



The Apostles Are Persecuted

9

Key Theme

- God uses people to accomplish His plans.

Key Passages

- Acts 4:1–31, 6:8–15, 7:51–60

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Describe why the apostles were persecuted.
- Describe how the apostles responded to persecution.



Lesson Overview



Come On In

Write on the board, “How should Christians respond to persecution?”



Studying God’s Word

Soon after Pentecost, the apostles began to experience persecution because they preached the truth in the name of Jesus Christ. They were able to stand firm and even rejoice in their sufferings because they were empowered with the promised Holy Spirit.

Study the Prepare to Share section.

Go Before the Throne.



Activity: Facing Persecution

Students will examine their own attitudes toward persecution in light of several passages that describe believers facing persecution.

Student Guides

Pencils



Activity: Truth Be Told Review Game (Optional)

The students will review the lesson by playing a board game.

Truth Be Told Game Board and Answer Key

Game pieces for each team

Truth Be Told Question and Number Cards

Poster putty



Prepare to Share

SCRIPTURAL BACKGROUND

Prepare to teach by preparing your heart. Read the key passages listed above along with this background.

Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would come to teach all things. But He would not come until Jesus had left the earth (John 16:7). And when He did come, He would guide believers into all truth (John 16:13). The Holy Spirit would empower the disciples and make them witnesses for Jesus and the gospel from Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8).

As the church began to grow, so did the opposition to the truth about Jesus. The disciples drew on the power of the Holy Spirit for wisdom, strength, and perseverance as they stood firm to proclaim the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints (1 Corinthians 2:13; Ephesians 3:16; Jude 3).

It appeared the apostles were off to a good start by the power of the Holy Spirit. Peter's sermon at Pentecost added about 3,000 souls to the church (Acts 2:41). And the Bible tells us that Peter and John were given the power to heal a lame man at the Temple in the name of Jesus Christ. This lame man got up, and all the people saw him walking and praising God (Acts 3:1–10). The people were amazed at the miracle performed by the apostles, but Peter quickly declared that it was by faith in the name of Jesus Christ—the very Man they had denied and killed—that the lame man had been healed (Acts 3:15–16).

As their fame grew and they continued to preach the power of Jesus Christ and His resurrection from the dead, the priests and Jewish leaders became jealous. It wasn't long before Peter and John were arrested—but not before 5,000 more believers were added to the church (Acts 4:1–4).

A familiar scene—reminiscent of Jesus's own recent illegal trial—followed their arrest as the rulers, elders, scribes, Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, and others gathered together to question the apostles. They asked, "By what power or by what name have you done this?" (Acts 4:5–7).

God's Word tells us that Peter, filled with the wisdom and knowledge of the Holy Spirit, stood and again proclaimed that it was by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom they had crucified and God had raised from the dead, that the man had been healed. Peter spoke boldly to his accusers in the name of Jesus, and proclaimed that salvation could be found in NO other name given to men under heaven (Acts 4:8–12).

The Jewish council was perplexed. A notable mira-

cle had been done, and no one could deny it. But they plotted to stop the spread of this gospel of Jesus Christ, and they threatened the apostles, commanding them not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus! However, Peter and John would NOT be discouraged. And they would not back down from speaking the things they had seen and heard (Acts 4:20).

The apostles were released and went back to their friends, and together they rejoiced at God's faithfulness. As they were gathered together, they prayed that the Lord would grant them boldness to speak His Word and continue to give them the power to do signs and wonders in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 4:23–30).

This would not be the end of their troubles, however. They were again imprisoned but miraculously freed by an angel of the Lord who opened the prison doors. The apostles went back to the Temple and began preaching again (Acts 5:17–21). Again they were arrested and told to STOP preaching in the name of Jesus Christ! And yet, the apostles boldly proclaimed that they were to obey God rather than men and would not stop preaching (Acts 5:29).

The persecution of the church and the apostles would only continue to grow worse. But even in spite of beatings and imprisonment, the apostles rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for the name of Jesus (Acts 5:40–41).

Later on, the Apostle Paul also suffered many trials as he was persecuted for his faith in Jesus Christ. It was Paul who penned what has come to be a cry of confidence and victory in the gospel. We read it in Romans 1:16: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek."

As Christians, we too should boldly proclaim that we will not be ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. For it was through its truth that we were saved and through its power that others will be saved to eternal life.

HISTORICAL/APOLOGETICS BACKGROUND

In our Western world, Christians know very little of persecution. As Americans, we enjoy religious freedom, freedom of assembly, and freedom of speech. There are more than 450,000 churches across the United States where we can worship without government interference. Some of these are mega-churches with coffee bars, fitness centers, bookstores, and more. When we complain of being persecuted, it may be because someone called us a name, or we were denied a promotion at

our job due to our evangelistic fervor. But compared to the early church, and much of the church today around the world, we live in very peaceful and accommodating circumstances.

The history of the church is one of persecution and martyrdom. It has been customary for church historians to count ten major periods of severe persecution in the early church, beginning with the persecution under Emperor Nero in AD 64 and ending with Emperor Diocletian in AD 305. Christians were thrown to the lions, forced into gladiatorial battles, burned alive, and crucified. In fact, all of the original apostles, except John, died unnatural deaths because of their faith. And John died while exiled to the island of Patmos. In the second century, one Christian apologist wrote the following:

Though beheaded, and crucified, and thrown to wild beasts, and chains, and fire, and all other kinds of torture, we do not give up our confession; but, the more such things happen, the more do others in larger numbers become faithful (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*).

And while we may be tempted to think that severe persecution is a thing of the past, the reality is that more Christians died for their faith in the twentieth century than in all of the previous centuries combined. By some counts, around 100,000 Christians are martyred for their faith each year, and there are currently over 100 million Christians being persecuted worldwide.

Indeed, the history of the church demonstrates triumph in the face of persecution and martyrdom. In many places around the world, as the persecution increased, the church grew. Under Chairman Mao and Chinese Communism, for example, professing Christians in China grew from 1.5 million in 1970 to 65 million in just twenty years, even though foreign missionaries were severely restricted.

When we survey the Bible, we quickly see that persecution is a stark reality of the Christian life. The Apostle Paul warned Timothy that “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). Jesus told His disciples to expect persecution from the world because, since they hated Him, they will hate His followers also. He said that if they persecuted Him, they would persecute His followers (John 15:18–20). Since the world is driven by the love of sin and self, it is no wonder they hate Christians who are called to be different and separate from the world. It is this very separation from the world and the world system that provokes hatred toward us.

As Christians, we must learn to recognize the spiritual value persecution offers and even to rejoice in it. Persecution allows us to share in a unique fellowship with our Lord. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, listed a number of things he surrendered for the cause of Christ. Such losses, however, he viewed as “rubbish” (Philippians 3:8) that he might share in the “fellowship of [Christ’s] sufferings” (Philippians 3:10). Peter wrote that the church should not think it strange to come upon trials, but they should rejoice that they can partake in Christ’s sufferings. And, when the time comes for His glory to be revealed, those who suffered for His sake may also be glad with exceeding joy (1 Peter 4:13).

Persecution is good for our spiritual growth, whether we like to think of it that way or not. James instructs us to count it all joy when we fall into trials, knowing that the testing of our faith produces patience, endurance, and maturity (James 1:2–4). Jesus also addressed this topic during His famous Sermon on the Mount when He said that His followers would be blessed when people insult and persecute them. In fact, He said we should rejoice at persecution, for our reward will be great in heaven (Matthew 5:11–12).

It is hard to say just when we will fall into life threatening trials for the sake of the gospel. But, when it happens, we can be confident that if we are truly saved and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, His power in us will enable us to stand firm for our faith.

For more information on this topic, see the Online Resource Page.



BEFORE THE THRONE

Praise your name, Lord Jesus! Thank you for the examples you give us in Scripture of apostles who boldly proclaimed your Word. The persecution they suffered because of your name did not deter them. Help all Christians to follow their example. Please keep those who profess the name of Jesus from the fear of man. Give us strength to look to you and your Word for wisdom and courage that we may always be ready to defend the reason for the hope that we have. Holy Spirit, bring boldness. Move in the hearts of my students to believe the gospel. Change them into new creations who long to proclaim the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Review

As we transitioned into the book of Acts last week, we saw how the promise of Jesus to send the Holy Spirit was fulfilled. The Spirit came with power and gave the miraculous sign of offering praises to God in the languages of the people gathered in Jerusalem so that God's power through these disciples was evident. As the gospel was proclaimed and the charge of the murder of Jesus was leveled against the Jews and others gathered, there was an amazing response as 3,000 were convicted by the Spirit and drawn to Christ. They repented of their sins, received baptism, and were added

to the church where they began to learn all that Christ had taught as the apostles taught in the Temple and from house to house.

We are moving along in the storyline of the book of Acts today and looking at the persecution that arose from the Jews in Jerusalem. Our goal is to understand what brought the persecution in the early church and how the believers responded to it and then to apply that knowledge to our own situation as followers of Christ and members of the church in our culture and context.



► Write on the board, "How should Christians respond to persecution?"



Studying God's Word

READ THE WORD

To set up the text that we are going to study today, I need to fill in a little of the background. So open your Bibles to Acts 2. After Peter's sermon, there was a massive influx of believers where the 120-member group swelled to over 3,000 in one day (2:41). Beyond that, more were being added to the church each day as the proclamation of the gospel and teaching of the apostles continued (2:47). In Acts 3 Peter and John were headed to the Temple where they encountered a lame man. They healed the man who had been lame from birth. As the crowd in the Temple marveled at the healing, Peter proclaimed the gospel to them and made it clear that it was in the name and power of Jesus Christ that they had healed the man. Again he reminded them that they murdered the Messiah but that God raised Him from the dead, pointing to the prophets to confirm his claims. Let's read Acts 4:1–31 to understand what happened. *Have someone read the passage aloud, possibly having a second reader take over at verse 23.*

Acts 4:1–31

EXAMINE THE WORD

Observe the Text

? Who approached Peter and John as they spoke to the people? *The priests, the captain of the Temple guard, and the Sadducees.*

- ? **What was the cause of concern?** *They were concerned that Peter and John were teaching the people about the Resurrection of Jesus.*
- ? **Why were the Sadducees concerned about this teaching?** *They did not believe in the resurrection of the dead (Mark 12:18).*
- ? **What did they do with Peter and John?** *They placed them in custody (prison) overnight.*
- ? **How long had passed since Peter and John arrived at the Temple?** *Since it was evening at the arrest, and they arrived around the ninth hour (3:1) which is three in the afternoon, it had been about three hours.*
- ? **How did the people listening respond?** *Many of them believed.*
- ? **How many believed?** *This passage says the number of men rose to 5,000. Acts 2:41 mentions 3,000 souls (men and women), so there were thousands added in this period. Based on this, we can't know exactly how many.*
- ? **Who gathered to judge Peter and John?** *Many Jewish leaders and priests named in verses 5 and 6.*
- ? **What name can we apply to this group?** *The Sanhedrin, the group of 70 ruling elders of the Jews.*
- ? **What question did the Sanhedrin ask the two men?** *Rather than asking about the preaching of the resurrection, they asked about the means of healing the man: "By what power or by what name have you done this?"*
- ? **Who responded to them?** *Peter.*
- ? **In what manner did he respond?** *He responded filled with the Holy Spirit.*
- ? **How did Peter answer their question?** *He told them plainly that it was in the name of Jesus Christ that he healed the man.*
- ? **Who did Peter blame for Jesus's crucifixion?** *He blamed the Jewish leaders.*
- ? **What else did Peter proclaim about Jesus?** *That God raised Him from the dead.*
- ? **In verse 11, how did Peter condemn the Jews?** *He used a quote from Psalm 118:22 which is similar to Isaiah 28:16 that Jesus quoted in Matthew 21:42 to condemn the leaders for failing to acknowledge Jesus and rejecting Him as the Messiah.*
- ? **How did Peter relate Jesus to salvation?** *He went beyond the healing of the man in the name of Jesus to the fact that salvation is found only in the name of Jesus.*
- ? **How did the Jews respond to Peter's answer to their question?** *They were surprised by his boldness and that he responded with such clear reasoning since the apostles were uneducated men. They realized the men had been with Jesus.*
- ? **Were there any grounds to deny Peter's speech or the healing?** *The Sanhedrin saw the man who had been healed and acknowledged the healing was genuine. They also recognized the truth in what Peter said even though they did not believe it. There were no grounds to deny them.*
- ? **What did the Sanhedrin want to prevent?** *They wanted to prevent the spreading of the teaching of Jesus among the people.*

➤ While it is true that the Romans had carried out the Crucifixion, Peter clearly lays the responsibility of the act on the Jewish leaders, even using the phrase "whom you crucified."

- ? **How did they plan to accomplish this?** *They would command the disciples not to teach in the name of Jesus so that people would not hear the message and respond to it.*
- ? **Did Peter and John agree to the demand?** *No!*
- ? **What reason did they give to reject the command of the Sanhedrin?** *They explained that it is better to obey the commands of God rather than the commands of men.*
- ? **How did they describe their commitment to preaching Jesus?** *They said they could not help but speak of what they had seen and heard.*
- ? **How had God commanded them to proclaim Jesus?** *Jesus had commanded them to be His witnesses and to make disciples of all nations beginning in Jerusalem. Jesus is God and always does the will of the Father, so their command to preach of Jesus had come from God. Additionally, they were empowered by God the Holy Spirit to preach the truths about Jesus.*
- ? **How did the Sanhedrin react to this denial?** *They threatened them again and released them.*
- ? **What were the Sanhedrin afraid would happen if they punished Peter and John for what they did and said?** *They were afraid of the reaction of the people who had seen the miracle—likely the threat of them rebelling against the leaders. This is similar to the response of the Sanhedrin a short time earlier as Jesus walked among the people, defying the leaders with His teaching and acts.*
- ? **What was the reaction of the disciples as they reported what had happened?** *They rejoiced in the outcome and offered praise to God for all He had done—even acknowledging His hand in directing all of these events.*
- ? **What did they ask God for in verse 29?** *They asked for boldness to continue proclaiming the truth and for power to heal and to do signs and wonders.*
- ? **Why did they need boldness?** *They recognized their need for God to work in them to give them the courage to face the threats of the Sanhedrin.*
- ? **What was the purpose of these signs and wonders?** *These were used to authenticate that the message being preached was truly from God because only God could perform the miracles. These signs were done in the name of Jesus.*

? **How did God respond to their prayer?** *He granted their prayer for boldness, filling them with the Holy Spirit, and caused the place they were in to be shaken. This physical act demonstrated God's approval of their prayer and His power to give them that boldness.*

Discover the Truth

What an amazing account! This little gaggle of unlearned men stood before the highly trained leaders of Israel and demonstrated through their arguments and miracles that the power of God rested with them rather than the leaders. They were absolutely confident that God would vindicate them for preaching the truth about Jesus—the only name by which men must be saved. They were willing to face this persecution for the privilege of proclaiming God's truth to all so that many would come to repent of their sins and trust in Christ. And this is exactly what they should have expected to happen.

? **How is the instruction of Jesus in Luke 21:12–18 connected to this passage?** *Jesus had already warned the disciples of what would happen as a result of their obedience to His commands and adherence to His teachings. This reality was playing out as the Jewish leaders sought to silence the preaching of Jesus as the resurrected Savior. This is also echoed in John 16:1–4.*

? **What principle of obeying government authorities can we draw from Peter and John's disobedience to the command to stop preaching?** *They acknowledged the command of God (Jesus) as superseding the commands of men. If a command of man contradicts a command of God, we must obey God.*

? **What attributes of God were the disciples trusting in as they prayed for boldness?** *Refer to the Attributes of God Poster. God's sovereignty was acknowledged in their prayer as well as their trust that God, being omnipotent, could carry out those plans.*

“You killed Jesus, but God raised Him from the dead!” That truth was proclaimed by Peter and John, and they were emboldened to preach that truth. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, they performed miracles and proclaimed with boldness the salvation that is found in Jesus alone.



Luke 21:12–18

SOVEREIGN

OMNIPOTENT



Facing Persecution

MATERIALS

- Student Guides
- Pencils

INSTRUCTIONS

Ask the following questions in a rhetorical manner to get the students thinking about persecution.

In Second Timothy 3:12, the Apostle Paul wrote, “All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.”

So what about you? Do you pray for boldness? Are you ready to face a judge for the charge of preaching in the name of Jesus? Would that ever happen to you? Could someone in our country ever be called before a judge for preaching the gospel in public?

Those are the questions I want you to consider in our activity today. You will find the Facing Persecution activity in your Student Guide. Take some time in small groups to read the passages and discuss the questions, then we will look at them as a group in a few minutes.

CONNECT TO THE TRUTH

Let’s talk about facing persecution based on our readings of those passages (1 Peter 3:14–17, 4:12–16; John 15:18–25).

- ? 1. How are you facing persecution for your faith in Jesus? *Discuss various answers.*
- ? 2. If you are not currently facing persecution, does that necessarily mean that you are not living a life of godliness? Explain your thinking. *Based on our particular cultural contexts, we may not face a lot of personal persecution. The amount of persecution we face will be shaped by many factors, only one of which is our faith in Christ and its expression. However, it is important to analyze our own hearts on this matter to*

be sure that we are not shrinking back from living out our faith and speaking of the hope of salvation found in Christ alone, asking God for boldness to speak in the name of Jesus. While the persecution that we face in our country may seem minor to what Christians in other times and places face, God has placed us in this place at this time according to His good pleasure (Acts 17:26), and we should not feel like we are sub-par Christians because no one is shooting at us.

- ? 3. What is the difference between being persecuted for our beliefs and expressions of our faith before others and being persecuted for our attitude before others? *It is a blessing to be persecuted for the name of Christ and righteousness’ sake, not for being obnoxious. We should be speaking the truth in love and sharing the hope that we have in Christ with meekness and fear, but doing so boldly, knowing that the gospel is the power of God to salvation.*
- ? 4. How do your own attitudes about persecution compare to what is expressed in these passages? *Discuss various answers, offering encouragement to those who are fearful and cautions to those who are too sure of themselves.*
- ? 5. If persecution comes, do you believe you will be prepared to respond to it in a way that honors Christ? *As we read about terrible forms of persecution faced by Christians around the world, it should encourage us to be praying for them and remind us that God’s grace is available to us when we need it, not before we need it. We can be preparing our own hearts for persecution by praying for others and acknowledging that God may send those trials our way at any time.*

It is important for us to remember that we are called to take up our crosses daily to follow Jesus. If the world hated Him, and we are to be walking through this life in a way that people would look at us and see Him, then we should expect the same. Jesus said, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of God” (Matthew 5:10).



READ THE WORD

Looking back to the book of Acts in chapter 5, the disciples did continue to preach Christ, and the apostles worked miracles as “multitudes of both men and women” became believers (5:12–14). This again led to the imprisonment of the apostles, but an angel freed them from prison. They appeared before the Sanhedrin again where Peter reminded them it is better to obey God and preach salvation in Christ than to remain silent. This time they beat the apostles and then freed them, commanding them to stop preaching Christ. The apostles rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame in the name of Jesus, and they continued to proclaim Jesus as the Christ. There were even a great many of the priests who came to faith in Christ. *Encourage the students to read chapter 5 on their own.*

We are going to look briefly at the account of Stephen, the disciple who has the distinction of being the first martyr in the church, facing death for his belief in Jesus as the Messiah. We are going to read Acts 6:8–15 and then jump to 7:51–60. The section that we are skipping over, for the sake of time, is a recounting of God’s faithfulness to Israel given to the Sanhedrin by Stephen, one of the first deacons in the church. I encourage you to take time to read that section this week. *Have someone read the passages aloud.*

Acts 6:8–15, 7:51–60

EXAMINE THE WORD

Observe the Text

Let’s begin by looking at Acts 6:8–15.

- ? **How is Stephen described?** *He is full of faith and power. In 6:5 he is also said to be full of the Holy Spirit.*
- ? **How did God display this power in Stephen?** *Stephen was able to do great wonders and signs among the people. He also had great wisdom as he disputed with the unbelieving Jews.*
- ? **Who was disputing with Stephen?** *Jewish men from various places in Africa, Asia, and Europe.*
- ? **Were these men able to refute Stephen’s arguments?** *No.*
- ? **Who is this ability to argue attributed to?** *The work of the Holy Spirit in Stephen gave him this wisdom.*
- ? **What did these men do to Stephen?** *They trumped up false charges against him, bringing him before the Sanhedrin.*
- ? **What were the charges they created?** *They said Stephen had spoken blasphemous things against the Law and that Jesus would change the customs of Moses and destroy the Temple. All of these were false, but they provided witnesses who would lie before the council.*
- ? **How did the members of the Sanhedrin perceive Stephen?** *They saw his face as the face of an angel.*

? **What does this phrase tell us about Stephen’s demeanor?** *Stephen was calm and under control, surely through the work of the Spirit in him as he was brought to testify before these leaders.*

Stephen goes on in 7:1–53 to deliver an eloquent speech. This speech is undoubtedly exactly the kind of thing Jesus was speaking of in Luke 21:10–19 where He told the disciples they would appear before synagogues and be given wisdom from Jesus (which we understand to be the work of the Spirit in us) regarding the words to speak. Let’s examine the outcome of Stephen’s speech before the council.

? **What specific things did Stephen accuse the leaders of?** *He told them they were stiff-necked, uncircumcised in heart and ears, resisting the Holy Spirit, persecuting and killing the prophets just as their fathers did, betraying and murdering the Just One, and not keeping the Law.*

? **Who is the Just One in verse 52?** *Jesus.*

? **Why would referring to them as “uncircumcised in heart and ears” have been so offensive to them?** *They would have thought of their physical circumcision (as males) as the mark of them belonging to God and as the keepers and protectors of His Law. Calling them uncircumcised, in any form, would be calling them Gentiles, or pagans, and would have been highly offensive to them. Stephen was pointing out that their physical circumcision did not make them able to hear and love God, but that they actually refused to hear His truth spoken through Jesus and failed to honor Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah. In one sense, he is reversing the charges levelled against him and placing those charges on the Sanhedrin.*

? **What did Stephen tell the Jewish leaders they did to Jesus?** *He told them they betrayed and murdered Him.*

? **How did the group react to Stephen’s speech and accusations?** *They responded quickly and violently.*

? **What does the phrase “cut to the heart” mean?** *This indicates that they were convicted of their sin. The same phrase is used in Acts 2:37 when the crowd responded to Peter’s preaching.*

? **What does the phrase “gnashed at him with their teeth” mean?** *This is a phrase that denotes anger through gritted teeth as they yelled at Stephen.*

? **What did Stephen experience as the Sanhedrin jeered at him?** *He was filled with the Spirit and saw the glory of God in Heaven, Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father.*

? **How does this verse support our understanding of the Trinity?** *Similar to the appearance of the Trinity at the baptism of Jesus, God the Holy Spirit was filling Stephen and God the Son was standing next to God the Father.*

- ? **How did the council respond when Stephen explained what he was seeing?** *They screamed and plugged their ears as they dragged him out of the city.*
- ? **Was there any dissent noted in the council?** *No, they responded with one accord. Interestingly, this phrase is used earlier in the chapter to describe the unity of the believers.*
- ? **What did they do to Stephen outside of the city?** *They stoned him to death.*
- ? **What was Stephen doing as they were stoning him?** *He was calling on God, asking Jesus to receive his spirit and to not charge the crowd with their sin.*
- ? **What person are we introduced to for the first time in this passage?** *Saul who was also known as Paul.*
- ? **What was Saul doing during the stoning?** *He was watching the clothes of the witnesses and others who were stoning Stephen.*
- ? **What does Acts 8:1 tell us about Saul's attitude?** *Saul consented with the stoning of Stephen.*
- ? **What does the phrase "he fell asleep" mean?** *This is a euphemism for death, especially used of believers throughout the New Testament.*
- ? **The term "martyr" is not mentioned in this passage, but what do we mean by the term?** *A martyr is someone who dies as a consequence of his faith. Christian martyrs are those who, for the sake of the name of Jesus Christ, face persecution unto death.*

➤ Stephen was the first martyr of the church.

Discover the Truth

Just as Jesus had promised, standing for the truth and proclaiming salvation in Jesus alone was met with sharp persecution. Stephen, a man filled with the Holy Spirit, who was doing miracles by God's power and offering salvation to all in the name of Jesus, found out how much the world hates the things of God. Stephen paid the ultimate price for his boldness in Christ's name but received the ultimate prize as a result. Stephen was not stoned because he was belligerent or obnoxious; he was stoned because he lived and spoke truth in the name of Jesus Christ.

- ? **What attribute of God is displayed in Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin?** *Refer to the Attributes of God Poster. God's faithfulness was displayed as Stephen was given the words to speak before the council through the power of the Holy Spirit.*



FAITHFUL



Truth Be Told Review Game (Optional)

MATERIALS

- Truth Be Told Game Board
- Truth Be Told Question Cards
- Truth Be Told Question Answer Key
- Truth Be Told Number Cards (or game spinner or dice)
- Buttons or other small items as game pieces for each team
- Poster putty

INSTRUCTIONS

Divide your class into teams. Teams will take turns drawing a Truth Be Told Question Card. Team members will take turns answering the questions. They will quickly determine an answer and give it. If they are correct, they will draw a Truth Be Told Number Card and move that number of spaces on the game board. As play proceeds, follow the directions on the game board. Alternate between teams as long as time permits.

We are going to review now by playing “Truth Be Told.” I’ll put you into teams. Teams will take turns picking a question card and answering the question. If the answer is correct, you will draw a number card and move your game piece that many spaces. All directions on the board must be followed. Return the used cards to the stacks. *Answers to the questions are provided on the Truth Be Told Question Answer Key on the Resource DVD-ROM.*

CONNECT TO THE TRUTH

Soon after Pentecost, the apostles began to experience persecution because of their faith in Jesus. But they were empowered with the promised Holy Spirit and were able to stand firm and even rejoice in their suffering.



Applying God’s Word

WHAT YOU HEARD IN THE WORD

While we don’t like to think about facing persecution, it is something that we cannot avoid by burying our heads in the sand. We should expect to receive some form of persecution for our faith in Jesus and for living in a way that is obedient to Him. But that doesn’t mean we should invite persecution by begging people to say mean things about us or to threaten us so that we can be persecuted. As we walk in a manner that is worthy of the calling of Christ and proclaim that Jesus is the only way anyone will be saved from their sins, we will be viewed as out of touch with reality. And that is not a special condition today—it was present from the first few days of the early church. We should not expect to be treated any differently from the people we have just read about.

And let us not forget that there are many other Christians in our world who ARE being harshly persecuted. In some cases it is being ostracized;

➤ It would be helpful at this point to include some specific, current examples of Christian persecution. You can find these at websites like www.persecution.com.

in some cases they are losing their homes; in other cases they are being murdered for their belief in Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world. We can share in their sufferings by praying for them. And we can support organizations like Voice of the Martyrs who work to support members of the church who are facing sharp persecution as they boldly proclaim the name of Jesus and live lives of godliness in front of those who are of the world and its false systems. The darkness hates the light and will fight to extinguish it.

Let me leave our teaching time with these words of Jesus: “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:11–12).

GOD’S WORD IN THE REAL WORLD

- ? How has your understanding of persecution changed as a result of looking at these passages? *Discuss various answers.*
- ? Are there times in your life when you have hidden your faith or failed to speak up because you were afraid of what might happen as a result? How should you respond to such failures? *Discuss various answers being sure to remind the students that when we sin we have an advocate in Christ who will forgive us because He has suffered for those sins in our place (1 John 1:7–2:2). We can ask forgiveness in light of the gospel and pray for boldness to act more faithfully in the future by the Spirit’s power.*
- ? When we think about the Apostle Paul, we might think of him as a bold man who proclaimed and lived for Christ in the face of extreme threats. But, in his epistles, Paul asked the churches to pray for boldness for him as he proclaimed the gospel (Colossians 4:2–6; Ephesians 6:18–20; Philippians 1:12–26). How can we use this to encourage us to live godly lives and prepare for the persecution that may come as a result? *We can look to Paul as an example of a man who recognized his need for God’s grace and empowerment in his life, remembering that he is no different from us.*
- ? In what ways can we work together as a body to encourage one another as we face various persecutions? *We can be praying for one another and sharing where we need prayers for boldness to stand firm for Christ despite the possible negative consequences. We can be coming alongside one another as we face these various trials and bear one another’s burdens.*
- ? Should we be praying that persecution DOES NOT come to us, or that we would have the grace of God we need WHEN it comes to us? *Discuss this answer keeping in mind that there are times when both may be appropriate. We should keep a balance in mind between asking God not to bring us trials—when we know that He has promised to bring trials to conform us into the image of Christ—and asking Him to be able to bear the burdens by the Spirit through His grace in Christ.*

? In what ways can we stay connected to the persecution of Christians that is happening around the world, seeking to support those who are facing immediate persecution? *There are various magazines and websites from parachurch groups that support these brothers and sisters in their trials. We can support them financially, prayerfully, and in other ways.*



MEMORY VERSE

Romans 1:16–17 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “The just shall live by faith.”



GROUP PRAYER TIME

Be sure to pray with your class before you dismiss them.

- Thank God for sending the Holy Spirit to give us boldness to face various persecutions.
- Praise God for His holiness that is evident to those in the darkness.
- Ask God for great boldness and wisdom in living a life of godliness and proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.