



As we learn to take on more responsibility for our own faith, and the faith of our brothers and sisters around us, let us remember always the vitality of the early church described in Acts. It is something to strive for and maintain. We should depend on the Holy Spirit to guide us and keep us spiritually close to each other, so we may support one another in times of need, as the earliest church members did. They have provided us with a shining example to follow. Let us pray and ask the Lord to grant us the wisdom, courage and a loving heart to follow in their footsteps.

## God Prepares the Way

### Listed Scriptures

Joel 2:28–32; Micah 5:2–5; Mt 1:18–2; Acts 6

### Lesson Aim

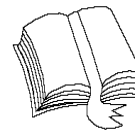
- 1) To understand that God prepared the groundwork for the spreading of His gospel.
- 2) To let the students know that God guides His apostles and followers as they strive to do His will.

### Memory Verse

“For my eyes have seen Your salvation, Which you have prepared before the face of all peoples.” (Lk 2:30, 31)

### Bible Reading For This Week (for students and teachers)

Acts 3–5



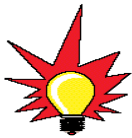
We often worry about many aspects of our lives. We are concerned about making the right choices and sometimes filled with self-doubt. From the Bible and other historical accounts, we can see that God prepares everything for us. All we need to do is to ask for His guidance. This is clearly evident when we study the history of the Jewish people around the time of the birth of Christ and thereafter.

For example, the period around the first century AD was a turbulent time for the Jewish people. Although they had been granted the freedom to return to their homeland by King Cyrus, they did not regain their kingdom of Israel. In fact, they would later be controlled by the Greeks and then the Romans. Nor did all Jews return to the Promised Land. Many remained in the land of their captivity, becoming a part of the new culture while still maintaining their faith. Their worship centered around

synagogues where they met for prayer and reading of the Torah. Every city with any Jewish presence had a synagogue. These synagogues later became useful places for the apostles to preach the gospel. You could say that this was a situation that God engineered for the sake of the apostles.

God prepared the way for our Lord Jesus to complete His work on earth. Even before the birth of Christ, the path was being laid for His coming. As we study the history of the early church, our faith should gain strength in the knowledge that, whatever we are about to face, our Lord is already there facing it with us.

## W A R M U P



Although we do not remember much from our infant years, we can be quite certain that we did not have many things to worry about. This is because our parents took care of all our needs. From the food we ate to the clothes we wore, everything was laid out for us. All we had to do was enjoy ourselves. Then as we grew older, our parents picked out choice schools so we could have an education to pave our futures. Now, as young adults, we are able to reap the fruits of our early years. If we think back, we would realize how much our parents had done for us to make our paths as smooth as possible.

In today's lesson, our Father in heaven has also paved the way for our salvation. But like all things, it comes at a price: the hard work of the early believers and the lives of the apostles. Today, we enjoy a lot of religious freedom and the hope of eternal life because God has prepared everything for us. Let us remember to praise and repay Him so that all the work is not in vain.

## B I B L E S T U D Y



### *God Paves the Way*

Proverbs 8:15 says: "By me kings reign, and rulers decree justice." Long before the birth of Jesus Christ, the way was being prepared for the apostles' work

through various events in history:

a. **God allowed Greece to become a world power under Alexander the Great (356–323 B.C.), resulting in Greek being established as a common language.**

Alexander was not satisfied with conquering countries. He wanted to teach them to appreciate Greek culture. He wanted to teach all the people in his empire Greek ways and beliefs. Hence under Alexander, the process of Hellenization (being put under Greek influence) began. Hellenization had far-reaching consequences. Many Jews who did not return to the holy land became Greek-speaking Jews, called Hellenistic Jews. Feelings between them and the Aramaic-speaking Jews of Palestine were not always cordial, leading to the first major conflict amongst the early believers.

Read Acts 6:1–7.

1. What was the conflict here?  
(The Hellenists complained that their widows were not given fair treatment in the daily distribution of food supplies, compared to the widows of the Hebrews.)
2. What action resulted as a consequence of these accusations?  
(The division of labor between the apostles and seven chosen members who would deal with problems, freeing the apostles for prayer and the ministry of the word.)
3. What qualities should the chosen seven possess?  
(Men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.)
4. What were the names of the seven who were chosen?  
(Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, Nicolas.)

After the Romans gained ascendancy and became the world power, Greek was still the common language spoken in many cities. It was referred to as *koine*, the Greek word for "common." Paul and other Christians were able to use this language to preach the gospel.

- b. **Amidst the power struggles between Greeks and Romans, the Jews gained special religious privileges and freedom of worship of which Christians initially took advantage.** Around the time of Jesus' birth, Augustus became the first Emperor of Rome. Some Jews had been cooperative when the Romans were attempting to take over from the Greeks, so when Augustus came into

his own, he rewarded his allies. Jews were given the freedom to practice their own faith. They had to acknowledge that the Roman Emperor was their king, but they did not have to worship his image, or practice the religious beliefs of those around them. Christians initially enjoyed this religious freedom together with the Jews because they were not seen to be different in the beginning. Jesus was Jewish after all, and so were His closest companions. Immediately after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, His disciples preached mainly to the Jewish community. Problems only developed when persecutions began in Jerusalem. Christians fled to other cities and the Word of God spread to the non-Jewish population. Non-Jewish believers did not have the same religious freedoms as the Jews. This became a most challenging issue for the believers at the time.

- c. **The Pax Romana provided an atmosphere that was conducive to preaching the gospel.** From the time of the Emperor Augustus, for about three hundred years, there was peace and prosperity within the Roman Empire known as the Pax Romana, the "Roman peace." There were a few exceptions, and a few emperors certainly did not die of old age, but generally people enjoyed a time of stability that enabled widespread travel around the Mediterranean along the superbly constructed roads. The Roman government also provided its citizens protection under Roman law, something which Paul took advantage of during his missionary journeys.

Under these circumstances, Christians traveled widely and preached wherever they could. In Acts of the Apostles, Paul, Barnabas, Timothy, Peter, Philip, and others were able to travel wherever the Spirit moved them to spread the gospel, with only a few exceptional circumstances.

- d. **Pagan society was in a state of flux at the time, creating an atmosphere that prepared people to listen to and believe in the Christian gospel.** Pagans of the time were experiencing much insecurity. Political alliances were changing, in part due to the Romans, and traditional practices were altering, resulting in uncertainty. Moral and religious bankruptcy permeated society, and sensitive people were finding ways to escape their dissatisfaction and disillusionment in life. The following verses give us an idea of the type of people you would find in pagan society during Paul's time and the lifestyles they led. Read the verses and write down the various sins mentioned.

1. Rom 1:24–31  
(lust, homosexuality, immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness, envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-minded, gossiping, irreligious, violent, proud, disobedient, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiv-

ing, unmerciful)

2. Eph 4:17–19  
(alienated from God, eagerly practicing immorality)
3. Eph 5:3–7, 18  
(fornication, covetousness, foolish talk, coarse jokes, idol worshipping, deceitful, drunkenness)
4. Col 3:5–9  
(fornication, uncleanness, lust, evil desire, anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language, lying)
5. 1 Thess 4:3–8  
(immorality, lust, defrauding, uncleanness)
6. 2 Tim 3:2–5  
(self-centered, greedy for wealth, boasting, proud, blasphemers, disobedient children, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, lacking self-control, brutal, despises good, traitors, proud, loves pleasure)

- e. **Although the apostles were there devoting their time solely to preaching the Word of God, many early Christians worked to spread the gospel independently too.** Just from Paul's letters alone, we can find mentions of many fervent brothers and sisters who worked diligently for God in their own way. Refer to the following verses and make a list of the members mentioned and what they did to help spread the gospel.

1. Rom 16:1–2  
(Phoebe: served at the church in Cenchrea; helped many members, including Paul, in their work)
2. Rom 16:3–5  
(Priscilla and Aquila: risked their lives for Paul; prayer house at their home)
3. Rom 16:12  
(Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis: all who have worked hard for God, according to Paul)
4. Phil 2:25  
(Epaphroditus: preached the gospel; looked after Paul; almost died in the service of God and Paul)

It is God's will that His Word should spread amongst the people in the world. He made it possible for this to happen in the time of the early church. We should depend on the Holy Spirit and have faith that He will also make it possible for this to happen today, and prepare ourselves to work for Him when our time comes.

## C H E C K F O R U N D E R S T A N D I N G



**1** What were the key factors that helped spread Christianity in the first few centuries?

**2** From the key factors, find evidence of God preparing the way for the gospel to spread.

**3** Can you find parallels between the society in the apostles' time and our society today?

**4** What can we learn from the early Christians about serving God?

## L I F E A P P L I C A T I O N

### *Role Play*



Ask students to imagine themselves as a part of the Palestinian population in the first century AD. Divide into different groups. Each group takes on one role. Depending on time, select the roles you wish, or use all the roles. Some roles are interrelated and can be presented together (e.g. roles one and two). Allow students ten minutes to come up with a short skit or presentation. This does not need to be a long activity. Some students may only need to think of a couple of things to say in their role. Try to re-enact the bustling atmosphere, the confusion, and eyewitness accounts of the time. Have fun!

Roles:

1. Reporters

Imagine you are a team working for a top Palestinian News Network during the first century AD. You are in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost covering the Jewish festival, when suddenly a commotion takes place. The team races to the scene of action, and discovers total confusion over a group of men and women who seem to be in a trance. They are uttering something, and you suddenly realize that you understand what they are saying. Then you also realize that the people around you, who speak different languages, also understand them at the same time. This is a newsworthy event indeed! Prepare an interview with the people involved, as well as some of the crowd.

2. Festival Goers  
You are all going about your business preparing for the festival, when suddenly a group of men and women nearby start shouting. You join the crowd going to see what's happening. You see people shaking and shouting. They seem to be in some sort of trance, but then you realize that you understand what they are saying! How strange! A group of reporters comes over and starts asking you questions.
3. Talk show host  
You are interviewing several guests regarding a remarkable new religious movement that is taking Jerusalem by storm. Prepare questions you might wish to ask a Pharisee, a new Christian convert, and a pagan.
4. Talk show guests  
A Pharisee, a Christian and a pagan give their point of view about this new religious movement.

### Teaching Tips

*Leave a few minutes for students to plan for the fellowship. They may wish to check their progress in preparation with their group, or ask for advice. See Lesson 1 Life Application section.*

## R E F L E C T I O N & P R A Y E R



*As the time draws near for our Lord's Second Coming, our enemy will increase his attacks on the church. It is easier to face obvious attacks against the Church, such as when we have visitors who debate with us about our doctrines. However, our enemy attacks in very insidious ways, which are very difficult to detect. Disagreements and dissensions within the church community are very hurtful to all of our faiths, and we must guard against it.*

*As we read on about the early church, we will see that many dissensions began very soon after the church was established. We must always remember the reason that God gave us the Holy Spirit. Read again the fruit of the Spirit,*

and the positive and powerful effects that the Holy Spirit could have on us if only we open our hearts to Him. The Holy Spirit established the church from the beginning and He is present in our church today. We must pray constantly to depend on the Spirit to guide us, so that the wonderful fruit of the Spirit will keep the community of God united and whole.

Let us pray for the church and for ourselves.

## Lesson 3

# Persecutions

### Listed Scriptures

Mt 10; Acts 6:8–7, 12; Rom 8; 1 Pet 3:13–4

### Lesson Aim

- 1) To understand the social background that led to the persecution of Christians.

### Memory Verse

“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.” (Jas 1:2-4)

### Bible Reading For This Week (for students and teachers)

Mt 10, Acts 6–7, Rom 8

## B I B L E B A C K G R O U N D



The first record of Christian persecution in the Bible is found in the Acts of the Apostles. Acts 6 and 7 tell us about a certain Hellenistic Jew named Stephen who stood up for the truth before a group of Jews. Stephen gave a moving account of parts of Jewish history, explaining how stubborn unbelief had been the cause of much tragedy. Unfortunately, his listeners were unconvinced and Stephen was stoned to death. Stephen's death inspired a zealous young Pharisee named Saul to continue with the persecutions until Saul was converted on the road to Damascus.