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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

High School (Ages 15-18)

Free curriculum for small and rural churches

Lesson Overview

This Sunday school lesson explores the life of Stephen, the first recorded martyr in the early Church, as he boldly proclaimed Jesus while facing persecution. Acts 6:8, 8:1 reveals how Stephen's faith and obedience led to his execution, illustrating the radical cost of discipleship, where love for Christ may demand the ultimate sacrifice. His story challenges teens to consider what it truly means to follow Jesus in a world where faith often requires courage, even in the face of opposition. By examining his prayer of forgiveness ("do not hold this sin against them"), students will grapple with the paradox of martyrdom: how love extends even to those who wrong us, and how God's justice and mercy intertwine in ways that defy human logic. The key verse, Acts 7:59, 60a, captures Stephen's moment 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 the early days of the church's growth in Jerusalem, the apostles, particularly Peter and John, were filled with the Holy Spirit and were performing mighty signs and wonders among the people. But as the church expanded rapidly, so did tensions among the Jewish leaders. The Greek-speaking widows, who had been serving at the table with the Hebrew-speaking disciples, began to feel neglected. Their complaints spread through the Greek community, drawing sharp criticism from the Jewish leadership.

One day, the twelve apostles gathered to address this growing division. They recalled the early church's commitment to serving all, including those who were marginalized. 'It is not right,' they declared in Acts 6:3, 'that we should neglect the ministry of the word while we serve at tables.' Their decision was clear: they would appoint seven men, all devoted to the Scriptures, full of the Spirit, and respected by all, who could handle the administrative and charitable duties of

feeding the widows. The apostles chose Stephen, a man of deep faith and wisdom, alongside Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus from the Antiochian background.

The selection of these men caused some jealousy among the Hellenists, who saw this as an affront to their own role in the church. Meanwhile, the apostles, now free from these burdens, devoted themselves fully to prayer and the teaching of the Scriptures. Their focus shifted from daily meals to the greater task of proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus and the kingdom of God. Yet even as they stepped back, they remained deeply connected to the people, ensuring the church's mission remained unified and compassionate.

As Stephen began to teach the people with great wisdom and authority, the Jewish leaders, some of whom were themselves devout, became enraged. They accused him of blasphemy, claiming he spoke against Moses and God. Stephen's response was a powerful recitation of God's dealings with Israel, from the time of Abraham to the Exodus, interweaving history with the promises of Christ's coming. His message was not just theological but prophetic: he declared that Jesus had been raised from the dead, fulfilling the Scriptures and calling the leaders to repentance. When they could no longer contain their fury, they dragged him before the Sanhedrin.

The Sanhedrin, composed of elders, priests, and scribes, confronted Stephen again, this time with the charge of blasphemy. In his defense, Stephen turned to the heavens, where he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'I see the heavens opened,' he declared, 'and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' His words pierced the leaders, who responded with cold fury. 'We hear enough!' they snapped. 'Enough!' And they covered their ears, mocking his vision. 'We see him who is speaking in his own words,' they sneered, 'but what does he think he's doing?'

The rage of the leaders reached its peak when they decided to stone Stephen. As they laid their coats at his feet, he knelt down and prayed aloud: 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' His last words were not defiance but surrender: 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' With that, he fell silent, his body struck by the first stones. The witnesses, however, saw something extraordinary, Stephen's face shining like an angel's as he ascended to heaven. The apostles, hearing his death, prayed for him, and the Spirit filled them anew, marking the beginning of a new era for the church.

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.

Prayer Focus

Thanks God, we ask Your help. As we study Stephen's story, we recognize the the high price of discipleship. Acts 6-8 reveals his death was not a traged tragedy, but a testament that Christ is worthy of total surrender. Followin Following Jesus may cost us everything, yet He remains the greatest treasur treasure. Lord, strengthen our faith against persecution and compromise. Gu Guide us to love deeply, so we witness boldly like Him. Give us courage to face death rather than deny Him. Amen.

>> Missions Spotlight

An estimated 365 million Christians worldwide face high levels of persecution. In countries like Nigeria, Egypt, and Iraq, believers are martyred for their faith. Stephen's story reminds us that the cost of following Jesus is real , but He is worth it.

-> To the Cross

Stephen was killed for preaching about Jesus. As he died, he said, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them' , just like Jesus on the cross. Stephen had been so changed by the cross that he died like Jesus. The cross transforms us to love even our enemies.