

Stephen's Impact

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FAITH STORY:

Acts 6:1-15, 7:54-8:1

FAITH FOCUS:

The newly formed church hasn't had many problems up until this point but then a problem arises between the Hellenistic (Greek-speaking believers) and the Hebrew-speaking believers. The apostles decide to appoint 7 leaders—Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas—to deal with this problem, so they can focus on preaching. One of the leaders, Stephen, is arrested because of his great faith. Our story then skips to when Stephen is stoned to death with Saul there as a witness.

SESSION GOAL:

To help students realize that a small step of leadership can have a long-lasting impact.

MATERIALS AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- Paper and markers
- Props for skit (listed in Explore the Bible)
- Copies of skit and highlighters
- Copies of the Respond Questions, pens
- Bibles
- You will want to plan ahead for the scripture/skit so that it goes smoothly and be prepared to improvise. Think about your group size and get the characters adjusted as needed.

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS:

Greet the students as they come in. Spend some time talking about their week and ask them what impact they think they might have had on their friends. Then ask them to ponder what was the

most meaningful thing they heard this week, and who said it. Next, ask students to take a piece of paper and marker and quickly draw the person who has had the biggest impact on their life thus far.

Share the pictures and keep track of how many students say people who aren't well known. Bring that to the students' attention at the end.

CONNECT:

Ask:

- Who's the most important person/ people in our church?
- What's the best gift you could possibly have from God?
- Who has the biggest impact in this youth group?
- Who has the biggest impact in your family?

EXPLORE THE BIBLE:

- Adjust this to the size of your group and get your sponsors involved as well. Get everyone involved, so that everyone can learn from the scripture in a hands-on way. You will be the narrator. Make copies of the scripture/script for everyone since there is no audience and then they know what's going on. Assign parts and make adjustments as needed. Encourage your kids to be overdramatic and/or give important parts to dramatic students or sponsors.
- Give students highlighters to mark their parts, then give them time to read through and get an idea of what they're doing. Give them direction as groups as to where they'll be standing, etc.

Divide the students into small groups. Give each group a Bible and ask them to discuss these questions:

- What does the discrimination in the first part of the chapter do to the church?
- What does this passage say about leadership?
- How was Stephen a brilliant example of a servant leader? (He was willing to make sure that the church was healthy on the inside and then he reached out to others as well. Willing to not be in the glory, he humbled himself and even died for Christ)

- In what ways does Stephen's death parallel Jesus' death?

Come back together into a large group and go over what the kids talked about in their smaller groups.

APPLY:

Discuss the following:

- Where do you see discrimination or uneasiness in the church today?
- What are the little things that people do (the inside jobs) in the church that often times get overlooked?
- What would have happened if Stephen would not have cared for the poor widows? If he wouldn't have been willing to help solve the problem in the church?
- What do you think this story has to do with Saul and his future?

RESPOND:

Ask students to spread out across the room. Give them a pen and paper, and the sheets of paper with responses questions. Ask them to answer the following:

- What are some of the small things that God calls you to do in your everyday life? Are you willing to do these small things? Why or why not?
- What impact could your gifts have on those around you, both in the church and in your everyday lives?
- Would you be willing to suffer as Stephen did?

Next have the youth break into small groups of 3 to 4. Have them each go around the group and share what gift they think God is calling them to use in the church both now and in the future. Then have the group members lay hands on each person and pray an affirming prayer for each person. If possible, have a sponsor or an "apostle" in each group as well. (You may want to provide a suggested prayer that they can use as they lay hands on group members and pray.)

In closing, have a large group prayer of sending and dedication of your students' gifts— both big and small—to God.

INSIGHTS FROM THE SCRIPTURE:

Palestinian Jewish Christians (Hebrew-speaking) had many different opposing views than the Hellenistic Jewish Christians (Greek-speaking). This is what led to the discrimination against the Hellenistic widows. Hellenistic and Palestinian believers had theological differences such as their view on the law, and language. This is proven by the fact that Hellenistic believers are more heavily persecuted after Stephen's death.

The tables that are talked about in verse 2 of chapter 6 could mean the actual distribution of food or they could refer to distribution of money. This could possibly be the first reference to deacons of the church, since this is the first group of leaders other than apostles appointed in the church. Up until this time only the apostles had done signs and wonders and now Stephen is doing miracles as well. Just like Jesus, Stephen is brought before the Council. There are discrepancies as to whether Stephen's death was a lynching or if he was fairly tried and condemned. Either way there are many parallels between Jesus' and Stephen's death. 1) His trial. 2) He asked God to receive his spirit (v59) 3) He prayed for those killing him, that they'd be pardoned of this sin (v59).

Saul was a witness at this trial. It is believed that he was an influential Pharisee. Because of Stephen's death, persecution of Christians increased and the Hellenistic-Jewish Christians left Jerusalem and Judea to escape heavy persecution, spreading Christianity. Some would say that Stephen may have paved the way for Paul's conversion.

WORKS CITED:

"Stephen." *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*. 5th ed. 1997.

Williams, C.S.C. *The Acts Of the Apostles*. 1957.

Willimon, William H. Interpretation, *A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Acts*. Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1988.

Session Reproducibles

SKIT

Parts:

- 2 people as Hebrew-speaking believers
- 2 people as Greek-speaking believers
- Several people to represent the 12 apostles
- Stephen
- Several people to be “7 chosen men”
- 2-3 people who Stephen does miracles for
- Several people who are the “gang” Synagogue of Freed slaves
- 1 cop to arrest Stephen
- Council members
- 1 lying witness
- God
- Jesus
- Saul

Props:

- A dinner roll
- A sign with the word “miracle” on it
- Bandanas and big bulky clothes for the “gang” of Freed Slaves
- Balled up paper to represent stones
- Flashlight
- 3-4 coats

Session Reproducibles

You will also need the meeting place of the apostles and the place of the high council so that things stay spread out during your skit.

Introduce the scripture story. Explain that this happened after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. The church had been established (Pentecost). Everything within the church had been going great up until this point. But since the church was consistently getting new members, people that converted after Pentecost and people before Pentecost started having some difficulties, so that's where our story comes in.

Narrator: But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. *(Hebrew and Greek believers rumble)* The Greek-speaking believers *(pause here as the Greek-speaking believers do their best to mumble something that sounds like Greek)* complained about the Hebrew-speaking believers *(Hebrew-speaking believers mumble something that sounds like Hebrew)* The Greek-believers said that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food. *(At this point one of the Hebrew believers throws a dinner roll at one of the Greeks and says, "Fine—have it!")*

Narrator: So the Twelve called a meeting of all the believers.

One of the 12: We apostles should spend our time teaching the word of God, not running a food program. And so, brothers, select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will give them this responsibility.

Another one of the 12: Yeah, then we can spend our time in prayer and teaching the word.

Narrator: Everyone liked this idea *(Everyone looks around at each other and says, "Hey, that's a good idea!")* and then the apostles chose the following:

At this point have the "7 chosen" stand in a line and step forward when called.

Narrator: There was Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit; Phillip; Procorus; Nicanor; Timon-but not Pumba; Parmenas; and Nicolas of Antioch. These seven were prayed for by the apostles who laid hands on them *(apostles lay hands on them and then say AMEN!)*

Now Stephen *(Stephen steps forward)* was a man full of God's grace and power. He performed amazing miracles and signs *(Stephen holds up a sign and then hands it to one of the people)* among the people. But one day some of men from the Synagogue of Freed Slaves *(they walk up to Stephen in a gang sort of fashion, pretty full of themselves)* started to debate with Stephen. But none of them could stand against the wisdom and Spirit with which Stephen spoke *(all of the "gang members" fall down)*.

So they persuaded some men to lie about Stephen. *(Walk up to man and point back at Stephen)*

Gang member: We heard him blaspheme Moses, and even God.

Narrator: This roused the people. *(at this point everyone gets angry and starts stomping and clapping)* So, they arrested Stephen, taking him to the high Council. *(cop takes Stephen over to where the council members are)*.

Lying Witness: This man is always speaking against the holy Temple and against the law of Moses. We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the Temple and change the customs Moses handed down to us.

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

Session Reproducibles

Now explain that Stephen addresses the council, giving them a rundown of the history of their ancestors. But at the end of his address he proclaims Jesus as the Messiah and accuses the council of murdering him unjustly which infuriates the council. This sets up the next scene.

Narrator: The Jewish leaders were infuriated by Stephen's accusation, and they shook their fists at him in rage (*council shakes their fists*) But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God (*God shines a flashlight at Stephen*), and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God's right hand. (**Jesus Waves**) Then Stephen told them:

Stephen: Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God's... uh... (*Stephen pauses and looks down at his hands. Confused, he desperately tries to figure out which direction it is*) um, his right hand! (**Jesus waves again**).

Narrator: At this point they put their hands over their ears and began shouting (*everyone minus Stephen, God and Jesus begin to shout... like lalala we're not listening!*)

They rushed at him and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him (*cop runs in, drags him a couple feet and then they grab the paper balls and throw them at him*) His accusers took off their coats and laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul. (*The four people with coats take them over to Saul who is watching the whole thing*)

Stephen: Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. (*Shouting on his knees*) Lord, don't charge them with this sin! (*falls over and dies*)

Narrator: Saul was one of the witnesses, and he agreed completely with the killing of Stephen. (*Saul goes over, puts his foot on top of Stephen proudly and does a thumbs up*).