

cell outlines
MAY 2019

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OVERVIEW

UNPACKING THE STORY OF STEPHEN

This month we will be unpacking the story of Stephen. Stephen was a man full of the Spirit and wisdom, and his life inspires us to stand strong in the face of opposition and be bold in speaking the truth.

In Session Three we will focus on the spiritual discipline of solitude, something that we rarely experience in our 21st-century lives that are usually full of a constant stream of noise, but essential if we are to connect with God at the deepest level. It would be ideal to hold this session in a place where group members can safely go off by themselves for 10 minutes and be totally alone.

Session Four is a practical week in which you should aim to do something tangible to 'speak truth to power in the face of oppression'. There are several ideas included on the session outline, so please do read through these at the start of the month as you may need to start chatting to your group members about this and make any preparations in advance.

And don't forget about the 'Remind' app. By signing up to this, young people (and anyone else) will receive daily discipleship questions, thoughts and challenges directly to their phones on the theme of the month's cell notes. Please encourage your young people to sign up to this by going to www.remind.com/join/followsa and downloading the 'Remind' app to their mobiles.

Further reading and references.

Some content has been sourced from the following:

William Barclay. *The Acts of the Apostles*

Tom Wright. *Acts for Everyone Part 1*

Kevin Deyoung & Chris Ranson. *Acts: A Visual Guide*

Christine Platt. *Acts 1-12: Church on the Move*

Phyllis J. Le Peau. *Acts: Seeing God's Power in Action*

Bryson Smith. *Mission Unstoppable*

UNPACKING THE STORY OF STEPHEN

Acts 6:8 to 7:60

WELCOME

1. Collect some smooth stones from the beach or a garden centre. Arrange them in a tower from the largest to the smallest.

Have a soft ball or bean bag. Group members have to throw the bean bag at the pile of stones and see how many they can knock over. It's not as easy as it sounds! (Keep the stones for later in the session.)

OR

2. Go outside and line up some empty tin cans or plastic bottles on a wall or bench. Take it in turns to throw stones to try to knock them off.



WORD

1. Read Acts 6:8 to Acts 8:2

You may feel that it will be too much to read all the Bible text with your group, especially if you have a younger group. You may prefer to use Acts 6:8 to 7:1 and 7:51 to 8:2 instead, and give a summary of Stephen's speech** that is in the middle of these two passages of Scripture. For a very young group you could use the summary of Stephen's story included at the end of the session.

A few thoughts for group leaders:

The story of Stephen is told in Acts 6:8 through to Acts 8:2. This is a long passage, with some difficult text. In the middle Stephen launches into the longest speech recorded in the New Testament**, where he tells the Jewish synagogue leaders the truth about their own history in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection. He was not popular after this!

Although we have only this two-chapter narrative of Stephen's life, he has left a legacy that still inspires us today. Stephen was described as full of the Spirit and wisdom, full of grace and power. When the enemies of Jesus could not stand up against this Spirit and wisdom, they stoned him to death.

Besides being a good administrator, Stephen was also a powerful speaker. When confronted in the Temple by various antagonistic groups, Stephen's logic in responding was convincing. This is clear from the defence he made before the council of religious leaders (Sanhedrin). He presented a summary of the Jews' own history and made powerful applications that stung his listeners.

Stephen's speech is the longest speech in Acts, so clearly Luke, the writer of Acts, thought that what Stephen said is important. We can get a bit lost in the long speech, but the main point is simple enough. Stephen is keen to show that the coming of Jesus is in complete continuity with the Old Testament, and he drew lessons from it which the religious leaders had never learned or even noticed.

The specific charges made against Stephen were that he opposed the Temple and the Old Testament law, and nothing was more precious or more sacred to the Jews than these. To speak against either was blasphemy. In his lengthy defence, Stephen argues that it is the Sanhedrin that have got things out of all proportion. He shows that God worked unhindered without a Temple for many years and that it is not as significant as they think. He wanted to demonstrate that God was not limited to a specific place, like the Temple, but that anywhere God was, was holy ground; wherever God's people are, God is right there with them. Stephen also points out that it is the Sanhedrin who come from a long line of ancestors who rejected God. During his defence Stephen must have known that he was speaking his own death sentence.

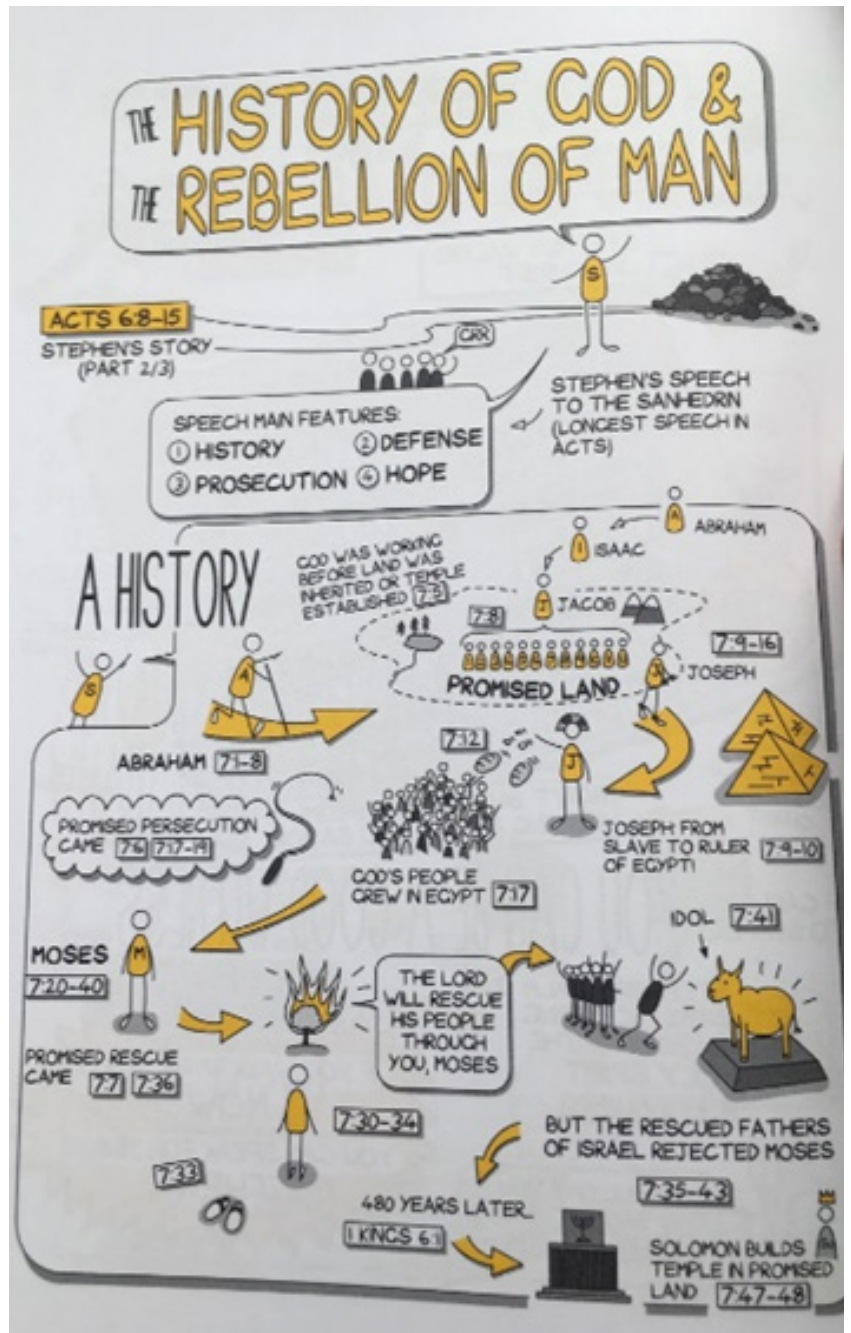
SESSION ONE

Stoning took place as follows: The criminal was taken to a height and thrown down. The witnesses had to do the actual throwing down. If the criminal was killed by the fall, well and good; if not, great boulders were hurled down upon the person until death resulted.¹

The stoning of Stephen was one of the most shocking incidents in the New Testament, a stark demonstration of the hatred of Jerusalem's religious authorities for Jesus Christ and his followers. (Actually, under Roman law, Stephen's death was illegal. The Sanhedrin was not authorised to carry out the death penalty, but the stoning appeared to be the result of mob action. There is no mention in Acts of anyone being brought to justice for the death of Stephen.)

But more than that, it set the stage for the spread of Christianity to the rest of the known world. Because of this violent persecution, Christians began fleeing Jerusalem, and wherever they went, they took the gospel with them, planting churches and proclaiming the good news of the forgiveness of sin.

Stephen was the very first Christian martyr. (Our word 'martyr' is a transliteration of the Greek word for 'witness'. By their lives and by their deaths, the martyrs have borne witness for Jesus.) Stephen's death is the only death scene and martyrdom described in detail in the New Testament, except for that of Jesus Christ.



** This diagram may help you / your group understand the long speech about the Jews' history that Stephen made.

Read more:

www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com/stephen-in-the-bible-character-profile-and-study/#ixzz5hD4wWwcg

www.thoughtco.com/stoning-of-stephen-bible-story-summary-700061

missionbibleclass.org/new-testament/part2/acts-the-church-begins/the-stoning-of-stephen

¹ William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*



SESSION ONE

2. Group Activity/Discussion

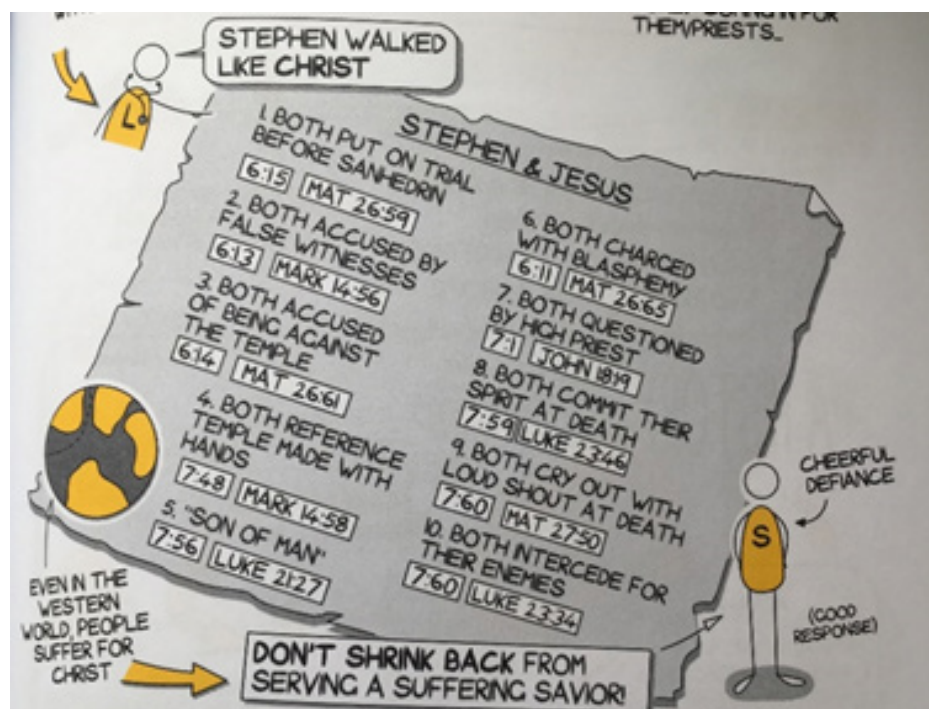
Split into two smaller groups.

Provide a long roll of plain wallpaper and some marker pens. (Try taping together long strips of wallpaper - large enough for the group to crawl on top of to write/draw.)

- * Ask one group to draw out a timeline or storyboard of Stephen's story. They can use stick men drawings if they want to. Encourage them to look for the key moments in Stephen's story, especially the opposition that he faced and how he reacted.
- * Ask the other group to create a character profile of Stephen. They could draw a picture of Stephen in the middle and then create a spider diagram / mind map around him looking at his character, strengths, key things that he said and did, the opposition he faced, lessons we can learn from his life. Draw some speech bubbles and use some of the words from the Bible text of the things that other people said to him. (It may aid your discussion if you look at the Bible text in a few different translations. This is easily done using Biblegateway.com.)

Ask each group to share what they have put on their diagram, and then use any of the following questions as you find helpful to further discuss Stephen's story.

- 🗨️ What would it have been like for the religious leaders not to be able to stand up against Stephen's wisdom?
- 🗨️ What were the main points of Stephen's long speech, and why did this make the religious leaders so angry?
- 🗨️ What specific charges are made against Stephen?
- 🗨️ Why do you think the charges are so serious?
- 🗨️ In what ways is this opposition to Stephen both similar to, and different from, the opposition that Peter and John faced in Acts 3 to 4 and Acts 5 (discussed last month).
- 🗨️ How was Stephen enabled to stand firm when encountering such opposition?
- 🗨️ What similarities can you see between Stephen and Jesus? (See diagram below.)
- 🗨️ What finally happened to Stephen? How does that make you feel?
- 🗨️ How would you like the way in which you follow Jesus to be influenced by Stephen's example?



(Picture from Acts: A Visual Guide by Deyoung and Ranson)

3. Read your group the following story

“ Four years ago, 21 Coptic Christians were beheaded by Islamic State terrorists on a beach in Libya. The world was appalled when the brutal terrorist group released footage showing the 21 men – all but one being migrants from Egypt – being led to the shore of a Libyan beach near Sirte dressed in orange jumpsuits. The Copts had been kidnapped around Sirte in two separate incidents. A man called Martin Mosebach has since written a book about them, and in doing so travelled to the town of El-Aour in Egypt to find their families.

Mosebach said:

‘The villagers in El-Aour are proud of the martyrs for standing strong and dying for their faiths. The mothers who lost their sons at the hands of the Islamic State know that their sons are now “crowned kings in Heaven”. You can go to every family in this region. They will tell you the same thing. That they are ready for martyrdom and they wait for the martyrdom and they are proud of the martyrs. They say that “our church is the church of the martyrs. Martyrs are the seeds of Christianity. As long as people are killed for Christianity, the Church is living and not dead.”’

Read more:

www.christiantoday.com/article/in-the-hometown-of-21-coptic-christians-murdered-by-isis-miracles-are-being-reported/131764.htm

vom.com.au/libya-murder-of-21-coptic-christians

Discuss:

- 🗨️ What opposition do we face today?
- 🗨️ Who opposes us?
- 🗨️ Ask if anyone in the group can give a specific example of when they have had to speak out on what they believe. What happened? How did they feel?
- 🗨️ How many risks do we take in being Jesus’ followers?
- 🗨️ Would we be willing to die for him?

WITNESS/ACTION

Stephen’s review of Jewish history gives a clear testimony of God’s faithfulness and sovereignty. Despite the continued failures of his chosen people and the swirling world events, God was working out his plan. When faced by a confusing array of circumstances, remember that:

- 1) God is in control – nothing surprises him.
- 2) This world is not all there is – it will pass away, but God is eternal.
- 3) God is just and he will make things right – punishing the wicked and rewarding the faithful.
- 4) God wants to use you (like Joseph, Moses and Stephen) to make a difference in the world².

Write out these four statements and ask the group which one of these four statements is the most encouraging for them today, and, if appropriate, ask them to share why.

WORSHIP/PRAYER

1. Give each person a large smooth stone and a marker pen. Ask them to write the following Scripture on their stone. (Leave space to add more writing/drawing in the following sessions.) Hold your stones as you pray together.

² Life Application Bible

“ He will keep you strong to the end so that you will be free from all blame on the day when our Lord Jesus Christ returns.

1 Corinthians 1:8 *NLT*

2. Use your discussion above (about the four statements) to direct your prayers. It may be that some of your group are facing difficult situations at the moment and would value being prayed for by the group.

3. Watch / listen to 'Guilty' by Newsboys. www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dq1-IX9U95I

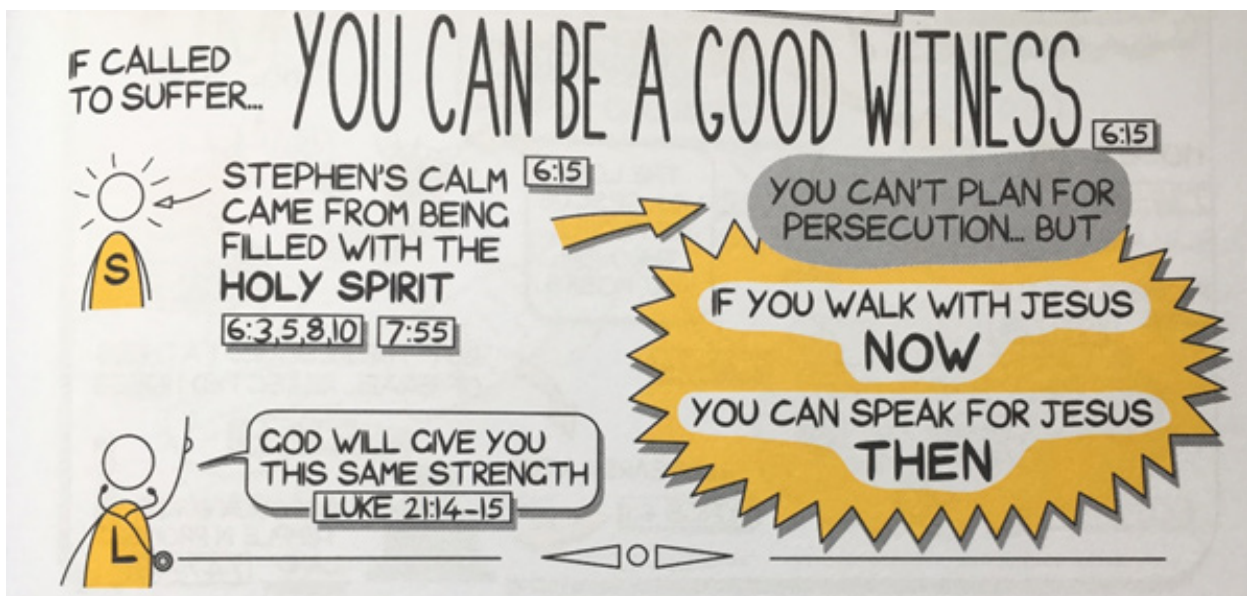
Write down some of the lyrics as you listen and use them in your prayers.

For example:

'I'll pay the price to be your light.'

'I'm gonna give my life to show the world the love that fills me.'

4. Show your group the following diagram. Pray for each other to be filled with the Holy Spirit and with the same spiritual strength that Stephen had, so you can be strong and faithful to speak for Jesus. You could print out the diagram as small wallet-sized cards or on to sticky labels for each person to take away with them.



(Picture from Acts: A Visual Guide by Deyoung and Ranson)

Stephen – Story Summary

In the early Christian Church, a few years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the believers in Jerusalem put all their resources together. However, the Greek Christians complained that their widows were being ignored in the daily distribution of food.

Seven deacons were appointed by the group to oversee the sharing of food and other everyday matters. Stephen, a man 'full of faith and of the Holy Spirit', was among them.

Stephen performed great wonders and miracles among the people of Jerusalem. Jews of the outer provinces began to argue with him, but they could not win against his Spirit-filled wisdom. So, in secret, they convinced false witnesses to lie, accusing Stephen of blasphemy against Moses and God. In ancient Judaism, blasphemy was a crime punishable by death.

The accusers brought Stephen before the Sanhedrin, the great council, where the false witnesses said they heard Stephen say Jesus would destroy the Temple. Stephen launched into a powerful defence, detailing the history of the Jews from Abraham through to the prophets. He concluded that the Sanhedrin had murdered the prophesied Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth.

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The crowd became furious at him, but Stephen looked up to Heaven:

'Look', he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God' (Acts 7:56, NIV).

At that, the mob dragged Stephen out of the city and began to stone him. They laid their coats in front of a young man named Saul of Tarsus. As he was dying, Stephen prayed to God to receive his spirit and further asked God not to hold the sin against his killers.

Stephen 'fell asleep' – or died. Other believers buried Stephen and mourned his death.

www.thoughtco.com/stoning-of-stephen-bible-story-summary-700061

WHAT DOES STEPHEN'S STORY MEAN FOR US TODAY?: SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER IN THE FACE OF OPPRESSION

Acts 6:8 to 7:60

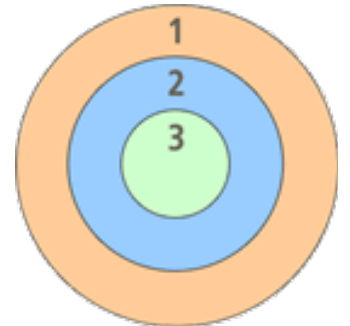
WELCOME

1. Play the traditional Indian game of Gutte. It is very similar to jacks, but with stones. (Older people used to call it 'Fivestones'.) You will need five small stones. You spin one stone in the air and pick other stones from the ground without dropping the stone in the air. This game can be played by any number of people. See an example here:

📺 www.youtube.com/watch?v=-BgnsPmJ0yc

OR

2. Mark out a target on the floor. Have group members stand behind a line and try to roll or throw five small stones on to the target. Each person adds up their points, depending on the area in which their stones land, after all five stones have been played. The winner is the person with the most points.



WORD

In the October 2018 cell groups we talked about how we, as Christians, may face persecution, and clearly Stephen's story has much to teach us about standing strong and remaining faithful to Jesus in the face of opposition. In this session, however, we are going to go in a different direction and focus on what it means to speak the truth to power in the face of oppression.

Stephen showed great wisdom and grace as he confronted the religious leaders of the day and told them what he knew to be the truth. He spoke out, and his conviction led to his brutal death. Stephen's courage begins well before the crowd starts calling for his death. He is prepared and able to speak eloquently of God's love and continued care for his people. And he is comforted and encouraged by his vision of Jesus with God.

In speaking truth with courage and conviction Stephen followed the example of Jesus, who spoke out against the leaders of the day, especially where they were causing oppression and disadvantage to the most marginalised in society. He spoke from a heart of love and compassion. Jesus was born into a world where his people were dominated and treated unjustly by the ruling authority of Rome. The whole story of the gospel and of the Early Church in Acts has been one of reaching out with Jesus' love to those who were despised.

1. How brave are you?

Create an imaginary line across the room, with one end of the line labelled 'Definitely' and the other with 'No Way'. Explain that you are going to ask the group members a few questions and they have to stand somewhere along this line depending on how brave they think they would be.

Ask the following: How brave are you? Would you...

- * Admit you supported a different football team if all your mates supported your team's bitter rivals?
- * Tell your parents if you knew your older brother was lying to them about where he was going out in the evening?
- * Let your best friend copy your homework if you had spent hours doing it the night before and given up watching your favourite TV programme to do it?
- * Join in with your mates and take the mick out of the homeless man in town?
- * Tell your mates you go to church even if none of them do?

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- * Jump in a river to save a drowning dog?
- * Try to stop a fight between a big group of strong men?
- * Eat a worm?
- * Tell your mates to tidy up their litter and put it in a bin?
- * Give a whole month's pocket money to charity?
- * Stand up for an issue you care about?

After each question give the young people a chance to think about it and decide where they stand, and ask them to explain their decisions as you go. Some of the questions are more serious than others, and some use a different definition of 'brave' from others – encourage the group to think about this while you do the activity.

Ask the group: Have you ever found yourself in a situation where being brave could actually cause you great pain, eg, taking a tackle in a rugby match or standing up for a friend? What made you carry on, knowing you would get hurt?

- 🗣️ Was it because it would make you look good, or
- 🗣️ because you felt it was the right thing to do?

Conclude by reminding the group that we are studying the story of Stephen. Stephen was a man who was brave enough to stand up for what he believed in. He was prepared to speak the truth, even though he knew it would not go down well with those that were listening.

(Adapted from: www.energize.uk.net/meeting-plans/823)

2. Speaking Truth to Power

- “ ‘Speaking truth to power means believing deeply in what you say and fighting every day to have that heard. It may not be popular; it means taking a risk, it means standing for something.’

Shari Runner, Interim President & CEO, Chicago Urban League

[@chiurbanleague](https://twitter.com/chiurbanleague)

www.huffingtonpost.com/jade-greear/speaking-truth-to-power

Write the phrase 'Speaking truth to power' on a large piece of paper. (You will use this to create a poster together during the following discussion and activities.)

Ask the group what they think this means. Note down their thoughts on the flipchart paper as you discuss.

The phrase 'speaking truth to power' was coined by the Quakers in the 1950's. It talks about taking a stand and mobilising society around change. It speaks of campaigning for a better world. In Stephen's long speech he gave some examples, such as Moses who told the Egyptian Pharaoh he had no right to enslave the Jews. And he told us that God is a God of perfect justice who will make things right.

Ask the group:

- 🗣️ What other examples are there in the Bible of people speaking truth to power against oppression? For example: Joseph, Esther and Mordecai, Nehemiah.
- 🗣️ How do we see Stephen speaking truth to power?
- 🗣️ How do we see Jesus speaking truth to power?

Note down these thoughts on your poster.

There are several extracts from web articles included at the end of this session outline that you may find useful during your discussion. An older group may enjoy reading and discussing some or all of these articles.

3. Find Scriptures that encapsulate the heart of ‘speaking truth to power in the face of oppression’.

Group members could search for verses using their phones or other devices. Here are some examples. Read them together and write these, and any other Scriptures you can think of, on your poster.

Proverbs 31: 8-9 (NLT)

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves;
ensure justice for those being crushed.
Yes, speak up for the poor and helpless,
and see that they get justice.

Isaiah 1:17 (GNT)

See that justice is done – help those who are oppressed.

Psalms 106:3 (NIV)

Blessed are those who act justly, who always do what is right.

Proverbs 29:7 (NIV)

The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern.

Deuteronomy 15:11 (MSG)

There are always going to be poor and needy people among you. So I command you: Always be generous, open purse and hands, give to your neighbours in trouble, your poor and hurting neighbours.

Micah 6:8 (NIV)

And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Matthew 25:35-40 (MSG)

‘I was hungry and you fed me,
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
I was homeless and you gave me a room,
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,
I was sick and you stopped to visit,
I was in prison and you came to me.’

Then they are going to say, ‘Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?’ Then the King will say, ‘I’m telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me – you did it to me.’

4. The Danger of Silence

An older group may enjoy this short video (4 mins).

Clint Smith. ‘The Danger of Silence’ – www.ted.com/talks/clint_smith_the_danger_of_silence?language=en

WITNESS/ACTION

1. Read the following statement to the group and ask them if they agree or disagree and why.

As Christians, we are responsible for learning about the hardships of other people in the world³

Discuss with the group what situations they see around them, or in the wider world, that are not true and just to the

³ chimesnewspaper.com/24998/opinions/christians-must-speak-out-against-injustice

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people in it. Are there people who are not treated fairly or equally? Where are the people who are suffering hardship? Are there lies and deceit there? Is this the time for someone to speak out?

Ask the group if any individuals have any particular areas of inequality, oppression or social change on their hearts at the moment, and allow them to share with the group.

There are times when we go with the flow of our culture; however, there will be times when we need to stand firm to what we know is true and right. It can be hard and a challenging thing to do. It can make us stand out like a sore thumb and open us up to criticism and ridicule. Let's encourage each other to stand up and speak out; to be unafraid of being the first to say 'This isn't right!'

2. Hashtags

Ask the group what hashtags they have seen recently that are part of a campaign against injustice, oppression or discrimination in some way.

For example: #TrashTag #WhyWeWearBlack #TimesUp #TheBarriersWeFace #MeToo #BringBackOurGirls #BlackLivesMatter #YemenInquiryNow #GivingTuesday #fairtrade #climatestrike #periodpoverty

Hashtags are becoming a powerful catalyst for social change in our modern digital world. They open up a worldwide conversation on global issues. Hashtags are useful when discussing a specific topic, trying to reach a certain demographic or trying to raise awareness of a cause. They continue to be a force behind social movements, and they're being felt across the world.

Write a load of hashtags on your poster that express how you feel about speaking truth to power in the face of oppression.

3. Martin Niemöller (1892-1984) was a prominent Protestant pastor who emerged as an outspoken public foe of Adolf Hitler and spent the last seven years of Nazi rule in concentration camps. During his time in the camp and after the war, Niemöller had time to reflect on his views and came to believe he had not done enough to speak up for other people. He admitted he was only concerned about protecting his own church and not the whole nation. This led to his famous writing, which became a symbolic message about the holocaust. He became a radical advocate for peace, and won several awards for his work for world peace including the Lenin Peace Prize (1967) and the Grand Cross of Merit (1971).

**First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out –
Because I was not a socialist.**

**Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out –
Because I was not a trade unionist.**

**Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out –
Because I was not a Jew.**

Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me.

Rewrite this poem using people/situations of injustice that are relevant to your own lives, and read them to each other. You could also use them in your time of prayer below.

WORSHIP/PRAYER

1. Ask each person to write Isaiah 1:17 on their stones:

See that justice is done – help those who are oppressed. (GNT)

Hold these stones as you pray together.

2. Divide into small groups. Give each person in the group a small piece of paper.

Ask them to discuss in their group something that they would like to have the courage to do, something that they don't feel like they can do on their own. Get them to write their name and the thing that is relevant to them on their piece of paper and fold it up.

Explain to them that, like Stephen, they too can be filled with the Holy Spirit and be able to take on difficult stuff with his help. To symbolise this, get each group to put their bits of paper into an empty bottle – then fill this up right to the brim with water, and give it a shake for good measure!

Encourage the small groups to pray together that God will fill them with the Holy Spirit, and pray for the specific issues discussed.

You may want to give an opportunity for individuals to be prayed for and a ‘response’ time; or it may be more appropriate to pray as a whole group.

www.energize.uk.net/meeting-plans/823

3. Any of the following songs would be good to finish your time of prayer.

🎵 ‘Give Us Your Courage’ – Tim Hughes

🎵 ‘Guilty’ – Newsboys

🎵 ‘God of Justice’ – Tim Hughes

Extracts from web articles for your further information

Christians have a moral obligation to speak the truth and live a life of integrity. A life of integrity includes the courage to challenge structures of power, no matter who they are. To live with conviction, students must be willing to learn how to live a life of both love and righteous indignation. Too often, I hear my fellow peers say they are unwilling to listen to stories of oppression because they do not want to be temporarily saddened by someone’s misfortune. A life of conviction requires us to have our faith tempered by the flames of righteous indignation and the loving nature of compassion.

chimesnewspaper.com/24998/opinions/christians-must-speak-out-against-injustice

Christians are a befuddling contradiction to the world

Christians should be confusing to the surrounding world, because they speak with both grace and truth. You see that in Stephen’s life: one minute he’s pointing his finger at the religious leaders and calling them heartless murderers (truth), and the next – as they’re stoning him – he prays for their forgiveness (grace). It’s not usual to find somebody switch gears like that. Our society has no category for someone speaking prophetic truth with tender grace. So when Christians embody both, the world scratches its head.

Sadly, even if you speak truth graciously, the world will hate you. Jesus flowed with grace and truth, as did Stephen, and the world killed them both. Some people will always throw stones at Christians, but others, like Saul, will see the sweetness of Jesus and be converted.

jdgrear.com/blog/5-lessons-from-the-life-of-stephen

Jesus was overtly on the side of the poor, the excluded, the ignored, the disenfranchised and the exploited. He was on their side when it damaged his reputation, his earning potential and any hope he had of moving up the ranks of religious or political power. He was on their side when he drove out the price-manipulators and rent-seekers in the Temple courts and he was on their side when it cost him his life.

We are called to be on the side of those who are marginalised and disadvantaged by a system designed to benefit those at the top. If we follow Jesus, we will stand with and for all who are left out, forgotten, abused and socially, economically and politically excluded – no matter the personal cost.

Being on the side of the poor or excluded isn’t about having progressive values, the right opinions or even voting the right way. It’s about the decision to leverage any power, privilege, abilities and resources you have to transform not only an individual’s immediate circumstances but, more importantly, the economic, social and cultural systems that perpetuate inequality, poverty, exclusion and exploitation.

www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/apr/14/jesus-was-on-the-side-of-the-poor-and-exploited-christian-politicians-should-remember-that

For The Salvation Army, whether it is the local worshipping community or the international administration, social justice is rooted in faith, and characterised by action, particularly on behalf of the oppressed. A holistic approach to salvation suggests that Christianity must address not only the spiritual and the physical aspects of people's lives, but also the societal norms, traditions and policies that militate against, or prevent, wholeness for every individual.

The Salvation Army has strong traditions that have shaped our self-understanding and theology; two are particularly relevant to the area of social justice – a call to the marginalised, and a culture of activism.

The roots of the movement in the East End of Victorian London, coupled with the social awareness of William and Catherine Booth, have ensured a historical commitment to the poor and marginalised throughout our history. From its beginnings The Salvation Army was always a 'neighbourhood religion' growing within urban society and led by local people. It both belonged to and challenged Victorian working-class culture.

www1.salvationarmy.org/ihq/www_ihq_isjc.nsf/vw-sublinks/B3DB4808441E738E802575EE0009F92F

Being a mouthpiece for truth and justice might involve alerting the police to the presence of a gang of drug dealers operating down your street... Speaking up for truth and justice might involve sticking up for your neighbour in a dispute with the local council, or for an elderly parent or an autistic child. It might involve blowing the whistle on an incompetent doctor in your hospital, or on a builder who has fraudulently and dangerously not constructed a building to the required safety standard. It might involve challenging a work colleague about the hours being charged to a particular client, or taking on an unjust appraisal system... or challenging your company to make sure their outsourced cleaners are paid a living wage, not just the minimum wage. Such situations require courage and tact to resolve well. And so do the abuses of power that occur in more common everyday situations.

(Mark Greene, *Fruitfulness On The Frontline* p143)

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE: SOLITUDE

Try to hold this session in a place where group members can safely go off by themselves for 10 minutes and be totally alone.

WELCOME

Ask everyone to be completely quiet and sit with their backs to you, each person on their own.

Have a selection of objects that make a noise, eg, crisp packet, bell, whistle, opening a can or bottle of fizzy drink, bouncing a ball, Rubix cube, scissors, stapler, opening a newspaper, sharpening a pencil, opening/closing a zip.

In turn, make the noise with the object and ask group members to quietly write down what they think the object is. There must be no speaking and no other noise throughout the whole activity.

Alternatively, find a 'guess the sound' video on YouTube and play this to the group.

Afterwards go through the answers – the winner is the person who got the most sounds correct.

WORD

1. My life is full of...

Ask each person to draw a picture of themselves, and then draw all the 'stuff' – everything and everyone – that is in his/her life and on his/her mind around the picture and somehow connected to the person.

In last month's cell groups, a challenge was set of spending five minutes alone with God every day for one week. Ask the group to feed back on how this went. How many of the things on their drawing were a big part of making this challenge harder or even distracting them from completing the challenge?

2. Break into smaller groups and ask each group to read the following Scriptures. Ask them to decide what is the common theme between all the passages.

Matthew 14:22-23

With the crowd dispersed, Jesus climbed the mountain so he could be by himself and pray. He stayed there alone, late into the night.

1 Kings 19:9-13

God could have spoken to Elijah in the violent wind, the earthquake or the fire, but instead he chose to speak in a 'still, small voice'. How has God used silence to speak to you?

Luke 5:16

This tells us that Jesus often slipped away to be by himself to pray, to be alone, to be with the Father.

Psalms 46:10

'Be still, and know that I am God' (RSV).

Jesus knew the importance of being alone with God. He often withdrew from the crowds to be on his own for a while. The discipline of solitude is the practice of being alone, in order that we can listen and create a space in our hearts where God can reach us. Solitude involves taking time and finding space away from other people, possessions and concerns, to be alone with the Lord.

Sometimes 'being alone' can have negative implications; we think it means being lonely, and we can be fearful of being left on our own. Perhaps this is what drives us to fill our world with a constant stream of noise, from people, the TV, radio, music or social media chatter.

But the discipline of solitude is not about being lonely – it is about being alone. A deep inner solitude and silence actually sets us free from loneliness and fear.

SESSION
THREE

It is when we are most by ourselves that we realise God is actually right there with us. At that point the solitude allows us to grow closer to God. We are able to see clearly, through a Godly perspective, what is important in our lives. We can hear his quiet voice and allow his peace to invade our heart.

3. Read the handout together.

4. An older group may also like this Salvation Army video:

▶ Spiritual Disciplines – Silence and Solitude (3 mins 30) – www.youtube.com/watch?v=oW0cBfiYUdA

5. Discuss:

Take a look at your drawing. How much of the ‘stuff’ in your lives distracts you, or even prevents you, from spending time alone with God?

Circle the top three things that distract you. Then discuss with a partner what you can do to minimise or eliminate the distraction.

WORSHIP

Choose one, or both, of the following activities:

1. If you can, go outside and draw a prayer labyrinth on concrete with chalk (a labyrinth looks like a maze but leads to an end in the centre; no dead ends). Or mark out a labyrinth with tape on the floor inside your meeting venue.

One at a time, ask each person to slowly walk into the centre of the labyrinth. As they walk towards the centre ask them to ‘release’, like letting a balloon go, whether that’s letting go of fears, or confessing sin, or giving God what’s been on their minds. They can visualise continually battling the ‘balloon’ away if they’re distracted and can’t focus on God.

At the centre of the maze is a time to quietly rest and receive from God for as long as they like. They might sit, stand, or lie down.

In the twists and turns on the way out from the centre, they’re returning, thinking about how what they received from God connects with life.

As they leave the labyrinth you could ask one or more of the other group members to pray with them.

Adapted from www.agenerousgrace.com/2016/11/19/spiritual-disciplines-real-families-10-practical-ways-teach-solitude

2. Allow ten minutes for everyone to head off on their own to practise the spiritual discipline of solitude.

Watch and follow the instructions on this video before they go:

▶ Embracing Silence (3 mins 20) – www.youtube.com/watch?v=ftUcpnd33_o

Bring the group back together for some feedback on this activity.

💬 What did I learn about God?

💬 What did I learn about myself?

WITNESS/ACTION

Ask each person to try one of the challenges below this coming month, or come up with their own ideas to experience the spiritual discipline of solitude (you could print these out with the handout below):

* Spend five minutes on your own in complete silence... no radio, phone, music, TV etc! Don’t feel you have to fill the silence with prayers... just allow your thoughts to focus on God. (Keep a pad and pencil nearby as you relax into solitude; then when a distraction thought comes into your mind write it down and then commit it to prayer.)

* Try this again, but make it 10 or 15 minutes! What do you learn about yourself through doing this?

- * Schedule appointments with God for the whole month. Write them into your calendar or diary.
- * Take advantage of some of the little solitudes that you find in your day, eg, five minutes whilst you are waiting to meet your friend. Turn your thoughts to God and experience his peace at these times.
- * Find or develop a 'quiet place' designed for silence and solitude and use this place to get away from the noise and distractions of everyday life into a time of quiet and peace with God.
- * Take a half-hour silent prayer walk at a nearby park.
- * Take a mini retreat and go off by yourself for a morning or afternoon. (Make sure an adult knows where you are going, though!). Use the time to pray and worship God, and to read the Bible. You could combine this challenge with any of the spiritual disciplines we have already learnt about, eg, fasting, worshipping, prayer walking.

THE POWER OF SOLITUDE

When being alone means being closer to God

By Kelli Mahoney

Solitude is a powerful spiritual discipline that is often overlooked by many Christians – adults and teens alike. Between the multitude of church activities, school, and even social networking, taking time out to be by ourselves with God is often one aspect of our faith we put into practice far less frequently than we should.

What is solitude?

Basically, solitude is being alone. It is the absence of distractions like people, computers, schoolwork, television, cell phones, radio, etc. Solitude can be getting away from everybody in a weekend retreat or just locking yourself in your room for an hour in peaceful quiet. The reason solitude is a spiritual discipline is that 'alone time' can often be a more difficult task than we think. It takes an effort to be sure you are not disturbed.

Why do we avoid solitude?

The simplest and most common reason we avoid being alone with God is that solitude forces us to face everything in our lives head-on. This internal confrontation is often why solitude is one of the most difficult spiritual disciplines. Yet without time alone with God, the aspects of our lives that need the most work often go ignored or unseen. Others also keep us from solitude. There are all kinds of pressure to be social and 'get out there' and experience life. We're often discouraged from spending time alone because to others we're not taking advantage of the life God gave us. However, God also wants us to spend time knowing ourselves, too.

Why is solitude important?

It is when we are most by ourselves that we realise God is actually right there with us. At that point the solitude allows us to grow closer to God as we begin to address the things going on in our lives, thoughts, and existence. We are able to see clearly, through a Godly perspective, what is important in our lives. When we spend time in solitude, we get away from all the things that distract us from our reality. We see inside our lives, our thoughts, and our behaviours. Solitude brings us peace that we just can't get when we're surrounded by others. It allows us to decompress and take the stress off our day. Yes, sometimes solitude can grow loud with the clanging of thoughts bumping around in our minds, but at least that clanging is just our thoughts and not mixed with the cacophony of noise the world brings in.

But how do I find time for solitude?

We live in a busy, busy world where time alone is not always rewarded. So solitude does take effort and persistence. While

sometimes we think of solitude as long periods of meditation, often we have to be more creative about it. Sometimes we may only have a few minutes to be alone with God. We may find a few minutes before we get out of bed in the morning, on the walk to the bus stop, or in a peaceful corner during study hour. We need to learn that it's OK to tell others that we just want to be alone and tell them in a way that helps them understand this isn't a slight against them, but just our way of letting our spirits breathe a little bit. There is a reason that solitude is a spiritual discipline, and we all have to work hard to be sure we are getting that 'alone time' with God.

www.thoughtco.com/the-power-of-solitude-712390

Try each one of these over the coming month (or come up with your own ideas to experience the spiritual discipline of solitude):

- * Spend five minutes on your own in complete silence... no radio, phone, music, TV etc! Don't feel you have to fill the silence with prayers... just allow your thoughts to focus on God. (Keep a pad and pencil nearby as you relax into solitude; then when a distraction thought comes into your mind write it down and then commit it to prayer.)
- * Try this again, but make it 10 or 15 minutes! What do you learn about yourself through doing this?
- * Schedule appointments with God for the whole month. Write them into your calendar or diary.
- * Take advantage of some of the little solitudes that you find in your day, e.g. five minutes whilst you are waiting to meet your friend. Turn your thoughts to God and experience his peace at these times.
- * Find or develop a 'quiet place' designed for silence and solitude and use this place to get away from the noise and distractions of everyday life into a time of quiet and peace with God.
- * Take half an hour silent prayer walk at a nearby park.
- * Take a mini retreat and go off by yourself for a morning or afternoon. (Make sure an adult knows where you are going though!). Use the time to pray and worship God, and to read the Bible. You could combine this challenge with any of the spiritual disciplines we have already learnt about, e.g. fasting, worshipping, prayer walking!

ACTS INTO ACTION: WHERE DO WE NEED TO SPEAK UP FOR TRUTH?

This is a practical week in which you should aim to do something tangible to 'speak truth to power in the face of oppression'.

If your group members don't feel that they can make any difference in the world, begin your session with a chat about the Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg. This 16-year-old made worldwide headlines by going on a school strike to raise awareness about climate change. She urges the leaders and all people of the world to take action on the climate crisis and to take the topic seriously. Greta inspired more than 20 000 students of her generation and younger all over the world to follow her example to fight for the future of their planet.

Read the following articles about her work.

medium.com/nine-by-five-media/why-we-all-need-to-be-more-like-greta-ba36abec961

Here is an article about a 14-year-old girl who lives in the writer's (of these cell notes) home town. Just an ordinary girl with a passion to make a difference. She organised the Youth Strike 4 Climate in Bristol.

news.sky.com/story/dear-teacher-im-missing-class-to-save-the-planet-11635913

Use this cell group session to inspire your group that they can make a difference about the issues that are on their hearts, and show them how to practically get stuck in.

You can choose to do anything you'd like. For example:

- * Consider if there is anyone/family/group in particular need in your community at the moment or facing a particular hardship. What could you do to support them?
- * Is there a hot community issue at the moment? Maybe lack of funding for the local school, maybe teenage crime, maybe a refugee family moving into the area that needs support, maybe a big problem with litter? What could your group do practically to get involved in this issue?
- * Is there a charity or organisation locally that supports people living in need anywhere in the world, or that campaigns on an issue of social change? How could you get involved in their campaign? Could you invite someone in to speak to your group? Could you do a fundraising activity for them?
- * Have any of your group members already got experience in this area? Are they already a member of a social change organisation or active in social action? Has anyone in your group got a particular issue of inequality on their hearts? If so, task that person with bringing information to the group and some practical actions that you can take to get involved.
- * Write letters to your MP, town councillors or other policy-makers about areas of concern that your group members have on their hearts.
- * Start, or get involved in, a petition calling for equality and justice in a specific area.
- * Invite one of the local decision-makers to your group to listen to the young people talk about the issues in their community and get their voice heard.
- * Get a research session going. Provide laptops, tablets and internet access and encourage group members to get searching websites like Amnesty International UK, The Micah Challenge, Open Doors Youth, Christian Aid. Help them understand some of the major inequalities and human rights issues that are going on in our world right now. You could respond to online petitions, write letters or emails, and/or create a presentation to share with your corps.
- * The Salvation Army International Projects office (SAID UK) has loads of campaigns running, all of which aim to make equality a reality for people in developing countries. There is loads of information, fundraising ideas and presentations. You could even come up with an idea to raise money to buy from the Just Gifts catalogue – giving a gift to tackle poverty and injustice around the world. Visit www.salvationarmy.org.uk/id/about-us

SESSION FOUR

- * The Salvation Army also has projects in the UK working with the elderly, refugees, people in poverty, victims of modern slavery, domestic abuse, homelessness, addictions, and has a voice in influencing social policy. Perhaps your corps is involved in a project supporting vulnerable people in some way. How can your group get involved? Take a look at the website for more info. www.salvationarmy.org.uk

You will probably need to be preparing for this throughout the month. Maybe you could ask group members to begin to research some issues in the preceding weeks. Maybe you will need to obtain parental consent to take your group members out on an activity, or advertise in advance in your corps if you are doing some fundraising.

The key things to any of these activities is that your group members are enabled to understand some of the deeper issues going on – for example, thinking about homelessness. This is a deep and complex issue and many factors contribute to homelessness, such as family breakdown, addictions, redundancies, lack of affordable housing etc. What are the policies that are in place that oppress or hinder people being able to have a roof over the head? How can you speak up, how can you act for change?

