

# A Good Shepherd Early Church Story

## Set Apart For Ministry

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## **SET APART FOR MINISTRYy ... MATERIALS**

- rmedium wicker basket to hold
- wooden Hellenist figure
- wodden disciple figure
- wooden Stephen figure
- wooden onlooker figure
- wodden SaullPaul figure

Set Apart For Ministry #77



Stephen



Disciple



Hellenist



Saul



Onlooker

## **SET APART FOR MINISTRY ...**

**Acts 6, 7-8:3**

### **ACTIONS**

Without speaking, stand and get the basket from the shelf. Return to the circle and sit down, placing the basket next to you.

Gently stroke one or more of the wooden figures to center yourself and the children.

Move your open hand, palm up, from left to right as you speak of "everywhere."

Begin with hands together and open them as you speak of growing.

Nod sadly.

Place the figure of the Hellenist to right center.

Place a disciple next to the Hellenist.

Touch the Hellenist briefly as you speak.

Nod as you touch the disciple.

## WORDS

Children of God., watch carefully where I go to get this story so you will know where to find it if you choose to make this story your work today or another day.

Children of God, if you will make silence with me I will find all the words to this story of God's people.

After Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came to the disciples, they began to tell the Good News of Jesus' love everywhere.

Soon the church began to grow.

And soon there were problems.

There were many different kinds of people living in Judea during this time. Some of them were Jews, some were Gentiles, some were Greeks and some were Jews who spoke Greek. They were called Hellenists.

The people of God had always been very careful to take care of poor people, especially widows and orphans.

But soon the Jewish people who spoke Greek began to complain that their widows and orphans were not being treated fairly.

Since the disciples were very busy telling the stories of Jesus and his life, they decided to find some other people to help take care of the ones who needed help.

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Place the Stephen figure in the center of the storytelling area.                               | They found seven men called to do the work. One of them was named Stephen.  |
| Rest both of your hands gently on the Stephen figure, and look up to God.                      | The disciples put their hands on Stephen and the others and asked God to be with them and help them with their work.              |
| Move Stephen slightly away from the rest of the group. Return the other figures to the basket. | Stephen was full of the Spirit of God. He did wonderful things, and his words helped people know of God and God's love.           |
| Place an onlooker figure next to Stephen.  | But there were people that didn't like Stephen. They didn't want God's love to be for aU the people, only for some of the people. |
| Move Stephen to the other side o f the area.   | They had Stephen arrested. They even had people tell lies about Stephen.  |
| Nod your head sadly, once or twice.  | The rulers believed the lies and decided that Stephen should die for saying wrong things about God.                               |
| . Look upward, and smile slightly.   | Stephen looked up into heaven and he saw Jesus standing next to God.  |
| Shake your head as you touch the other figures. Move the figures a short distance.             | The people wouldn't listen to Stephen. Instead they dragged him out of the city and threw stones at him until he died.            |
| Place the Saul figure to one side, slightly away from the group.                               | Nearby stood a young Jewish man named Saul who watched, believing that the people stoning Stephen were doing the right thing.     |
| fold your hands as you repeat Stephen's prayer.  | As the people were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, take my spirit."   |
| Touch the Stephen figure and use a slightly louder voice.                                      | Then Stephen called out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."   |
| Lay the Stephen figure down.   | Then Stephen died.  |

Speak quietly as you touch the Stephen figure.

Move your hands out from the center to illustrate the people leaving.

Move the Saul figure through the story area, stopping three or four times.

Nod sadly as you speak.

Carefully return all the wooden figures to the basket.

Stand and carry the basket back to its place on the shelf Return to the circle and sit down.

Be sure each child has chosen their work before you dismiss them as a group.

That day many people were hurt because they believed that God's love was for all people.

Many people left Jerusalem and ran away to other parts of the country.

And Saul went into many houses and took men and women and put them in jail because of their belief that God's love was for all people.

It was a very hard time for the early church.

### WONDERING QUESTIONS

I wonder if Stephen felt any different after the disciples laid their hands on him and asked God to be with him?

I wonder how Jesus looked when Stephen saw him?

I wonder if Stephen was afraid to die?

I wonder how badly it hurts to be stoned?

Children of God, watch carefully how I put these materials away so you will know how to handle them if you choose to make this story your work today or another day.

Watch carefully where I return this story so you will know where to find it if you choose to make this story your work today or another day.

I wonder what you will make your work today? Let's go around the circle and decide what each of us will do.

## SET APART FOR MINISTRY .... TEACHER HELPS

The story of Stephen is important for us in at least three ways. First, it is our first and most detailed account of the disciples organizing another group of people, seven men in this case, to meet the needs of the growing church. While there is some scholarly disagreement about who the Hellenists were, there is a consensus that a group of believers was being treated unfairly. The disciples, now the primary proclaimers of the gospel, acted quickly. They also realized their own limitations. If they were going to continue to spread the Good News, they would need someone else to work in the other area of justice ministries. The word "deacon" is not used in this text, although traditionally that is the title we have given to Stephen and the other six men. While their title is not important, it is significant that the disciples found a way to delegate the responsibility for taking care of the people who were being mistreated. The "laying on of hands" is still done in ordination and consecration today.

Second, this story is important because it is a glimpse for us into the day to day struggles against prejudice in the days of the early church. Often we believe that we are the only century dealing with extreme prejudice. Nothing could be farther from the truth. For generations the Jewish people had been taught that they were the chosen people of God. Circumcision set them apart from the Gentiles, and their laws of cleanliness and kosher food reminded them daily that they were different. It is important for us to remember that the first believers, called "The People of the Way" were not really Christians. They were Jews who believed that their Messiah had come. So most of them kept their Jewish laws and feast days. At the same time, there were Jews who believed they could embrace certain aspects of Greek culture and still be Jewish. Those people were called Hellenists. Most orthodox Jews looked down on them, believing them to be less pure than themselves. It may have been for that reason that the widows and orphans of the Hellenists were treated with less respect and received less food and money. Stephen, along with Philip, were Hellenists. No doubt their Greek affiliation angered some of the Jewish leaders.

And finally the story of Stephen sets the stage for the stories of Saul/Paul. The author of Acts makes careful note of Saul's participation in this story. The first verse of Acts 8 declares that Saul consented to Stephen's death. The following two verses have been used in today's *story* to indicate that Saul personally rounded up believers and had them sent to jail for their beliefs.

I have not said anything about Stephen's defense of himself in the story for the children. The defense is a political/religious masterpiece that angered the listeners a great deal. Stephen was trying to tell his audience that the God of the Israelites and the God of the People of the Way did not have to Live in a temple. He traced salvation history back to Abraham and through Moses, noting at length, the deliverance of the people of God from Egypt. Although some of the "facts" in his account are different from Old Testament scriptures, the nature of God is the same. This is a God of relationship, not entitlement. Stephen went on to remind the witnesses how God ordered worship, not with the calf the people made in the wilderness, not even with the house David wanted to build for God. And even though Solomon was allowed to build a house for God, Stephen quoted prophet Isaiah and reminded the listeners that God is one who creates. So they are really not creating a place for God. Stephen finished with the words of Jeremiah, reminding the listeners that prophets have always been persecuted. He then laid the responsibility for the death of Jesus squarely on the shoulders of the people before him.

In the wondering questions I have begun by asking if Stephen felt any different after the disciples laid their hands on him. Some of the children will say yes. Encourage them to expand and say how they think he might have felt. Others may say no. When asked why, they may respond that Stephen always knew inside that he was a man of God. They may feel that the laying on of hands would have just affirmed that knowledge.

The second wondering question asks what Jesus looked like when Stephen looked up and saw him. It will be interesting to hear the responses. Some will say that he could see the *nail* prints in Jesus' hands. Others will say that Jesus looked like he did when he was on earth. Still others will say that he looked different in heaven than he ever looked while he was on earth. With older children *this* can become quite a discussion about visions and pre-death experiences. Remain open to the discussion and allow them the freedom to ask questions in the safety of your room and their community of faith.

The third wondering question asks if Stephen was afraid to die. The story given to us shows him calm and very accepting, even asking that *his* executioners be forgiven by God for their violent act. Remember that the responses from the children may include a great deal of projection of their own fears and wonderment about death and dying.

The final wondering question deals with the pain of Stephen's death. I believe all the children will say that it hurt a lot to be stoned. *This* is a time for seriousness and realization that some people have suffered and died for their faith. An interesting note; According to *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary*, the victim of stoning was placed in the bottom of a pit and heavy stones were pushed upon him (p. 73) While we want the children to understand that this was a painful death for Stephen, that should not be the focus of the story. I have used the phrase "belief in God's love for all people" throughout the story. The final word in this story needs to be that God is gracious enough to love all kinds of people. Nobody, then or now, has a corner on that market.

#### SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR OLDER CHILDREN:

The man named Saul gave his approval for the stoning of Stephen. He believed he was doing God's will because he was following the rules of *his* religion. Later on he changed his mind. He understood things differently. Think of a time when you have said or done something and then later changed how you felt about that issue. How did you let people know? Why *did* you change your mind? Did you have more information later? Did you talk with other people? How did you feel about the original stand you took?

Stephen was able to ask God to forgive the people who killed *him*. Think of people who have said unkind things about you, or done unkind things to you. Can you pray for them to be forgiven? What do you really want God to do to those people? How long will it take you to get to the "forgiveness point?"

In our story Stephen "saw Jesus" before he *died*. Do you think that happens to people today? How would you feel if you saw Jesus? Would you tell anyone? What would you say if you did? How would you know *it* was Jesus? How *did* Stephen know it was Jesus?