

STEPHEN, THE FIRST MARTYR

Acts 6:8 - 8:1

STRUCTURE

Key-person: Stephen

Key-location: Jerusalem

Key-repetitions:

- Hostile actions: some members of the synagogue argued with Stephen (Ac 6:10); seized Stephen (Ac 6:12); Jews falsely accused Stephen (Ac 6:13); members of the Sanhedrin gnashed their teeth at Stephen (Ac 7:54); they covered their ears and yelled (Ac 7:57); dragged Stephen out of the city (Ac 7:58); stoned Stephen (Ac 7:58-59); Saul approved Stephen's death (Ac 8:1).
- Positive facts about Stephen: God gave Stephen power to work miracles (Ac 6:8); Stephen possessed wisdom and the Holy Spirit (Ac 6:10); Stephen's historical-based defense (Ac 7:1-53); he saw God's glory and Jesus standing by God in heaven (Ac 7:56); he prayed and asked Jesus not to hold their sins against them (Ac 7:59-60).
- Stephen used stories from the past to communicate truths: (1) he taught that the gospel was for all people using stories about God's encounters with Abraham, Joseph, and Moses. (2) He taught that Israel was always rebellious using stories about how Joseph's siblings rejected him, the Israelite slave in Egypt rejected Moses, Israelites rejected the prophets, and they crucified the Righteous One.

Key-attitudes:

- Deception of members of the Synagogue of Freedmen.
- Stephen's confidence when he talked about Jesus.
- Listeners' antagonism against Jesus.
- Sanhedrin's fury when they heard Stephen.

Initial-situation:

On the day of Pentecost, several events occurred. The Holy Spirit was poured out on Jesus' followers, Peter testified about Jesus, and three thousand people believed and were baptized.

Many of Jesus' new followers had lived in other countries and spoke Greek, while those from Judea spoke Aramaic or Hebrew.

The church grew and was tested when it faced problems. Peter and John were arrested and oppressed by the Jewish religious leaders. A couple named Ananias and Sapphira tried to deceive the church. Greek-speaking Jewish believers complained because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. Seven men were chosen to help the apostles in that service. Stephen and Philip were part of the seven.

The word of God continued to spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly.

Initial-problem:

Stephen did miraculous signs among the people. Opposition arose from a Jewish group which argued with Stephen, but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Holy Spirit by whom he spoke.

Final-situation:

Saul gave his approval to Stephen's death.

BIBLE STORY

God gave Stephen power to work miracles. Members of the group called the Synagogue of Freedmen argued with Stephen. But they could not argue against Stephen's wisdom or the Spirit by whom Stephen spoke.

The group seized Stephen and brought him before the Jewish Sanhedrin Council. False witnesses testified, "Stephen said that Jesus from Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses gave us."

All in the Council saw that Stephen's face looked like an angel's face (Ac 6:8-15).

The high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?"

Stephen replied, "God appeared to our father Abraham in Mesopotamia and told him, 'Leave your country and your relatives, and go to the land I'll show you.' God sent Abraham to this land and promised Abraham that his descendants would possess this land. Abraham fathered Isaac; Isaac fathered Jacob; and Jacob fathered twelve sons who are the ancestors of our tribes.

"Jacob's ten oldest sons were jealous of their brother Joseph and sold him as a slave into Egypt. God enabled Joseph to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. Pharaoh made Joseph ruler over Egypt.

"A famine struck all Egypt and Canaan; Jacob's family could not find food. Jacob sent his ten oldest sons to Egypt to buy food. Joseph recognized his brothers and sent for his father Jacob and his whole family. Jacob, with his family, went down to Egypt. The number of Jacob's descendants multiplied in Egypt. A king who knew nothing about Joseph became ruler of Egypt. He oppressed our ancestors by forcing them to throw out their newborn male babies so they would die.

"Baby Moses was born. Moses' mother tried to save the baby's life by placing him in a basket and placing the basket in the river. Pharaoh's daughter found baby Moses, adopted him, and raised him as her own son. Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. Moses was powerful in speech and action. Moses was forty years old and he visited his fellow Israelites. He saw an Egyptian mistreating an Israelite. Moses defended the Israelite by killing the Egyptian. The next day Moses saw two Israelites fighting. Moses tried to reconcile them, but the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, 'Who made you our ruler and judge? Are you going to kill me just like you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' Moses heard this, and he fled to Midian.

"Forty years later, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. Moses heard the Lord say, 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Take off your sandals; you are standing on holy ground. I've seen how Egypt is mistreating my people. I've heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now I'll send you back to Egypt.'

"This is the same Moses whom the two Israelite men had rejected. God sent Moses to be their ruler and deliverer. Moses led them out of Egypt. Moses performed miracles in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and for forty years in the desert.

"But our ancestors refused to obey Moses; they rejected Moses and wanted to turn back to Egypt. They told Aaron, 'Make us gods who will go before us' (Ac 7:1-43).

"Our ancestors followed the plans God gave to Moses and built the Tabernacle, a tent-like structure. But Solomon was the one who built the temple.

"You stubborn people are just like your ancestors. You always resist the Holy Spirit! Your ancestors persecuted every prophet who ever lived. They killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. Now you have betrayed and murdered the Righteous One" (Ac 7:44-53).

The Sanhedrin Council members were furious and gnashed their teeth at Stephen. Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit. Stephen looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at God's right side. Stephen said, "Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at God's right side."

The Council members covered their ears, yelled at the top of their voices, hurriedly dragged Stephen out of the city, and stoned him. The false witnesses left their clothes with a young man named Saul.

Council members were stoning Stephen, and Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Stephen fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Then Stephen died (Ac 7:54-60).

Saul gave his approval to Stephen's death (Ac 8:1).

GENERIC DIALOGUE QUESTIONS

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| 1. What catches your attention in the story? | 5. How did the characters face their problems? |
| 2. Is there anything in the story that is hard to understand? | 6. How have you faced similar problems? |
| 3. Who are the main characters in the story? | 7. Is there someone in the story who is similar to you or who is different from you? |
| 4. What problems did the characters face? | 8. What does the story tell about God? |

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why was Stephen seized and brought before the Sanhedrin Council to be judged?
2. How did Stephen defend himself before the Sanhedrin?
3. How did Stephen tell historical stories to defend himself before the Sanhedrin Council?
4. What accusation did Stephen bring against the Sanhedrin Council?

5. The Sanhedrin knew Old Testament history as well as Stephen. What made the difference between the way Stephen and the way the Sanhedrin responded to Jesus?
6. In addition to knowledge, what is needed to understand Jesus?
7. Today, in what way do people hold on to Bible stories and religious activities and miss the point of what they represent?
8. How did Stephen react when the Sanhedrin Council members were stoning him?
9. How do you react when people oppose you for believing and talking about Jesus?

LIFE-LESSONS

1. **The primary task of some church leaders is preaching/teaching and praying; however, all Christians have the duty to pray and to spread the word of God.** The seven chosen to distribute food to needy widows (Ac 6:1-5) also communicated God's word, as exemplified by Stephen (Ac 6:8-7:60) and Philip (Ac 8:4-39).
2. **People who reject the gospel may make false accusations against Christians who talk about Jesus.** False witnesses claimed that Stephen blasphemed against Moses and against God (Ac 6:9-14).
3. **Doctrine can be taught through telling Bible stories that relate to the doctrine being taught.** Stephen used stories from the past to communicate doctrine: (1) he taught the gospel was for all people with stories about God's encounters with Abraham, Joseph, and Moses. (2) He taught that Israel was always rebellious with stories about how Joseph's siblings rejected him, the Israelite slave in Egypt rejected Moses, Israelites rejected the prophets, and, they crucified the Righteous One.
4. **God sustains faithful believers when they are persecuted.** Members of the Jewish Sanhedrin Council were furious and gnashed their teeth at Stephen, but he was full of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit filled Stephen with peace and love (Ac 7:55, 60). See Galatians 5:22. Stephen saw the glory of God the Father (Ac 7:55) and Jesus standing at the right hand of God to receive him (Ac 7:55).
5. **The person who is full of the Holy Spirit will have the same attitudes as Jesus Christ.** Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit (Ac 7:55) and he died like Christ. Stephen forgave those who were guilty of murdering him (Ac 7:60), just like Christ forgave those who were guilty of murdering him (Lk 23:34).

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Chant:

Words in **bold and underlined** are to be stressed. Stress words by stretching them out instead of increasing volume.

ALL	
"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33 NIV).	
GROUP 1	GROUP 2
Jesus <u>told</u> us	"In this world <u>you will have</u> trouble."
Jesus <u>commanded</u> us	"But <u>take</u> heart!"
Jesus told us <u>why</u>	"I have <u>overcome</u> the <u>world.</u> "
ALL	
"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33 NIV).	