

YOUTH UNIT I: Faith-FULL Versus Faith-LESS
YOUTH GENERAL LESSON TITLE: Living in Faith
YOUTH TOPIC: Stephen, the Spirit-Full Hero!

LESSON 4

DATE: March 24, 2024 (Palm Sunday)

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Acts 6

PRINT PASSAGE: Acts 6:7-15

KEEPIN' IT CURRENT! (5 Minutes)

"A Hero of the Faith" – Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born February 4, 1906, to Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer in Flossenbürg, Germany. Bonhoeffer went to seminary and then worked as a pastor in Barcelona, Spain from 1928-1930. In 1930, he traveled to America to continue his theological education. Bonhoeffer attended Union Theological Seminary from 1930-1931. During his stay in New York, Bonhoeffer attended the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. While there, he became inflamed with the struggle for civil rights.

Bonhoeffer's zeal for the Lord caused him to speak out against issues of civil rights in America and abroad. This caused him to be isolated from other believers who saw him as too radical. Bonhoeffer was very vocal about his disdain for the Nazi movement. He was involved in protest and particularly opposed the anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany. Nazis defined Jews as those who had Jewish ancestry alone. Bonhoeffer called for them to embrace a religious understanding of Judaism. In 1935, Bonhoeffer was appointed to lead a new seminary for the Confessing Church. Bonhoeffer taught an ascetic lifestyle to his students during this time—encouraging spiritual disciplines such as fasting, prayer, and confession.

Bonhoeffer continued to stand against the Nazi movement. He worked in ecumenism with other Christian faiths around the globe in spite of the growth of German nationalism all around him. In 1938, Bonhoeffer increased his political efforts by joining a group working to overthrow Hitler. Bonhoeffer fled briefly to New York City to seek refuge from



the Nazis but returned to Germany after only two weeks in America. He believed it was hypocritical to flee and not oppose the injustice in his own country.

Bonhoeffer was arrested on April 5, 1943, and placed in jail in Berlin, Germany. Later documents were discovered linking Bonhoeffer to a failed attempt on the life of Hitler. The Nazis interrogated Bonhoeffer and then eventually hanged him. He gave up his life for his convictions and for the message of the gospel.

Bonhoeffer teaches the church that as believers we cannot live and remain distant from the concerns of the world around us. Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid" (Matt. 5:14). As believers, we must let our light shine in the world. We are Christ's representatives whether in school, the department store, or with friends. We must speak up and be Christ's ambassadors to the world around us.

KEEPIN' IT REAL! (5 Minutes)

- Why do some Christians remain silent about the issues around them? Is there a time to remain silent? How can believers share their faith with the world around them?
- Bonhoeffer gave up his life for his convictions. What do you feel strongly about?

KEEPIN' IT BIBLICAL! (20 Minutes)

KEY VERSE: They could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. Acts 6:10.

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.

The Book of Acts is believed to have been written by Luke. Luke is also credited with the gospel that bears his name. The Book of Acts picks up where Luke leaves off. The Book begins with the ministry of Peter and then shifts from Peter to the Apostle Paul. Acts is the only book of the Bible that chronicles the history of the early church directly after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Acts gives us the strengths of the early church, such as the 3,000 new converts on the day of Pentecost. (Acts 2) But, Acts also gives us the weakness of the early church, such as the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira. (Acts 5:1-11)

We also see the development of the church and church structure in the Acts of the Apostles. 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. In Chapter 6, an issue arises among the believers. There was a complaint against the Hebrews and the Hellenistic Jews. The Hellenist were Jews who were Greek-speaking and adopted Greek customs. This created a culture divided among the early believers. The Hellenist felt the needs of the Hebraic Jews were being attended to above their needs. There were daily distributions given for the support of widows and the Hellenist believed the Hebrews were getting more than them. The solution was for deacons to be elected to serve the people. Among those elected was Stephen. These men were to serve the tables so that the apostles could continue in prayer and study. The apostles laid hands on the men who had been selected and commissioned them to the work. Stephen's skill in teaching and debate shamed the educated, honored synagogue members (6:9-10). To regain their reputation, these men tried to destroy Stephen's credibility (shame him). The opponents of the followers of Christ needed the balance of public opinion to sway in their favor, just as they did during the crucifixion of the Lord. They worked to stir the crowd against Stephen. They accused Stephen of blasphemy, saying he spoke against Moses. Stephen, of course, did no such thing, but simply taught them the gospel message.

The Bible says that Stephen's face shone like an angel as the people seized him. This inflamed the crowd even more. Stephen truly suffered for doing good (1 Peter 3:14). Yet, God encouraged him and strengthened his resolve by giving Stephen a powerful, profound godly experience—a glimpse of the spiritual real-

ity that Stephen so faithfully 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, even in opposition.

KEEPIN' IT TOGETHER (5 Minutes)

It is great to be supported in life, great to have those who agree with your opinion. The feeling of support from friends, family, co-workers, and classmates can feel absolutely amazing. Yet, the reality is that we will not always have this support in our lives. As we walk with Christ, the gospel itself can cause division between us and those whom we love. Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword" (Matt. 10:34). This verse immediately stands in contrast with the passive understanding that most of us have of Christ. Jesus said he was bringing a sword. Then he said that our tension would not be with those outside our homes but with our family members (Matt. 10:35-36). Jesus, in essence, is guaranteeing that believers will have conflict. Jesus guarantees that standing with Him will result in misunderstandings and sometimes people will walk out of our lives.

Being alone or isolated can be destructive. In Genesis, Chapter 2, God said it was not good for humanity to be alone (Genesis 2:18). It is not good, but our Heavenly Father knows how to make it work for our good. Sometimes our greatest moments of growth are when we are alone. When we stand alone, we have no one to rely on but God. In those moments, believers' trust and faith are built-up. The child of God learns how to conquer fears and builds the courage to speak up for Christ.

When we are courageous enough to stand alone, we also preserve the identity that God gave us. Sometimes, Christians just want to fit in. Like Peter who denied Christ during the crucifixion, believers hide their true identity to avoid the consequences of standing up for Christ. Stephen stood alone, but when he could not stand anymore Jesus stood for Him (Acts 8:56)!

iTHINK! (5 Minutes)

- ▣ Make a list of Stephen's strengths and weaknesses. Ask learners to explain their choice to label some as "strengths" and others as "weaknesses."
- ▣ What role does the Holy Spirit play in Stephen's life and witness?