

Stoning of Stephen

(Acts 6:8—7:60)

Introduction

We've been learning that the early Christians suffered persecution.

Ask: What is *persecution*? (To be *persecuted* means to be treated with meanness or cruelty because of what you believe.)

Peter and John were put into jail because they were teaching and preaching Jesus and were told not to ever speak about Jesus again.

The bible clearly tells us that anyone who follows Him will suffer persecution. (See Matthew 10:16-23, Matthew 24:9, 2 Timothy 3:12, and Revelation 2:10.)

Ask: What sorts of persecution could you expect to receive if people found you were one of His followers?

Sometimes it can be hard to be a Jesus follower. People might laugh at you or make fun of you or call you all kinds of names. You might lose a friendship or perhaps not be included in a special event at school (picked for a game or for a part in a play).

Here in America some people have been told not to mention Jesus' name in public. But it can be much worse in some other countries where you could be put in prison or even put to death if people found out you were a follower of Jesus.

Well, you have two choices: You can either avoid speaking up about your faith and pretend you are not a believer in Jesus. Or, you can boldly share your faith in Jesus and risk the consequences.

Matthew 10:32-33 [do a "sword drill" for these verses!]

So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, (33) but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

Ask: What is that telling you?

We must learn trust the Holy Spirit to give us courage when we face difficulties, the words to say to people, and protection.

This morning we have a lesson about a person who did not allow fear of suffering to keep him from speaking boldly about Jesus to people who didn't want to believe that He was the Son of God.

Opening Prayer

Father, we never want to be afraid to tell other people about Jesus. Please help us to trust that You will always give us just the right words to share with people. And help us not to worry about how people are going to respond. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Memory Verse

Blessed are you when men hate you, And when they exclude you, And revile you, and cast out your name as evil, For the Son of Man's sake. (Luke 6:22)

[Revile = speak evil against you; mock; insult]

Lesson

Last week we met a man named Stephen. He was one of the seven men chosen to help distribute food to the widows.

Ask: How does Acts 6:5 describe Stephen? (He was *a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit.*)

Today we are going to learn more about Stephen. Let's begin where we left off last week with verse 8:

Acts 6:8

*Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, **performed amazing miracles** and signs among the people.*

Ask: What evidence do we have that Stephen was filled with the power of the Holy Spirit?

He performed amazing miracles among the people. Stephen was used of God because he was full of faith and the power of Holy Spirit.

A man in his own strength cannot perform a miracle; only God can perform a miracle. But He works through people to accomplish His works by the power of the Holy Spirit.

God doesn't work through just anyone, the person must be full of faith, as it says Stephen was in verse 5. Stephen was fully convinced that it was God working through him. Only by allowing the Holy Spirit to have full control of our lives, can the Holy Spirit use our lips to speak His words, our minds to think His thoughts, and our bodies to go and do what He wants us to do.

Those things that seem impossible for us to do, such as speak boldly about Jesus, or be kind to our enemies, are possible when the Holy Spirit lives in our heart and is allowed to control us.

We have been seeing that God's enemy, Satan, does all he can to stop God's work. God was using Stephen in a mighty way enabling people to see His power and Satan wanted to stop him.

Acts 6:9

*But one day some men from the Synagogue of Freed Slaves, as it was called, **started to debate with him**. They were Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and the province of Asia.*

[Teacher, show locations on map.]

The enemies of Jesus began to argue with Stephen. We do not read that Stephen argued back. But because Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit, he had wisdom to know how to answer these men who were arguing with him.

Acts 6:10

None of them could stand against the wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen spoke.

These evil men were not able to respond to the wisdom the Holy Spirit gave Stephen. Since they lost their argument with Stephen, they came up with a plan to try to get Stephen in trouble.

Acts 6:11-14

So they persuaded some men to lie about Stephen, saying, "We heard him blaspheme Moses, and even God." (12) This roused the people, the elders, and the teachers of religious law. So they arrested Stephen and brought him before the high council. (13) The lying witnesses said, "This man is always speaking against the holy Temple and against the law of Moses. (14) We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the Temple and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

[Teacher: "blaspheme" means *to speak evil of*.]

Stephen was being falsely accused, but the Holy Spirit inside his heart enabled him to have courage. As Stephen stood before the Jewish religious leaders, they saw something unusual about his appearance.

Acts 6:15

At this point everyone in the high council stared at Stephen, because his face became as bright as an angel's.

Then in 7:1, the high priest asked Stephen if the things he was being accused of were true. Stephen answers him by giving a history lesson of God's work in the lives of His people. He tells the story of the unfaithfulness of God's people. He said that throughout history the Jews had rejected God's servants starting with Abraham to the present time.

His sermon goes on for a long time. Let's skip ahead to the end of the next chapter of Acts.

Acts 7:51-53

*"You stubborn people! You are heathen at heart and deaf to the truth. Must you forever resist the Holy Spirit? That's what your ancestors did, and so do you! (52) Name one prophet your ancestors didn't persecute! They even killed the ones who predicted the coming of the Righteous One—the Messiah whom **you betrayed and murdered**. (53) You deliberately disobeyed God's law, even though you received it from the hands of angels."*

Wow! Stephen was accusing these Jewish religious leaders of being responsible for the murder of Jesus!

Ask: Do you think it was easy for Stephen to speak these words to Jesus' enemies?

Ask: How was Stephen able to say those truthful words with such courage? (He was filled with faith and the Holy Spirit.)

God's truth exposes people's sin. That's a good thing, because God wants people to recognize they are sinners so they will repent of their sins and put their faith in Jesus for forgiveness. But when people have their sins exposed, it is very uncomfortable for them and some people do not react well.

As the Jewish religious leaders heard Stephen tell them they were guilty of murdering Jesus, they didn't respond in a positive way.

Acts 7:54

The Jewish leaders were infuriated by Stephen's accusation, and they shook their fists at him in rage.

Now Stephen was staring in the faces of angry people.

Ask: If you were standing before a group of angry people, what would you have done?

I'd probably be so fearful that I'd want to run away as fast as I could. But the Holy Spirit gave Stephen courage to do what we cannot do in our own power.

Acts 7:55-56

But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God's right hand. (56) And he told them, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God's right hand!"

Stephen did not allow fear of these angry men to keep him from bringing honor to God. He continued to point these angry men to Jesus as the Son of God who was standing at the right hand of God.

Acts 7:57-58

Then they put their hands over their ears and began shouting. They rushed at him (58) and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. His accusers took off their coats and laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul.

These were very angry, stubborn people who were still rejecting the Good News about Jesus. They rushed toward Stephen, grabbed him, and dragged him out of the city. They were so angry with Stephen and God's message; they all began to throw rocks at him.

Even as Stephen was suffering as a result of sharing God's truth, listen to his dying words...

Acts 7:59-60

As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." (60) He fell to his knees, shouting, "Lord, don't charge them with this sin!" And with that, he died.

Remember Jesus' dying words, "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*" Because Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit, he was able to respond in the same way Jesus did as He suffered on the cross.

In our study of Acts the persecution of believers has gone beyond being put in jail and commanded not to teach in Jesus' Name. The persecution has risen to the level of having followers of Jesus put to death. Stephen's death would not be the last for believers who share the Good News about Jesus.

This lesson seems to have a sad ending but it doesn't. Stephen was stoned to death but he was not alone as he suffered, He saw Jesus in heaven waiting for him. Stephen left his life on earth and went to heaven to spend eternity with his Savior Jesus.

You and I can be comforted that if we are believers, the Holy Spirit lives inside of our hearts. Whatever God asks us to do while serving Him on this earth we will have the power to do because He lives inside of us. One day when we leave this earth, we will spend the rest of eternity with our Savior, Jesus Christ.

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, we pray that we will always have the courage to stand up for You. We don't want to be afraid of what others are thinking of us. Help us in our weakness to remember that You are with us and that You will always give us the words we need to say and the boldness to say it. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Learning Centers

Game Center

Dodge the Question

Divide the children into two groups. Have one group form a large circle and instruct the other group to stand inside the circle. Give the outside circle a nerf ball. Then tell the children inside the circle to dodge the ball. If a child is hit, he must answer one of the review questions and then join the other circle. Play continues in this manner. Groups exchange places when the last child has been hit; winners are those last to be hit

Use the following questions in a game or discussion:

1. Who was a man full of God's grace and power? (Stephen)
2. Why couldn't Stephen's enemies win their argument against him? (They could not respond to the wisdom given to him by the Holy Spirit. They had nothing to say!)

3. When the Jewish religious leaders looked at Stephen's face, what did they see? (A face of an angel.)
4. Why did Stephen tell his enemies about God's history with the Jews? (He was reminding them that the Jews have always rejected God's servants just like they rejected and murdered Jesus.)
5. How was Stephen able to be bold to speak the truth to his enemies? (The Holy Spirit gave him courage.)
6. As the Jewish religious leaders were raging against him, what did Stephen tell them he saw? ("*Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God's right hand!*")
7. What did the Jewish religious leader do when Stephen told them he saw a vision of Jesus at the right hand of God? (They put their hands over their ears and began shouting. They rushed at him and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.)
8. What does it mean "to stone him"? (They pelted Stephen with big rocks until he died. Stoning is meant to be a slow, painful, and deliberate form of capital punishment.)
9. What did Stephen say as they stoned him? (As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, "*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.*" Then he fell to his knees, shouting, "*Lord, don't charge them with this sin!*")
10. How can this lesson help you stand up for Jesus?

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