

STORY

Stephen, God's Child Martyred - Acts 6:8-7:60

TEACHER PRAYER

Lord Jesus, I thank You for how You kept Stephen from feeling abandoned when he needed You most. I thank You for this example of the strength of heart You can give to one of Your own. If it pleases You to give me similar stresses, I trust You to give me what You gave Stephen to carry him through to glory. Bless my heart and mouth as I serve You today in my classroom. I need You every hour. Amen.

OUTER AIM

Stephen was condemned and executed for preaching Jesus-Savior, but Jesus came to his rescue.

INNER AIM

God gave Stephen enough love for even his enemies so that after he explained how God had given them a Savior (long sermon!) he was taken home to be with Jesus.

or:

The way our Lord Jesus cared for His people in Jerusalem seems self-defeating in that He let Stephen get killed early in life, but this was God's way of blessing Stephen—who was taken to heaven—and God's way of reaching out to other souls, because Christians who fled for their lives “went everywhere preaching the word.” (8:4)

VOCABULARY & BACKGROUND

Further study sources: Rupprecht, *Bible History References*, Vol. 2, 491-497; a good Bible dictionary such as the *Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, or a Bible Handbook.

v. 8

- ▶ When the home congregation in Jerusalem grew in membership quickly, the pastors had to ask for help in some of their work--so the congregation agreed to help by electing seven assistants.
- ▶ One of them was Stephen, who was blessed with extraordinary faith, power, wisdom, and spirituality.

v. 9

- ▶ *Synagogue of the Freedmen* - one of the congregations in Jerusalem whose membership was made up of Jews from foreign countries: Their congregation's name tells us that they wanted to be identified as people not of the lower class, but as first-class citizens in the Roman world.
- ▶ These hostile people enjoyed the challenge of attacking Stephen's person, message, and success.

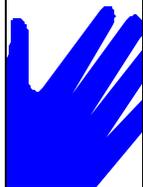
v. 9, 10

- ▶ Soon Stephen's sermons and miracle-working got the attention of others who were convinced that Jesus was a false prophet, and that Stephen was also.
- ▶ This mob of independent tough guys did not know God's Word as well as Stephen did, and since they were losing their debates, they decided to play dirty by hiring false witnesses to accuse Stephen of a number of scary sins:

v. 11, 12

- ▶ That he had bad-mouthed (blasphemed) Moses, God, and the “holy place” (Temple). On these charges they brought Stephen to trial before their ecclesiastical court.
- ▶ *elders and scribes* - the Jewish professional class of clergy and teachers of Scripture.
- ▶ *the council* - the supreme court of the Jewish church (the Sanhedrin, not a civil court), and testified that they had heard him say: a) Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this Temple, and b) Jesus shall change their church's customs and rituals.

v. 13



- ▶ *blasphemy* - the awful sin of bad-mouthing God's person or word or work.
- ▶ We note that in regard to point a), they had misunderstood--or chose to misrepresent--what Jesus had said about His own approaching death and resurrection in John 2:19-22. In regard to point b), they did not understand that Jesus had come to fulfill the Mosaic Law in the place of all Law-breakers. That made the ceremonial regulations--as prefiguring types of Himself-- no longer functional, either.

v.15

- ▶ The Holy Spirit here points up the contrast between Stephen and these evil-minded Jesus-haters, who now "saw his face as the face of an angel."
- ▶ We know little about the face of an angel, but we do know that angels have appeared in phosphorescent, radiant clothing (Luke 24:4), and that when Moses had received the Law from God, his face was shiny (Ex.34:35).
- ▶ This seems to be a God-given way for Stephen to get their full attention.
- ▶ Stephen certainly had the work of an angel (a messenger from God on high) cut out for him.

Ch.7:

- ▶ Stephen was on the witness stand long enough (fifty verses!) to make a good case that the charges against him were falsified.

vv. 2-8

- ▶ He makes the point that he serves (rather than blasphemes) the LORD God, who chose Abraham to carry forward His gracious plans for a special people...

vv. 9-18

- ▶ He makes the point that he reveres the God who preserved His people through His special servant Joseph.

vv. 20-40

- ▶ He makes the point that it is the Jewish nation that should be on trial, for when God appointed Moses as their "ruler and deliverer," he was rejected; and then the greater "ruler and deliverer" who had been with them in the wilderness was discarded in favor of heathen idols.

vv.44-50

- ▶ He makes the point that God was not as interested in the temple as they made Him out to be.
- ▶ At this point Stephen's sermon/testimony takes an abrupt turn.

v.51

- ▶ Why does Stephen here break out into a scathing denunciation of the council for resisting the Holy Ghost?
- ▶ We deduce that during his sermon they had been shaking their heads or showing their bad attitude in other ways...until Stephen could no longer ignore their response.
- ▶ Their attitude toward God and His messenger Stephen was so bad that....

v.51-55

- ▶ Now they had to be told that they are resisting God's own Holy Spirit, who yearns for their salvation.
- ▶ They were copying the bad example of their parents and forebears who had murdered God's preachers, and now they had even become guilty of doing the same to God's "Just One," the sinless Messiah Himself!
- ▶ Note: It was not Stephen who was guilty of a bad attitude toward God, Moses, and the Temple, but the Jewish leadership that was guilty--guilty of even more sin than all the other sins during all the centuries of Jewish history.

v.51

- ▶ *Stiff necked* is the opposite of bowing the head in humility; and *uncircumcised in heart and ears* means they were unconverted, undedicated to God.
- ▶ Note: To oppose God's messages brought by God's spokesmen IS to oppose the Holy Ghost, who uses the means of grace to get into sinful hearts and turn them around upside-down.

v.54

- ▶ This is not the response we would like to see, for it was seething anger that exploded in Stephen's face.

v.55

- ▶ How wonderful that God drew Stephen's attention away from this hellish scene of mad-dog snarling and snapping, and gave him a glimpse into the heavenly Jerusalem--actually letting him look into the sanctuary of God's throne-room--with Jesus standing at attention at the place of honor and privilege, ready and waiting for Stephen's arrival home.

v. 56

- ▶ Stephen couldn't help but blurt out in excited amazement and joyous surprise, ("LOOK!") and evidently expected the others also to see the wonderful vision that he saw.

v. 57

- ▶ They, of course, not having Jesus in their hearts, could not see Him in heaven either.
- ▶ Explore these thoughts with the class: Why did they holler and put their fingers into their ears and assault Stephen? Why were Stephen's message and conduct so frightening to them?

v. 58

- ▶ Even though they had no legal right to execute anyone, the Jews were so mad at Stephen that they took the law into their own hands.
- ▶ In the Old Testament times, God allowed this style of execution for blasphemers (Lev. 24:14-16).
- ▶ But in doing this to Stephen, they had become carbon copies of their evil forefathers (cf. v. 51-52).
- ▶ Note: Stephen is the central character here, of course, the hero of faith who may be included in the Hebrews 11:33-40 listing of such champions whom God supported.
- ▶ Which verse could be a reference to Stephen?
- ▶ Stephen died from brain concussions when his skull was smashed by the rocks they threw.
- ▶ Thus, vv.55-56 and 59-60 deserve our closest attention, for here we have an example of how a Christ-like heart reacts to the most horrendous mistreatment.
- ▶ True religion is to forgive from the heart--to want God to bless such evil men--to call upon our God to carry us through every obstacle when we are truly serving Him--to beseech the LORD to include such sins in/with/under His redemptive mercy and to keep on with His program of seeking lost souls, even in Jewry.
- ▶ Finally, true religion is to commit ourselves, body and soul and all things into His keeping--so that we can fall asleep in Jesus, Who has stood by us through everything else and will receive us before the throne of our Father, to introduce us there to the rest of the family of God.

STUDENT PRAYER

If you have perceptive and thoughtful students, they can be asked to compose prayers of their own for use by the class. If it is up to the teacher to provide one, it should be simple and short.

PRESENTATION

With Stephen's sermon included, this gets to be one of the longest New Testament stories in the series; so you should summarize. But for the Upper Level give the gist of his defense-strategy to show Stephen's concern that his listeners would review God's blessings on Israel, blessings which were often not appreciated. Many of our own sermons are meant to work the same way.

APPLICATIONS

1. In our society, are Christians protected by law from being attacked as Stephen was? Yet, since Satan and his crew do their dirty work anyhow, what might happen to a Christian in any of the following situations,... and how would YOU handle a bad response?
 - A Christian business-person makes the Savior known among the other office personnel.
 - Co-workers enjoy discussing a subject that God answers in the Bible.
 - A Christian delivery van driver shares Bible testimony with customers on his route.
 - A Christian student shows disapproval of the dirty talk and jokes of other students.
 - A Christian student has a quiet moment of prayer at the lunch-table.
 - A Christian is asked his opinion on socially-acceptable sins such as abortion, alcoholism, gambling, drug abuse, living together without marriage, etc.
2. How do you as a young Christian feel about your parents (or your pastor or teacher) when they want to talk with you about something you did that needs correcting?
3. If you get into trouble because of your own sinfulness, might you feel “persecuted”? What causes a person to become angry--such as the council members were--when you are scolded or disciplined? Explain:

PASSAGES

These passages can be assigned as memory work or simply discussed in class as to how they fit the lesson.

Lower

Acts 4:12 - Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

I Tim. 6:12a - Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life....

Middle any of the above and...

Luke 12:8 - Also I say to you, whoever confesses Me before men, him the Son of Man also will confess before the angels of God.

Matt. 5:44 - But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.

I Thess. 4:14 - For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.

Upper any of the above and...

Romans 1:16 - For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.

Luke 2:29-32 - Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.

II Tim. 4:18 - And the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen!

HYMN CHOICES

“Am I a Soldier of the Cross” (TLH #445:1,4)

“Fight the Good Fight with All Thy Might” (TLH #447:1,2,4)

“Stand up!--Stand Up for Jesus” (TLH #451:1,4)