would you stand up for God and do the right thing?
  - The other children are making fun of a Christian. They ask, “You aren’t a Christian, are you?” How would you stand up for God?

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- If you cheat at the board game, you will win. No one will ever know. How will you stand up for God and do the right thing?
- Your best friend wants you to go to the movies instead of church for worship. How would you stand up for God and do the right thing?
- Make up an imaginary situation and tell what you could do to stand up for God.

Invite the children to respond to this story using the adaptable “God’s Story” printable reflection page. Free printables for this story.

Crafts:

- Collect stones with at least one smooth, flat side. Use paints to decorate the stone with the words “Stephen, the first Christian martyr.” You and the children might find other words or phrases to add to the stones. For example, “Stand up for God” or “He will keep you strong to the end” (1 Corinthians 1:8), or simply “Stephen, Acts 7”.

Print and use these free bookmarks, trading cards or timelines. Free printables for this story.

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Other Online Resources:

- Colouring page and puzzle worksheets (Calvary Curriculum)
- Crafts: Decorate stones with Stephen’s name. Ideas for rocks or stones (you’ll have to scroll down the page) (Artists helping children)

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