

Acts 6 and 7

Aim of Lesson

To show how Stephen was both courageous and willing to die for his Lord.

Background study

Acts 5:34-39; 1 Timothy 3:8-13.

Suggested outline of lesson

Introduce this lesson by explaining why the church in Jerusalem needed some form of organization as the number of believers grew. Emphasize the care that was taken over the poor and widows. Show the family spirit that can prevail when people give and take as willingly as the early Christians, shown in the events described in Acts 6.

Compare the attitude of the believers with that of the Jewish leaders towards the growing church. Recall the fact that the religious leaders thought their problems were over when they crucified Jesus; they believed that he would soon be forgotten. However, just the opposite seemed to be happening as men and women flocked to the church. The Jewish leaders felt it their duty to stamp out Christianity. They disagreed with its teaching, which they regarded as a threat to the Jewish religion, and they beat and imprisoned Jesus' followers. But many of the people saw how different was the way of Jesus from the way of the Jewish leaders, and were baptized into his name. Not all the Jewish leaders, however, agreed with this persecution and some were worried that they might be contravening God's commands.

Explain why the seven deacons were chosen, what their duties were, and what qualities were required in these men. Show how Stephen's qualities were exactly those required for the pastoral ministry. Lead into the way in which these same characteristics helped him to handle the questions put to him by the Jewish elders. Show vividly how they argued with him and, when they realized that they could not establish a case against him, they acted as they had with Jesus and brought liars to falsely accuse Stephen of blasphemy.

Explain, briefly, about the Sanhedrin. Try to help the children imagine the scene as Stephen stood alone (yet not alone) before his accusers. Point out that the trial should have proved Stephen's innocence, had it been conducted fairly. Outline Stephen's defence, as he related the history of Israel from Abraham to Solomon and demonstrated that God had always been with his people even when there was no building for him to 'dwell in'. Explain that Stephen was showing that God's people had always resisted his purpose with them. They had failed to see that the tabernacle and the temple were temporary and that they should have been preparing to welcome their Messiah. Stephen fearlessly strove to persuade the Jews to face up to their long and violent rejection of God's chosen messengers, culminating in the terrible crucifixion of the promised Messiah. With the authority of the Holy Spirit Stephen condemned them.

Discuss how people react when they know they are wrong, but cannot admit it to themselves or to God. Stephen's accusers, moved by bigotry, acted violently and unlawfully when they dragged him beyond the city walls to kill him. Contrast their passionate rage with the calmness of Stephen who knew that his Saviour was close to him as he looked and saw the vision of Jesus on the right hand of his Father. His accusers shut their ears and could not, would not, open their minds when Stephen told them of the vision, and their hatred turned to murder.

It is important to show how close Stephen was to Jesus as he prayed: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them". He was so close that he was able to express the same selfless forgiveness of his executioners that Jesus had expressed on the cross.

Finally, introduce Saul standing aside and looking after the clothes of the stoners. Children are often confused by people of the same name, so make clear that this is not the same man who was the first king of Israel. Prompt the children to begin thinking about how the brutality of his friends and the calm of Stephen might have affected him.

Relevance to the children's lives

Our lives and that of Stephen are very different. In what ways? What remarkable qualities did he demonstrate in the way that he died? (Courage, faith, calm, joy). Why was he able to be like that? We are not persecuted for following Jesus. Does this story make you wonder if you could behave as Stephen did?

Worksheets

The remaining letters in the word search should make the word 'BIBLE'.

Prayer

Dear Lord God, help us to forgive when people hurt us. Show us how to see good in others. Amen.

Memory verse

"And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them...'" (Acts 7:60).