

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



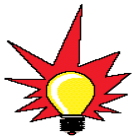
The first record of Christian persecution in the Bible is found in the Acts of the Apostles. Acts 6 and 7 tell us about a certain Hellenistic Jew named Stephen who stood up for the truth before a group of Jews. Stephen gave a moving account of parts of Jewish history, explaining how stubborn unbelief 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.

From the above account, we know that the first persecutions were carried out by Jews against Christians. During Paul's missionary journeys, there are many accounts of local Jews stirring up the community to attack Paul and his fellow Christians. They considered Judaeo-Christians to be heretics and saw the spread of Christianity as a danger to their Jewish beliefs. Deeply religious Jews were fighting to protect their own people from leaving the God of their fathers, never considering that this same God would wish them to turn to Jesus Christ and accept Him as the Messiah.

At the same time, Roman politics were also against the Christians, who claimed to worship the one true God. In a system where Emperors demanded to be worshiped as gods, this proved to be deeply problematic. Emperors could only keep their thrones, and indeed their lives, if they were seen to be powerful and omnipotent. They could not pass by a group of simple people who refused to bow down to them. This set a dangerous precedent for other groups to follow. They must therefore be made an example of.

As we learn more about the terrible sufferings early Christians endured for their faith, we should ask ourselves if our own faith is able to live up to their standards. Would we be amongst those who give up, or those who face death courageously? Most of us are blessed by God and live in a peaceful country that allows us freedom of worship. This is therefore a hypothetical question. Nevertheless, it is important for us to think about this, and measure ourselves against the faith of these early Christians.

W A R M U P



Before class, find a poster or a large picture (from a calendar, for example). List six or seven interesting things about the picture you could describe.

Ask for 3 to 5 volunteers (depending on class size). The volunteers must leave the room. They will be called in one at a time. Show the picture to the remaining students in class. Tell them what you are going to describe to the first volunteer. Then put the picture away so that none of the volunteers can see it. The audience must remain quiet, no matter what is being said.

Ask the first volunteer to enter. The student faces you as you describe the picture to her. Tell the student to listen very carefully, as she will

need to describe it to the next volunteer. After you have finished your description, ask the second volunteer to enter. Tell this new person that he must listen carefully, as he will have to describe the scene of a picture to the third volunteer. Then the first and second volunteers face each other and the first volunteer describes the picture as you have described it, to the second volunteer. The first volunteer then sits down. She must not say anything else until the game is over. Ask the third volunteer to enter, and repeat the process until every volunteer has had a chance to describe the picture to the next person. The last volunteer will describe the picture to the whole audience, after which you will take out the picture to show all the volunteers.

Are the descriptions different from the picture? Did anyone change your description? If so, how has it changed? Briefly describe why this happened.

Tell students that this is often the way rumors grow. One person starts repeating something incorrectly and the message is changed. That was how many misunderstandings regarding the beliefs of the early church started. Rumors and stories about the Christians grew to the extent that many reports about what Christians did during worship were no longer true. These rumors caused a great deal of trouble for the Christians. Feelings against them grew, making them easy targets for persecution.

B I B L E S T U D Y



Despite the growing divergence between traditional Jews and Christian converts, Christian communities worshiped and operated within the Jewish synagogues for more than a generation. As long as the church was regarded as another Jewish sect, the Roman authorities tolerated it under the agreement between the Emperor and the Jews. In the following examples we see how Paul and his fellow Christians were accepted in the synagogues and regarded as part of the Jewish community. Read the passages and summarize the events briefly in point form. State the place, the persons involved, what happened and evidence that the Christian missionaries were accepted by the Jewish community:

- a. Acts 13:13–15

- b. Acts 14:1
- c. Acts 17:1–4
- d. Acts 18:1–4

However, as more and more gentiles became Christians, problems arose that alienated Christians from the Jewish communities. For example, two of these major problems were:

- a. The Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15) decided that non-Jewish Christians did not need to be circumcised. These uncircumcised Christian believers were gradually rejected by staunch Jews.
- b. Gentile Christians were not protected by the special agreement between the Romans and the Jews with regards to religious practices. They were therefore considered unpatriotic by pagans when they refused to take part in the cult of emperor-worship. Christianity became less and less acceptable. In this situation, it was perhaps inevitable that persecution would descend.

Persecutions were not uncommon, but they occurred in pockets. Hence, Paul's co-workers in Christ, Aquila and Priscilla, fled from Rome when the Emperor Claudius commanded all Jews to leave the city. The couple ended up in Corinth, where they met Paul (Acts 18:2). They were able to return to Rome later, as Paul sent greetings to them there in Romans 16:3,4. The persecutions were therefore not usually sustained for very long and occurred in different areas at different times.

The most vicious persecutions were started by Emperor Nero. Nero wanted to expand his palace grounds. Unfortunately, there was no room for expansion, as the area around the palace was occupied by a bustling city. Around 64 AD, a mysterious fire began which destroyed most of the area around the palace, therefore rendering it uninhabitable. Nero took over the area. A rumor began which pointed a finger at the Emperor for the tragedy. Tacitus, a historian who lived at the time, wrote in his "Annals 15.44":

To kill the rumors, Nero charged and tortured some people hated for their evil practices—the group popularly known as "Christians." The founder of this sect, Christ, had been put to death by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, when Tiberius was Emperor. Their deadly superstition had been suppressed temporarily, but was beginning to spring up again—not now just in Judea but even in Rome itself where all kinds of sordid and shameful activities are attracted and catch on.

First of all, those who confessed to being Christians were arrested. Then, on

information obtained from them, hundreds were convicted, more for their anti-social beliefs than for fire-raising. In their deaths they were made a mockery. They were covered in the skins of wild animals, torn to death by dogs, crucified or set on fire—so that when darkness fell they burned like torches in the night. Nero opened up his own gardens for this spectacle and gave a show in the arena, where he mixed with the crowd, or stood dressed as a charioteer on a chariot. As a result, although they were guilty of being Christians and deserved death, people began to feel sorry for them. For they realized that they were being massacred not for the public good but to satisfy one man's mania.

Persecutions did not end with Nero, although his were considered more vicious and violent than most. Christians were certainly persecuted under the Emperor Domitian (AD 81–96). Letters have survived between the Emperor Trajan and the governor of Bithynia, Pliny the Younger (AD 111–113) which tell us that by this time, being a Christian was a capital offense. These letters also indicated that people found to be Christians would be given the opportunity to renounce their faith or be put to death. During the reign of Marcus Aurelius (AD 161–180), who disliked the Christians intensely, believers were taken to Rome, the provinces of Gaul, and Africa for execution. Emperors Decius (AD 249–251) and Diocletian (AD 284–305) both embarked on vicious and systematic persecutions of believers.

There were several key reasons given for executing Christians, although the legal grounds always remained obscure:

- a. Christians were cannibals—based on a misunderstanding of the Holy Communion.
- b. Christians were atheists—like the Jews they had no images in their shrines to worship the gods.
- c. Christians were incestuous—their "love" for one another was well known.
- d. Christians refused to worship the Emperor—in itself a crime of treason.

Many Christians answered these charges in their writings. You could say that these Christians were the first theologians. They were called the Christian Apologists, but it does not mean that they were apologizing for their faith. They were called Christian Apologists because in their essays and letters, they defended their faith and replied to charges made against Christians. However, they were largely ignored by authorities bent on persecution. By the third century, in many areas simply bearing the name "Christian" became a crime in itself.

CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING



1

Why did Nero wish to persecute Christians?

2

Why were Christians hated and persecuted generally?

3

Church leaders tried hard to rally the believers throughout these difficult times. In their letters and during their missionary journeys, the apostles were constantly trying to encourage the believers to hold fast to their faith, no matter what happened. Read the following verses and think about how believers at the time might have been encouraged by them:

- Phil 1:27–30
- 1 Thess 3:1–5
- 2 Tim 1:8–12
- 1 Peter 1:6–9

LIFE APPLICATION



Persecutions in School Today

In North America, nobody arrests us or executes us for our beliefs anymore. However, there are other forms of persecution. In schools the most common form is bullying. Bullying is a form of persecution because it targets weaker victims and demoralizes them, sometimes so severely that victims commit suicide. What would you do in the following situation?

Mary is a very quiet girl in your class. She seldom smiles and she gets very nervous when the teacher calls on her to answer questions. She usually gets the answer wrong anyway. She doesn't seem to have any friends. To be honest, she is usually so sullen and unfriendly that no one really bothers trying to make friends with her.

After some time, you begin to notice certain things. A group of two boys and a girl two grades up go to Mary during recesses. They usually walk her to a corner and talk to her. You don't know what they're saying because they usually surround her. Sometimes, you see them walk off with the snack that Mary had brought with her. Mary also loses many things. She has pencils, coloring markers, bookmarks, and erasers in the morning, but she would lose them in the

afternoon. When the teacher becomes exasperated with her, Mary covers in her seat. On a few occasions, Mary even lost her field trip money. When this happens, Mary doesn't go on the trips because she says her parents can not afford to give her the money again.

You become very suspicious of these senior friends of Mary. The thought comes to your mind that Mary is the victim of bullying. You become convinced that these two boys and the girl are taking things from Mary—her snacks, all the items that she loses, including her money. You don't wish to get into trouble with the bullies. You are afraid they might target you if you tried to interfere. However, you are aware that Mary is becoming increasingly depressed. What would you do?

(Suggestions: Talk to a teacher privately. Don't confront the bullies openly. If you have a group of friends, talk to them about Mary. Ask them to help you assist Mary. If necessary, explain to them that it is not right to persecute a person for being different or any other reasons. If possible, talk about what Jesus would do in the situation. If you are able to persuade your friends to help you, you could invite Mary to stay with you and your group at recess. Bullies don't usually wish to confront a group of people; they target vulnerable individuals. Ask Mary to talk to the teacher quietly. Most importantly, help Mary regain a sense of self-worth and self-confidence. This is a very good opportunity to talk to someone like her about God and how we can depend on God to help us in times of tribulation.)

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 advice. See Lesson 1 Life Application section.

REFLECTION & PRAYER



Persecution can come in many shapes and forms. We should be thankful that most of us do not suffer as a result of our faith. However, we should ask the Lord to strengthen our faith, so that we can meet persecutions bravely, trusting fully in God to deliver us, should we ever experience it. Let us pray and ask God for such faith.