

Bible Stories for Adults

Stephen

Acts 6-7

Opening

Gathering: What different ways might someone respond to the conviction of the gospel message?

Today's Focus: Stephen saw to his trial before the Sanhedrin as an opportunity to witness and became the first Christian martyr after his listeners were convicted by their rejection of Jesus.

Key Verses: *These men began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke. Acts 6:9-10*

But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Acts 7:55

Opening Prayer

Lesson

The Early Christian Community (*Acts 4:32-35*)

How tight of a community existed in the early Christian church?

Acts 4:32 = *One in heart and mind ... they shared everything they had*

What does it mean that they shared everything they had? Did they loan lawnmowers, or what?

Acts 2:44-45 = They even sold what they owned and gave the proceeds to those in need

Did this communal living become the main focus of this group?

Acts 4:33 = No, the focus remained on testifying to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus

How extensive was the charity within the church?

Acts 4:34-35 = Members even sold real estate and gave to the apostles for distribution

Charity Problems (*Acts 4:36-5:11*)

What member helped provide an example to encourage others?

Acts 4:36-37 = Barnabas - Later was partner with Paul on missionary journeys

How were the believers shown that charity is to be based on love, not on desire for praise?

Acts 5:1-11 = Ananias and Sapphira sold field, gave part, but said they gave all; died

How did Jesus tell us not to give for the sake of being praised by men?

Matthew 6:1-4 = Don't announce your giving to be honored by men, but do it in secret

Another Charity Problem (*Acts 6:1*)

What other problem popped up relating to charity in the early church? = Still all Jewish

Acts 6:1 = Greek speaking widows were being neglected in daily food distribution

Note that the first contention in the Christian church was a money matter

Grecian Jews - Those who spoke only Greek (the language of the world) = mainly outside Palestine

Hebraic Jews - Those who spoke Aramaic (likely also spoke Greek) = from Palestine

Why did widows receive a daily food distribution?

1 Timothy 5:3-5 = Unable to work, Widows relied on family or charity of others to live

Every Friday morning, synagogue members collected donations from market and homes

Distributed to needy that afternoon enough for 2 meals/day for the coming week

Kuppah (Basket) = Weekly distribution fund

Tamhri (Tray) = Daily collection for emergency needs

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The Size of the Problem

How big of a problem could this have been?

Acts 2:41, 47b; 4:4; 5:14 = Large, the church had thousands of members

Jews from other parts of the world (*diaspora*, dispersed) moved to Jerusalem for various reasons

Many did so out of religious yearning to be close to the temple (Zionists)

Many older Jews moved to Palestine to die honorably as a faithful Jew in Israel

Some rabbis said the dead would rise only in Israel

Righteous dead of other lands had to roll back to Israel underground = very unpleasant

When diaspora Jews died in Israel, their widows were left with no family to care for them

The Solution (Acts 6:2-4)

With twelve apostles to manage the church, why couldn't this be easily corrected?

Acts 6:2 = *Wrong to neglect the ministry of the Word ... to wait on tables*

Were they saying that serving the needy was not important enough for their attention?

1 Corinthians 12:14, 17-18, 27, 29 = No, they were specially gifted for other tasks - apostles

So how could the needy be cared for? = Wisdom needed for sensitive issue, potential for bias

Acts 6:3 = Church body (not apostles) to select deacons (servers) gifted by the Spirit

Diakonia - serve or minister = v1 - daily distribution; v2 - wait on

What would the apostles do with all of the extra time they would now have?

Acts 6:4 = *We will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word*

The Result (Acts 6:5-7)

Did the Hebraic Jews stack the deck of these 7 deacons with Hebrews?

Acts 6:5 = The group chose 7 - all had Greek names, one was even a converted gentile

What does this show us that the early church understood about Christian life?

Philippians 2:1-4 = Look to the interests of others ... put others first

How were these first lay ministers inducted into this ministry?

Acts 6:6 = Apostles prayed and laid hands on them

What happened to the church after its first conflict was resolved in this manner?

Acts 6:7 = It grew rapidly - even priests believed - priests took gospel home

Note: Nearly 20,000 priests rotated into Jerusalem in 1-week shifts twice per year

Stephen (Acts 6:8-10)

Did any of the seven deacons (servers) have any other spiritual gifts?

Acts 6:8 = Stephen - full of God's grace and power, did miracles

With the apostles teaching in Solomon's Colonnade in the temple, where did Stephen teach?

Acts 6:9 = In Jerusalem's Greek-speaking synagogues

Who was likely a member of the synagogue mentioned here?

Acts 21:39 = Paul was from Tarsus, a city in Cilicia

How effective was Stephen in this debate?

Acts 6:10 = *they couldn't stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke*

Was Stephen so effective because he had received such good training by the apostles?

Luke 21:15 = Spirit gives us words and wisdom that no one can resist or contradict

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If You Can't Beat 'Em, Take 'Em to Court (Acts 6:11-14)

Did Stephen's debaters become Christians or at least honorably concede defeat?

Acts 6:11-12 = No, they lied that he had blasphemed God and took him before the Sanhedrin

What charges did they present against Stephen?

Acts 6:13-14 = He said the temple would be destroyed and Moses' laws were no good

Who was similarly charged with such false accusations before the Sanhedrin?

Matthew 26:59-61 = Jesus was treated the same

The Defense (Acts 6:15-7:1)

How did Stephen respond to these accusations?

Acts 6:15 = He stood quietly with God's grace shining fully

Of whom does the appearance of this blasphemer against Moses and God remind us?

Exodus 34:29-30 = Moses shone with God's glory when he brought the Law

How did Jesus respond to the accusations made of Him?

Matthew 26:62-63a = Jesus remained silent like Stephen

The high priest was able to get Jesus to talk. Who persuaded Stephen to talk?

Acts 7:1 = The high priest prompted Stephen to give the longest speech in the book

God is Not Restricted to a Place (Acts 7:2-8)

How did Stephen begin to state his point that God is everywhere, not just in the temple?

Acts 7:2-4 = God came to Abraham, the father of the Jews, in Ur, even before Haran

How did he show that God may work in ways we can't understand, but must accept by faith?

Acts 7:5-8 = God made and kept a promise with Abraham that seemed impossible

How could Abraham accept such a ridiculous promise that wouldn't be realized for 500 years?

Hebrews 11:8-13 = By faith, What the Jews - and us - need to accept Jesus

God's Men Rejected, Then Accepted (Acts 7:9-36)

Did Stephen accuse the Jews of being the first to reject one chosen by God? = Jesus was rejected

Acts 7:9a = No, Joseph was rejected by his brothers and sold into slavery

How did God turn this rejection into good? = Jesus' rejection resulted in salvation for the world

Acts 7:9b-10 = *He gave Joseph wisdom* and power to save the world from famine

Was Joseph ever accepted by his brothers? = Jews and all are to accept resurrected Jesus

Acts 7:11-16 = Yes, *on their second visit*, moved to Egypt as promised to Abraham

Who was the next one chosen by God that the Jews rejected?

Acts 7:17-28 = Moses was rejected by Israelites

How did God turn this rejection into good?

Acts 7:29-34 = Moses went to Midian where he was prepared and then called on Sinai

Was Moses ever accepted by his brothers?

Acts 7:35-36 = Yes, and he delivered them out of slavery in Egypt

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The Customs Moses Handed Down (Acts 7:37-43)

What were *the customs Moses handed down* that Stephen was accused of wanting to change?

Acts 7:37-38 = The Laws given to Moses by God on Mount Sinai - *living words*

The Jews always respected and kept these laws they were trying to protect from Stephen, right?

Acts 7:39-41 = No, they rejected them from the very beginning

They must have learned to respect and keep these laws over time, right?

Acts 7:42-43 = No, they continued to reject them until God finally exiled them

This Holy Place (Acts 7:44-50)

Were the Jews right in protecting the temple, God's house, that they said Stephen spoke against?

Acts 7:44-47 = No, God had nothing before Moses, then a moving tent until Solomon

But now the temple was God's house and should be treated as such, right?

Acts 7:48-50 = No, God lives everywhere in heaven and on earth

Speech Summary (Acts 7:51-56)

How did Stephen summarize his speech in his concluding comments?

Acts 7:51-53 = The Jews were worse than their fathers by rejecting the Messiah & the Law

Did Stephen's speech persuade them to repent and accept Jesus this second time?

Acts 7:54 = No, *they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him*

How did God bless Stephen for so boldly stepping out in faith and witnessing?

Acts 7:55-56 = He was shown a vision of Jesus at God's right hand

The Prosecution Rests (Acts 7:57-60)

Had the Sanhedrin heard anything like this before? = They accused Jesus of blasphemy

Matthew 26:64-66 = Yes, Jesus said they would see what Stephen just saw

Did they respond to it better this second time?

Acts 7:57-58 = No, they even ignored Roman law and stoned him themselves

Did Stephen apologize for his comments and beg for his life?

Acts 7:59-60 = No, even asked God to forgive them as Jesus had done

What promise did Jesus give that Stephen was the first to realize? = *Martyr* is Greek for *witness*

Matthew 10:39 = *Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it*

Closing Prayer

Response - Consider and meditate on one each day this week

1. When have I shared from what God has given me to help meet the needs of others?
(Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-37; 20:35; Deut 15:14; 16:17; Ps 116:12; Luke 6:30-31, 35, 38; 2 Cor 9:6-15)
2. How have I short-changed God?
(Acts 5:1-11; 1 Chronicles 29:14-17; Malachi 3:8-10; Matthew 22:21)
3. What have I done in order to receive praise from others instead of giving glory to God?
(Acts 5:1-11; ; Isaiah 64:6; Matthew 6:1-18; 23:1-12; 2 Corinthians 10:12-18)
4. What gifts has God given me to serve as an effective part of His Body?
(Acts 6:1-4; Luke 4:10; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4:7-16; 1 Timothy 4:14-16)
5. How do I react when others attack me?
(Acts 7:57-60; Matthew 5:38-48; Luke 23:34; John 15:20; Romans 12:14-21; 1 Peter 2:23; 3:8-14)