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Stephen , The First Martyr

Scripture: Acts 6:8-8:1

Theme: Following Jesus may cost us everything, but He is worth it

4th-6th Grade (Ages 9-11)

Free curriculum for small and rural churches

Lesson Overview

This Sunday school lesson explores the life of Stephen, one of the earliest followers of Jesus who faced persecution for his faith. Though Acts 6:8, 8:1 doesn't focus solely on Stephen's martyrdom, the story highlights his courage in speaking boldly about God's love despite opposition. Students will learn that following Jesus, even when it means sacrificing comfort, safety, or even life, is the ultimate act of trust. The passage shows how Stephen's faith was tested, but his love for God remained unwavering, setting an example of how believers are called to stand firm in their convictions. The key verse, Acts 7:59, 60a, captures Stephen's final moments as he prays for forgiveness for his enemies while facing death. For this age group, this verse teaches that true faith doesn't just believe in Optional reflection: children can draw a picture of Jesus helping their friends, then share one way they can help someone else this week. This extra activity supports the lesson's theme and gives teachers a simple, lowprep option for extending the discussion.

Bible Story

In Jerusalem, a growing number of Jewish people were following Jesus, but some of the original disciples, like Peter and the apostles, were worried. They knew that the Jewish leaders and the Pharisees were jealous because so many were turning to Jesus instead of the law. One day, the apostles gathered together and said to one another, 'If we're going to keep teaching everyone and watch them grow, we can't do it alone! There are too many people to feed, too many questions to answer, and too many new believers to help.'

One of the apostles, named Stephen, was a man of wisdom and faith. He was known for his kindness and his ability to speak boldly about Jesus. The apostles chose six other men, all full of faith, to help serve tables, ensuring no one was left hungry. Stephen was one of them, and while he wasn't an apostle, he was trusted to lead this important work. The apostles prayed together, asking God to guide their choice, and Stephen was appointed as the first of these helpers.

Now, Stephen wasn't just a helper, he was a man who loved God deeply. He spent his time sharing God's Word with others, teaching them about Jesus in a way that made sense. Some people loved what he said, but others grew angry. The Jewish leaders, who had been jealous of Jesus all along, began to argue with Stephen about his teachings. They accused him of blasphemy, saying, 'We've never heard him speak like this! He's claiming Jesus is the Son of God, and that's against our law!'

One day, a group of men brought false witnesses to accuse Stephen. They said, 'This man never stops talking about this Jesus he follows! He's saying he can raise people from the dead and that he's the one God chose to sit at his right side!' The leaders listened, and though they couldn't find enough proof, they were so furious they began to stone Stephen. The crowd watched in shock, but Stephen didn't flinch. He lifted his eyes to heaven and said, 'Father, don't hold this sin against them! Give me strength for this!' Then he fell to his knees, praying, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!' Before they could finish, he was still.

The news of Stephen's death spread quickly. Some of the believers who had been watching from afar were filled with grief, while others, especially the apostles, were shaken. They had seen Stephen's kindness, his faith, and his courage, and now he was gone. That night, the apostles gathered again, their hearts heavy. They remembered how Stephen had helped them serve and how he had stood up for Jesus even when it cost him his life. One apostle, Philip, who was still strong and full of the Holy Spirit, stepped forward. He said, 'We can't keep doing this alone. God wants us to share His love with everyone, even those who don't believe yet. Let's pray for wisdom and strength!' They prayed, and the Holy Spirit filled them anew, ready to continue God's work in the world.

Key Verse

Acts 7:59-60a , 'While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'"

The key verse (Acts 7:59-60a , 'While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'") calls us to respond to God's truth.

Activities

Activity 1: Stephen's Witness Card Game

A creative game where kids role-play Stephen's courage and how his faith transformed his enemies into his allies. Players take turns 'preaching' and 'receiving' kindness, reinforcing the theme of loving others even when it's difficult.

Supplies needed:

- Printed 'Witness Cards' (Stephen's story excerpt + Acts 6:8-8:1)
- Small prizes (e.g., 'Courage Badges' for brave play)
- Markers, colored paper, glue sticks (for crafting a 'stone-to-prayer' card)

1. Divide kids into small groups. Give each team a 'Witness Card' to memorize (Acts 6:8, 7:60).
2. Play 'Witness Mission': One player 'preaches' the card to the group, who must respond with kindness (e.g., a high-five or a kind phrase). If they do, they earn a 'Courage Badge.'
3. Craft a 'Stone-to-Prayer' card: Write a prayer for someone facing persecution on a smooth stone (symbolizing how the cross transforms even harsh hearts).

Activity 2: Cost of Following Jesus: 'Tally Marks Challenge'

A math-based activity where kids count 'costs' of following Jesus (e.g., giving up time, money, or comfort) and 'treasures' (e.g., peace, friendship with God). Helps kids see the balance between sacrifice and reward.

Supplies needed:

- Paper, pencils, 'Cost vs. Treasure' worksheet (pre-made or printable)

- Small items to 'trade' (e.g., plastic coins, LEGO bricks for 'money')
- Chalkboard or whiteboard for group tally

1. Explain: 'Jesus asked everything for us. What might it cost you to follow Him?' (List 3, 5 items: time, comfort, friendship, etc.).
2. Kids draw a line to divide 'Cost' (left) and 'Treasure' (right). On the worksheet, tally how many of each they'd give up.
3. Discuss: 'How did Stephen see the treasure? He chose Jesus' love over fear (Acts 7:59). Trade small items for 'money' to symbolize surrendering a 'cost.'

Discussion Questions

- Q1: Why do you think Stephen's enemies were so angry that they stoned him? How might they have felt if he'd been kind to them instead of angry?
- Q2: The Bible says Stephen 'was full of the Holy Spirit and of wisdom' (Acts 6:10). What are some ways the Holy Spirit can help us be brave, even when it's hard?
- Q3: If you could ask Jesus one question about persecution today, what would it be? How can we pray for people like Stephen who face danger for their faith?
- Q4: Stephen looked at his killers and prayed, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them' (Acts 7:63). What does it mean to forgive others, even when they hurt you?
- Q5: The cross shows Jesus gave everything for us. What's one way you can 'give everything' this week to honor Him?

Prayer Focus

Pray for persecuted Christians worldwide, especially those like Stephen who face violence for their faith. Ask God to give us courage to love others and pray for them, just like Stephen did in his final moments. Pray for the 'Holy Spirit wisdom' to guide our words and actions, even in difficult situations.

>> Missions Spotlight

The church faces persecution in many countries, but God calls us to be witnesses like Stephen. Every act of kindness, prayer, or sharing the gospel helps persecuted believers, just like Stephen's prayer transformed his enemies. Even small actions matter!

-> To the Cross

Stephen's death on the cross-like 'stoning' shows how his faith mirrored Jesus'. As he died, he chose love over revenge, just like Jesus on the cross. His prayer for his enemies mirrors Jesus' forgiveness (Luke 23:34), turning his enemies into allies through his sacrifice.