

The World Was Not Worthy of Them: Stories of Courage

A Study and Discussion Guide for Digging Deeper

by Keith Stanglin

This class explores the virtue of courage in Christian history. The first session examines the idea of courage in general. Subsequent sessions survey the lives of select individuals, from the second century to the twentieth century, who exhibited courage. These examples will inspire us to live more thoughtfully and courageously today. Included below are the books used or referred to in each video lesson. Use the discussion questions and further readings to dig deeper.

Episode 1. What Is Courage?

Summary

The first video examines the idea of courage in general. First, we look at the meaning of the word in Greek. Then we look at Aristotle's discussion of courage as a virtue. Thomas Aquinas accepts and clarifies Aristotle's main points. To these classic reflections on courage I add two observations. We conclude by citing a theme biblical passage and a theme hymn to supplement this learning module.

Books and Resources Used or Referred to:

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Loeb Classical Library.

Hamrick, David Russell, "Father, Hear the Prayer We Offer," at <http://drhamrick.blogspot.com/2014/10/father-hear-prayer-we-offer.html>.

John of Damascus, *De fide orthodoxa (On the Orthodox Faith)*, Fathers of the Church.

Lee, Justin, "Takeaways from the Debate over Tim Keller's Third Way," at <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2022/05/takeaways-from-the-debate-over-tim-kellers-third-way>

Qiaoying, Lu, "Aquinas's Transformation of the Virtue of Courage," *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 8/3 (2013): 471-84.

Renn, Aaron, "The Three Worlds of Evangelicalism," at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2022/02/the-three-worlds-of-evangelicalism>.

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae (Sum of Theology)*.

Willis, Love Maria Whitcomb, "Prayer," *Tiffany's Monthly*, vol. 3 (1857): 359.

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you ever seen someone show a deficiency of courage? What about an excess of courage?
2. Name some biblical examples of courage. How or why was the action courageous?
3. Read Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II.ii and II.vii, at <https://standardebooks.org/ebooks/aristotle/nicomachean-ethics/f-h-peters/text/book-2#chapter-2-1-2> and <https://standardebooks.org/ebooks/aristotle/nicomachean-ethics/f-h-peters/text/book-2#chapter-2-1-7>. Which examples and concrete illustrations stand out or help you understand his point?

Episode 2. Polycarp of Smyrna

Summary

Polycarp of Smyrna (70–156) was a pupil of the apostle John and other eyewitnesses of Jesus, and he was a courageous defender of orthodoxy. His courage was on full display when he held fast to his faith, refusing to renounce Christ, and was therefore executed by the Roman rulers.

Books and Resources Used or Referred to:

Martyrdom of Polycarp, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Michael W. Holmes, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

Discussion Questions:

1. How did suffering and martyrdom seem to shape early Christians' understanding of reality?
2. What are the various themes and meanings attached to martyrdom, and on what do you think these thoughts are based?
3. Read the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 1-16, at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/polycarp-smyrnaeans.html>. What specific thing surprises you most about this document, *Martyrdom of Polycarp*?

Episode 3. Boethius

Summary

Boethius (ca. 480–524) was a senator, consul, and advisor under the Ostrogothic king, Theodoric. He was arrested and imprisoned on trumped up charges of treason. As he awaited execution, he wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy*. In this book, he consoled by the truth of what is most important in life, acknowledgment of which helps him face death courageously.

Books and Resources Used or Referred to:

Boethius, *De consolazione philosophiae (On the Consolation of Philosophy)*, Loeb Classical Library.

Lewis, C. S. *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964).

Discussion Questions:

1. Read selections from *Consolation* I.3 (prose); II.2 (poem); II.4 (prose); III.3 (poem), in the attachment with this course. Boethius writes as a philosopher and does not quote Scripture, yet his words are consistent with biblical truth. Do you notice any parallels between these readings and Scripture? If so, what are they?
2. Do you agree or disagree that good fortune has spoiled us and left us unprepared to face adversity? Explain.
3. Do you agree that there is a certain clarity in the face of death? Have you seen that in yourself or someone else?

Episode 4. Martin Luther

Summary

Martin Luther (1483–1546) was a monk, priest, and university professor in Wittenberg. When he was pressured to recant his views on the justification and the authority of Scripture, he courageously stood firm and continued his career as a great reformer of the church.

Books and Resources Used or Referred to:

Bainton, Roland. *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon, 1950).

Luther, Martin. *95 Theses and Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, in Keith D. Stanglin, ed., *The Reformation to the Modern Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

Oberman, Heiko A. *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

Discussion Questions:

1. One of the medieval developments mentioned in the video is the persecution of Christians by other Christian believers. First-century Jewish Christians were persecuted by God's people and kicked out of their own synagogues. Read Luke 21:12-19, with special attention to verse 16. Have you seen Christians stand in opposition to the gospel, God's kingdom, or Christian principles?
2. As Polycarp fled for a time, Luther was hidden away in Wartburg Castle. When do you think it is permissible or prudent to flee persecution, and when must it be faced head-on?

3. Read Luther's *95 Theses* (1517) and the excerpt from his *Address to the Christian Nobility* (1520). What do you find striking about these documents? What passages do you see that you think took a great deal of courage to write and publicize?

Episode 5. Mother Martyrs

Summary

Women like Perpetua and Felicitas (d. 203), and Janneken (d. 1573), paid the ultimate price for their faithfulness to Christ. Not only did they sacrifice their own lives, but their allegiance to Christ also meant separation from their infant children.

Books and Resources Used or Referred to:

Munstdorp, Janneken van, "Testament," in Keith D. Stanglin, ed., *The Reformation to the Modern Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

Perpetua and Tertullian, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, in Bryan Litfin, ed., *Early Christian Martyr Stories: An Evangelical Introduction with New Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014).

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you seen someone have to make a choice between allegiance to Christ or a family relationship? How did that go?
2. Besides family loyalties, what are some other good things that might test our allegiance to Christ, especially in times of persecution?
3. Read *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/perpetua.html>. What instances of courage do you see in this account?

Episode 6. Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Summary

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) was a German pastor and theologian. He demonstrated courage by resisting the Nazi takeover of the German church and of the country.

Books and Resources Used or Referred to:

Bethge, Eberhard, *Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, rev. Victoria J. Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1959).

Metaxas, Eric, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010).

Discussion Questions:

1. When is it permissible or prudent to blend in to, or openly to resist, an anti-Christian society? Can you think of any contemporary examples?
2. What do you think about the man's approach in the 1936 photo from the Hamburg shipyard?
3. Read Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, ch. 4, pp. 95-104, at <https://archive.org/details/DietrichBonhoefferCostOfDisciples/page/n95/mode/2up>. How does he describe discipleship?

Episode 7. Conclusion

Summary

This lesson reflects on the nearly two millennia of courageous Christians, including the many acts of courage among Christians today.

Books and Resources Used or Referred to:

Tolkien, J. R. R., *Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1955, 1982).

Discussion Questions:

1. What has this study taught you about courage?
2. Was there a particular story in this series that stood out to you? What other important stories of courage from history were omitted?
3. What are the stories of Christian courage today? Who have you seen doing something courageous?