

Living in Faith

“What makes you think you have the one and only true faith?” asked Ahmed.

“That’s a good question,” joined in Ashley. “It’s pretty egotistical if you ask me. There is truth in all religions and faiths.”

Monika had been working with her college study group—Ahmed, Ashley, and Cayleigh—for the past month on a special project. During down times, like now, conversations ran the gamut. For Monika, mentioning the Lord was natural, which soon got into the topic of “religion.”

She offered the Gospel that included Scripture, her life, and her testimony mixed in.

“If you want to follow Jesus, that’s fine, go right ahead,” Ahmed responded. “Everyone else doesn’t have to in order to go to heaven, and I don’t believe God had any children.”

“I try to see the good in everyone,” Ashley said. “I’m more eclectic. You should try it, Monika, instead of being so judgmental.”

Ahmed and Ashley packed up their book bags, saying their goodbyes to Monika and Cayleigh.

“Do you think you’re ready for the presentation next week?” Monika asked, then smiled at Cayleigh.

“Yes,” Cayleigh said. “But I’d like to hear more about your faith. What church do you go to?”

1. *How important is trust in your relationship with God? Explain your answer.*

2. *Why do you believe the Christian faith is often opposed?*

3. *Complete this sentence: When people oppose my faith in God, I will _____.*

Trust in the Spirit

Acts 6:7-10, KJV

7 And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.

8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.

9 Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen.

10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.

Acts 6:7-10, NIV

⁷So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

⁸Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.

⁹Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

The church in Jerusalem was growing despite harsh opposition from the religious leaders. Luke wrote that even “a large number of priests” (vs. 7) were starting to put their faith in Jesus. But this young and growing church in Jerusalem was not without its issues. The Greek-speaking Christian Jews disputed with the Hebrew-speaking Christian Jews, saying the Greek-speaking widows were being neglected in the daily food distribution.

The apostles addressed the complaint by leading the church in Jerusalem to choose seven Jewish men with Greek-sounding names “full of the Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3). This solution indicates that the problem was due to an expanding church that struggled with a language and culture barrier. Stephen, a Greek name, was

one of the men chosen to fulfill the task of tending to the Greek-speaking Jewish widows. He was qualified due to his reputation, trust in the Spirit, and ability to interact with the Greek-speaking widows.

As Stephen was fulfilling his duties, he also performed many great wonders and signs among the people (Acts 6:8). These wondrous works of God done through the hands of Stephen caught the attention of a great number of people, including a group that opposed the faith: Libertines, Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia (Acts 6:9).

This group tried to silence Stephen by disputing with him in the public square. But no matter how hard the opposition tried, they could not withstand Stephen's "wisdom" or the "Spirit" whom he spoke with (6:10).

The context reveals that his wisdom and Spirit were gifts from Jesus for the purpose of emboldening the church in times of opposition. He is described as a man who was full of faith and power (Acts 6:8). Therefore, Stephen's faith was in Jesus; and when his faith was opposed, he chose to put his faith in the Spirit of Jesus.

4. *What was the complaint that led to Stephen serving the church?*

5. *What caused the opposition to Stephen?*

6. *Who did Stephen put his trust in amid opposition?*

Faith Will Be Opposed

Acts 6:11-15 KJV

11 Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God.

12 And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and

Acts 6:11-15 NIV

¹¹Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God."

¹²So they stirred up the

the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council,

13 And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law:

14 For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.

15 And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.

people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin.

¹³They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. ¹⁴For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

¹⁵All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Stephen's opposition could not overcome him with their words, nor could they persuade the crowd to oppose him, so those accusing Stephen bribed ("suborned" in the KJV) some men to make up lies about Stephen. The lies included two general categories. According to these men, Stephen was speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God. The specific charges against Stephen were that first, he was saying that Jesus would destroy the temple, and second, the customs of Moses were changed.

It has often been said that a half-truth is the greatest lie. With a half-truth, the opposition intentionally skewed Stephen's message to get the crowd "stirred" up. Stephen was indeed teaching that the temple and the law had a different place now that Christ had been crucified, buried, and resurrected. So, their accusations had a flavor of truth; but the accusers failed to mention the whole story regarding how the law and the temple found their fulfillment in Jesus. Stephen was more interested in showing the Jews that Jesus was the fulfillment of the temple and the law,

rather than tearing down customs.

In a sad turn of events, the opposition ended up winning the crowd's ear and persuading them to turn against Stephen. One of the main ways they stirred the people was by placing more liars to make up false claims about Stephen. The false testimonies were intentionally emotionally charged in reference to the most intimate part of their religion, the temple. Further, the false testimonies were intentionally half-told to turn the crowd against Stephen.

After the false testimonies, Stephen's case was brought to the highest authority for the Jewish people, the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was a council with 70 elders of Israel. Their job was to make judgments and determinations on difficult cases among the Jewish people.

As these 70 elders looked at Stephen, they saw a man who had the face of an "angel" (vs. 15). The description of Stephen's face resembling an angel is intended to highlight the awe and glory of his ministry. Stephen was obviously innocent of the charges brought before him. His faith in God was demonstrated by the great signs and wonders that were done through him. This was so evident that when the Sanhedrin saw him, the main characteristic that described his countenance was a reflection of the glory of God as seen in the face of an angel.

Stephen's likeness reflecting an angel further indicates that he had a steady trust in the Spirit of God in the midst of opposition. It would have been easy for him to lose heart or give in to the most powerful decision-making body the Jews had at the time. He should have looked like a frightened puppy at this point in the story, but he never wavered. Stephen was able to reflect the glory of God by putting his trust in the Spirit when his faith was opposed.

7. *How did the opposition stir the crowd to turn on Stephen?*

8. *What was the Sanhedrin?*

9. *How did Stephen respond to the opposition?*

God's Smuggler

Andy van der Bijl is better known by his code name, Brother Andrew, or by the name God's Smuggler, the title of a book he published about being a missionary who risked his life to bring Bibles and the Gospel to people living behind what was called the Iron Curtain. When the Soviet Union took over the countries of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, East Germany, and Bulgaria after World War II, the Soviets set up Communist governments in those countries and banned Christianity.

Born in the Netherlands in 1928, he did not start life as a Christian. When he was shot while serving in the Dutch Army, he started reading a Bible his mother gave him and surrendered his life to Christ. His simple prayer was, "Lord, if You will show me the way, I will follow You. Amen." After missionary school, he went to Poland and Czechoslovakia and found underground churches in desperate need of Bibles. "I promised God that as often as I could lay my hands on a Bible, I would bring it to these children of His behind the wall that men built."

He began to make trips into Communist countries in a blue Volkswagen with Bibles and gospel tracts hidden in it. He would pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance when he met the guards at the border: "Lord, in my luggage I have Scripture I want to take to Your children. When You were on earth, You made blind eyes see. Now, I pray, make seeing eyes blind. Do not let the guards see those things You do not want them to see." Always, he and those he recruited to help him followed the Spirit's leading, and none were ever caught.

10. *Why do we sometimes not trust the Spirit's leading?*

11. *How can praying to the Spirit give us strength when facing opposition?*

12. *What opposition have you faced victoriously with the Spirit's help?*

The Wisdom of the Spirit

Jesus said, “But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (Matt. 10:19-20). The believer is not alone or forsaken.

► *Create a prayer to God asking for His Spirit to rest on you and give you an open ear and open heart to hear what the Spirit of the Lord is saying now and when you face opposition—which you will if you truly follow His leading.*

KEY VERSES

Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake. —Acts 6:9-10, KJV

Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke. —Acts 6:9-10, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of March 25 through March 31

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

- Mon.** Mark 14:1-9—Faith Revealed through Extravagant Love.
- Tues.** Exodus 14:10-20—Faith in God's Deliverance.
- Wed.** Exodus 14:21-31—Faith in God's Protection.
- Thurs.** Mark 14:17-26—Faith Challenged and Encouraged.
- Fri.** Mark 15:25-39—An Unexpected Confession of Faith.
- Sat.** Psalm 22:1-11, 27-31—Faith Despite Pain and Loss.
- Sun.** Mark 16:1-8—Faith in the Risen Christ.