

ADULT UNIT I: Faith-FULL Versus Faith-LESS
ADULT GENERAL LESSON TITLE: Living in Faith
ADULT TOPIC: When the World Is Against Us

LESSON 4

DATE: March 24, 2024 (Palm Sunday)

DEVOTIONAL READING: Deuteronomy 28:1-14

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Acts 6

PRINT PASSAGE: Acts 6:7-15

Home Daily Bible Reading

Mar. 18	M	Deuteronomy 28:1-14	Blessings of Walking in God's Ways
Mar. 19	T	Titus 2:1-8	Let Your Life Match Your Words
Mar. 20	W	Proverbs 1:1-9	Fear God and Gain Knowledge
Mar. 21	Th	2 Corinthians 5:1-11	Refrain from Defiling the Church
Mar. 22	F	2 Timothy 2:8-21	Vessels Prepared for Every Good Work
Mar. 23	Sa	Acts 6:1-6	The Ministry of Caring for Others
Mar. 24	Su	Acts 6:7-15	A Spirit-Empowered Witness

EXALT!

Invocation – Teacher or learner

Celebration – “When I Can Read My Title Clear” - #506 AME Zion Bicentennial Hymnal

Declaration—Acts 6:7-15

(Read together by class, by a volunteer or responsively)

⁷ The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

The Arrest of Stephen

⁸ Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. ¹¹ Then they secretly instigated some men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.”

¹² They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council. ¹³ They set up false witnesses who said, "This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us." ¹⁵ And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Affirmation – We will bear witness to our faith and trust in Christ in the face of threat and danger. (*Spoken together by class and teacher*).

ENGAGE: (5-10 min.)

People who are falsely accused and persecuted often feel that the whole world is against them. What sustains us in the face of injustice and persecution? The testimony of Stephen encourages us to be obedient to the faith inspired by the grace, power, and wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

Break into small groups and discuss the following questions and issues:

1) Share your personal experiences and knowledge of persons being unjustly accused of wrongdoing. What were the causes and how were the people affected? 2) Discuss cases of people currently or historically you know (or you-yourself) who have either forsaken commitments or held steadfastly when faced with suffering? What was the outcome in each case? 3) What moral or legal support do we have for dealing with unjust accusations aimed at us? To what extent are we capable of overcoming the injustices we experience?

EDUCATE: (10-15 min.)

Acts 6:7-10: Luke, the writer of Acts, periodically includes summary statements to orient the reader to the general state of affairs at each point in the book: compare 6:7 with 12:24, for example. So far, the number of disciples has increased from 120 (1:15) to over 8,000 (see 2:41 and 4:4), which included a large number of priests (6:7) and thus was exploding in numbers as well as influence. Verse 7 reveals that "the church's development was caused by the dramatic spread of *the word of God* (see also Acts 12:24; 19:20). As the influence of the gospel message *spread* among people, so did *the number of disciples*" (*Ibid.*, p.259). Stephen was one of the deacons commissioned to address the physical needs of the vulnerable in the church (6:1-6) and thus held a position of leadership and influence. "*Freedmen* were Jewish people who had

been liberated from slavery or who were descendants of those freed. These people were different from free-born citizens of the Roman Empire who had never experienced enslavement. Other groups included *Jews of Cyrene* from northern Africa, *Jews of Alexandria* in Egypt, and people from *Cilicia* and *Asia*, both located in modern-day Turkey. Stephen's teachings gave these groups a reason to *argue with* him. If he had only performed miracles and served food (compare Acts 6:2-3), it is unlikely that these groups would have had any dispute. However, what led to conflict with the synagogue members were his words" (Ibid., p.261). Stephen's skill in teaching and debate shamed educated, honored synagogue members (6:9-10). To regain their reputation, these men tried to destroy Stephen's credibility (shame him). "Although Stephen was not an apostle, he had been chosen by God to give witness to salvation (compare Hebrews 2:3-4). His life demonstrated the spiritual *power* that had been promised by Jesus (1:18)" (Ibid., p. 260).

Acts 6:11-15: "Stephen's wisdom did not sit well with the religious leaders. Unable to win an argument with him, they took a different approach to quiet him. Certain *men* were *secretly persuaded* to speak up against Stephen regarding his teachings. The charge of *blasphemous words* came from their understanding of Stephen's teaching regarding the Law of Moses. Their accusation had severe consequences for Stephen. The Law of Moses prohibited blasphemous language *against* God and the leaders of Israel (Exodus 20:7; 22:28) The *Sanhedrin* was a 70-member "supreme court" for matters regarding Jewish law. The group consisted of chief priests, *elders*, and *teachers of the law* (Mark 15:1). Members of the Sadducees and Pharisees were also likely part of the council to some extent (see Acts 23:6)" (Ibid., p. 261). The "holy place" they refer to (6:13) is the temple: the temple and the Law were the two ways God had given Israel to experience and know God, yet over time God's people had placed their faith in these symbols and institutions (and their own work in fulfilling these) instead of trusting in God absolutely. Stephen's words (though misunderstood) threatened this shared (yet wrong) belief system. Stephen truly suffered for doing good (1 Peter 3:14). Yet, God encouraged him and strengthened his resolve by giving Stephen a powerful, more profound experience of God as well as a glimpse of the spiritual reality, Stephen, by faith had defended (6:15 and 7:55-56; compare Hebrews 11:1). Stephen's experience reminds us that when God's Spirit is powerful in acting through God's people, sometimes the immediate result is not immediate agreement but rather fierce opposition (6:10-12). This should not discourage us but rather drive us even more solidly to Christ, trusting God to do amazing things through our obedience in opposition.

ELEVATE: (10 min.)

Break into groups and discuss the following:

- 1) How we grow in faith in Christ when faced with unjust suffering; 2) How we practice witnessing to the gospel of Jesus without regard to the personal consequences; 3) How we study the example of Stephen and other martyrs for inspiration and hope in our suffering; 4) How we gain knowledge and wisdom to remain faithful when pain is our lot in defending our faith; 5) How we rehearse the gospel and our testimony with other believers to refresh each other's courage and conviction.

ITHINK: (5-7 min.)

1. Investigate the background of Stephen, based on Acts 6:1-8:1. What makes him a model for living his faith?
2. Share a story of someone who has been unjustly accused of wrongdoing in our lifetime, including how that person suffered and endured.
3. Suggest discussion questions to help participants dig into the possible consequences of sharing their faith in active ways.
4. Examine the long-term results of Stephen's faithful witness, including the possible influence his testimony had on those who persecuted him. What enabled Stephen to remain faithful when some opposed him? What might have been the connection between Stephen's service in "distributing food" and his testimony to Christ? How did Stephen's suffering affect Saul (Paul)?
5. Engage in a brief time of worship, including a hymn and a prayer asking for power and strength to remain faithful when threatened with persecution for faith in Jesus.
6. This is Palm Sunday, remembered by many as a day when all the people praised God and proclaimed Jesus the Savior (Matthew 21:8-9). Contrast the situations in which it is easy, and in which it is hard, to profess faith in Jesus.

KEY VERSES: "[Some] stood up and argued with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke."
Acts 6:9-10