



STORIES **AND** RITUALS

LESSON 32

Stories & Rituals: The Bible in Broad Strokes

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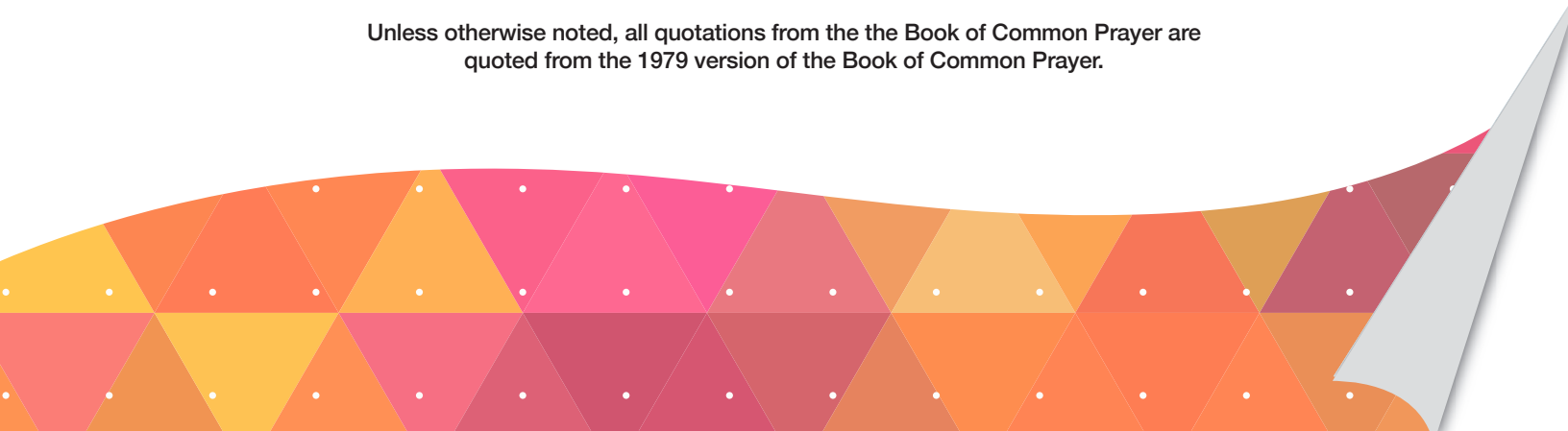
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Stephen Is Martyred

Texts: Acts 6:8-7:60

Big Idea: Discipleship is not always easy.

Lesson Objectives

Participants will:

1. Recognize that discipleship is difficult by playing a game.
2. Demonstrate an understanding of the story of Stephen by engaging in a re-telling of his story.
3. Identify both the joys and difficulties of discipleship by engaging in personal reflection and prayer.

ACTIVITY (TIME)

Dive In (10 minutes)
Group Check-In

Community Builder (15 minutes)
I Would Rather...

The Story (15 minutes)
Stephen Is Martyred

The Ritual (15 minutes)
Finding Strength

Dig Deeper (10 minutes)
Martyrs

Wrap it Up (5 minutes)
Closing Prayer

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Nothing

- Nothing

- Copy of Lesson Sheet 32.1

- Soft, instrumental music (optional)
- Method for playing music (optional)
- Stones
- Candle • Lighter

- Smartphones or other devices that connect to the Internet
- Copy of Lesson Sheet 32.2
- Pencils or pens

- Nothing

LESSON OVERVIEW



What's the Story?

Today your group will hear the story of Saint Stephen, who is traditionally known as the first martyr of the church. His story is chronicled in Acts chapters six and seven. In this story, Stephen is arrested, tried, and murdered for his miracles and preaching.

The bulk of today's passage is Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin (pronounced San-hee-drin), a large council headed by the High Priest that considered religious, civil, and criminal cases. (It should be noted that, before his crucifixion, Jesus was also put on trial before the Sanhedrin, which also condemned him to death.) In his speech, Stephen draws on the history of Israel in order to "prove" to Jewish leaders that Jesus is the Messiah.

The story does not end well for Stephen. His speech enrages the leaders on the Sanhedrin, and they condemn him to death. Stephen is driven out of the city and stoned. It is interesting to note the parallels between Stephen's final moments (chronicled in Acts 7:59-60) and Jesus' death. It should also be noted that Saul (later known to us as Paul) saw this happen, and approved of Stephen's death (Acts 8:1). Today, many liturgical churches celebrate Saint Stephen's feast day on December 26, remembering the sacrifice Stephen made while preaching the good news of Jesus.



What's the "Big Idea?"

Today's lesson focuses on the big idea that *discipleship is not always easy*. In Stephen's case, his discipleship led to death. Though in most cases we don't have to worry about being killed for our faith in Jesus, it is important to recognize that it's not always easy to be a believer. Though it comes in a more mild form, we too risk facing persecution when we share the gospel with others. Sometimes we experience hurtful words or actions that are meant to bring down those who have faith.



What's the Symbol?

Stephen was killed by stoning, a form of capital punishment where a group of people throws stones at the victim until he or she dies. In today's story, stones symbolize the cost that Stephen paid for being a disciple of Christ. Find a selection of large rocks and stones to display, as well as smaller stones to use for the ritual.



What's the Ritual?

Today's ritual will invite participants to think about the ways in which discipleship might be difficult, and to consider the places and people that encourage them and help them find strength in following the difficult path of discipleship. Participants will receive a stone to take with them as a reminder of the story and the cost of discipleship.



Setting Up Your Space

Set up your "altar" area. Cover a large table with a piece of fabric or linen. On the altar place some candles and a large cross. Place large rocks as well as smaller stones both on top and in front of the altar. Gather materials needed for the Ritual and Dig Deeper activity.

DIVE IN (10 MINUTES)

Group Check-In

Materials:

- Nothing

During the session:

- Open your session with a quick prayer. Use this one or a prayer of your own:
Holy Lord, open our eyes, ears, and hearts to see your love and faithfulness in the world around us. Help us see your love for us in your Word. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.
- Let's start our time together by sharing some of the great and not-so-great things that have happened to us this week. What were the high points and low points of your week? Go around the group and invite everyone to share.

COMMUNITY BUILDER (15 MINUTES)

Would You Rather...

Materials:

- Nothing

NOTE: This game should be played in a large space where participants can walk from one side to another. You may need to move furniture or clear space in order to make enough room for your whole group. If weather permits, you may wish to play this game outdoors.

During the session:

- Ask participants to stand in the middle of the playing space.
- Designate one side of the room as side "A" and the other as side "B."
- Read the statements below. Each statement includes two options. Participants should pick which option they would rather do: "A" or "B." Once picking an option, each person should walk to the side of the room designated for that option.
- Read the following statements, one at a time. After reading each of the following statements, give participants 30 seconds to share with a partner why they chose that option:
- I would rather eat: A) chocolate ice cream or B) vanilla ice cream.
- I would rather listen to: A) country music or B) Rock and Roll.
- I would rather live in: A) someplace hot during the winter or B) someplace cold during the summer.
- I would rather have for a pet: A) a snake or B) a cockroach.
- I would rather: A) see the nativity of Jesus or B) See the empty tomb.
- I would rather: A) pray alone or B) pray with a group of people.
- I would rather: A) stand up for what I believe and risk being hurt or B) Conform to another person's beliefs.
- I would rather: A) tell another person about my faith and experience hardship or B) Remain silent and live in hiding.

COMMUNITY BUILDER - CONTINUED

- If you have time, create other “I would rather...” statements and continue playing the game with the group.
- After you have finished playing the game, discuss the following questions:
- **Which statements were easier for you to finish? Which statements were more difficult?** *[Answers will vary.]*
- **Today we are going to talk about being a disciple. Who is a disciple?** *[Someone who is a student or follower of a particular person's teaching; in many cases, the word 'disciple' describes the followers of Jesus.]*
- **Which of the statements I read relate to discipleship? Were these statements easy or hard for you to answer?** *[Answers will vary. The last four statements relate to discipleship. The final two will most likely be the statements that were the most difficult to answer.]*



THE STORY (15 MINUTES)

Stephen Is Martyred

Materials:

- Copy of Lesson Sheet 32.1

Before the session:

- Make a copy of Lesson Sheet 32.1
- Practice reading through the story several times so you are familiar with it.

During the session:

- Tell the story on Lesson Sheet 32.1
- **After the story, ask: What is this story telling us about God?** *[Answers will vary, but may include: God calls us to be disciples by telling God's story to others, God equips us with the words and strength to tell others about Jesus, God is with us when we face trials and persecution, etc.]*
- **What is this story telling us about humanity?** *[Answers will vary, but may include: We tell others about God, even when it is hard; we face trials and persecution for sharing our faith with others; we find courage to stand up for what we believe, etc.]*
- **What is this story telling us about the world?** *[Answers will vary, but may include: The world doesn't always want to hear God's story, the world is filled with people who want to persecute others, the world needs to hear the good news about God's love for all people, etc.]*
- **Sometimes, the story of Stephen is a difficult one for us to hear. After all, Stephen preached about God, and he suffered death because of it. Time and time again we hear stories about saints and other people who have suffered because of their faith in God. However, God asks us to continue telling the story, even when it seems difficult for us to do so.**



THE RITUAL

(15 MINUTES)

Finding Strength

Materials:

- Soft, instrumental music (*optional*)
- Method for playing music (*optional*)
- Stories
- Candle
- Lighter

During the session:

- If you are playing music, begin playing it softly.
- Invite the group to sit in a circle. Everyone should be sitting at the same level (i.e. on the floor, in chairs, etc.). Place a candle in the middle of the circle. Light the candle.
- **The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that “Once Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” What do you think that means? Turn to a partner and share your thoughts.**
- Invite participants to share their ideas with a partner. After a minute, invite the group to come back together. Ask for volunteers to share their interpretations of the quote, as they are comfortable doing so.
- **This quote comes from a book that Bonhoeffer wrote called *The Cost of Discipleship*. This book includes Bonhoeffer’s ideas about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Bonhoeffer knew first hand that it’s not easy to follow Jesus. In fact, Bonhoeffer himself was imprisoned and eventually killed for his involvement in Christian communities during the Nazi regime. Bonhoeffer’s story, as well as the story of Stephen, reminds us that sometimes being a disciple is hard. However, it’s something that God still calls us to do.**
- Give each person a stone.
- **You have just received a stone. Hold the stone tightly in your hand. While you hold it, think about a time in your life (or a time in the life of another person you know) when being a follower of Christ was hard. What are some of the things that make it difficult to be a disciple of Jesus?**
- Allow time for participants to think.
- **In a moment, I am going to invite you to toss your stone into the middle of the circle.**
- As you toss your stone, say one word or phrase that describes what you are thinking. You can say these things either silently or aloud.
- **Invite participants, one at a time, to toss their stones into the center of the circle, asking them to share as they feel comfortable doing so.**
- **It was probably very difficult for Stephen to share his faith and to face the consequences of doing so. However, he found the strength to tell others about Jesus—strength that stayed with him until the moment of his death. What do you think brought Stephen strength during this time? Turn to a partner and share your thoughts.**
- Invite participants to find a partner and share their ideas. After one minute, bring the group back together. Ask a few volunteers to share their thoughts, as they are comfortable doing so.
- **Discipleship is not easy. However, there are people and things that give us the strength we need in order to fully live into our calling. Where are some of the places you find strength to be a disciple of God? Think about that for a moment.**
- Allow time for participants to think.

THE RITUAL - CONTINUED

- In a moment, I am going to invite you to reach back into the circle and take a stone. As you grab a stone, share one way in which you find the strength to be a follower of Jesus.
- Invite participants, one at a time, to reach into the center of the circle and pick up a stone. Encourage them to share as they grab their stone.
- Thank you for being open and honest, and for sharing today. Sometimes it's difficult to do that! I invite you to take your stone with you, and keep it in a place where you will see it. You can keep it in a purse, pocket, locker, backpack... anywhere! Every time you see your stone, remember the story of Stephen and all of the ways you find the strength to be a disciple.

DIG DEEPER (10 MINUTES)

Martyrs

Materials:

- Smartphone or other devices that connect to the Internet
- Copy of Lesson Sheet 32.2
- Pencils or pens

Before the session:

- Make a copy of Lesson Sheet 32.2 for every two people in your group.

During the session:

- Ask participants to split into groups of two.
- In many Christian traditions, Stephen is considered a saint. He is considered a saint because he died defending his faith in Jesus. Stephen stood up for his beliefs, and was killed because of it. Many people call him the first Christian martyr—someone who is killed because of their religious beliefs. There are many stories about other martyrs for Christianity, too.
- Give each group of two a copy of Lesson Sheet 32.2 and a pencil or pen.
- Invite groups to do some research about other martyrs for the Christian faith. As they complete the research, pairs should fill in the appropriate boxes on the Lesson Sheet.
- After groups have filled out the Lesson Sheet, ask them to share their findings.
- **Who are some of the martyrs you found? What are their stories? Why are they considered martyrs?** *[Answers will vary.]*
- **Why do you think it's important for us to learn about these martyrs?** *[Answers will vary, but may include: They give us hope, they challenge us to defend our faith, they set an example for what it means to be a disciple of Christ, etc.]*

WRAP IT UP

(5 MINUTES)

Closing Prayer

Invite the group to share any prayer concerns or requests they may have for the week. Close your time together in prayer. Use the following or pray your own prayer:

We give you thanks, O God, for the example of your servant Stephen. Give us the strength and courage to be disciples, even when it's difficult or we face trouble. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Lesson Sheet 32.1

Stephen is Martyred

A story from the book of Acts:

Stephen was a disciple of Jesus who did great things with people. Many people watched him because he was filled with the Spirit and could perform many signs and wonders. It did not take long for people to start speaking against him because of these things. People began to debate him and speak out against him, telling the elders and legal experts that he was saying untrue things about Moses and God. Soon, they arrested Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin, a council, for a trial.

While Stephen was before the council, his accusers set up false witnesses who testified that he was speaking against the laws of the people when he talked about Jesus. They testified, “He has said that Jesus will destroy this place and change the laws that were given to us by Moses.”

The high priest, who oversaw the council, asked Stephen, “Are these accusations true?” Stephen responded with a speech, where he talked about God and about Jesus.

Stephen talked about the history of God’s people: about the covenant made with Abraham, about Joseph and how his family moved to Egypt, and about the Israelites in slavery. He told them about how Moses rescued the Israelites from slavery and that even though they were rescued, the Israelites still didn’t understand the nature of God. Even though God, through Moses, delivered them from their oppression, the people still sought to worship other gods and created an idol of their own.

Stephen told them about the tent that God’s people built, which they used to worship God and store God’s commandments. He talked about how this tent stayed with the people for many, many years—through leaders like Joshua and David—until King Solomon built a temple, a real house, in which the Lord could dwell. But, Stephen challenged them to think about where God does dwell; that God lives beyond the houses that were made for the Lord.

Stephen also challenged them by questioning how people have persecuted their ancestors. He charged them with speaking against the Holy Spirit and rejecting Jesus, the Son of God. He accused them of receiving God’s laws, but not following them.

This speech angered the Sanhedrin, and they started to target him. But Stephen looked toward heaven and saw God’s glory, with Jesus standing at the right hand of God. He said, “Look! It’s the Son of God, standing at God’s right hand!” But the crowd covered their ears, for they didn’t want to hear him.

The crowd surrounded him and dragged him out of the city. Once they left the city, they began to throw stones at him. There were many witnesses there, including a man named Saul (later, he would be known as Paul). As the crowd was stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then, he kneeled on the ground and asked God to forgive those who were throwing the stones at him.

Soon after he prayed, Stephen died.

Lesson Sheet 32.2

Martyrs

Use the table below to guide your research on the martyrs of the Christian faith.

[illegible]