

## THE CHURCH: FACING THE CHALLENGES

All Activity Sheets

### KEY WORDS

ALIVE DISCIPLE SUFFERING PERSECUTION GROWING

### BIBLICAL REFERENCE

Acts 12:1-24

### LESSON OBJECTIVE

To recognize that although God does not prevent all Christians from suffering persecution, he keeps the Church alive and growing

### MEMORY VERSE

"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20, NIV\*).

### PREPARE YOURSELF TO TEACH

Most preadolescents have never faced death. Many have not even experienced the death of a close friend or relative. It will be difficult for them to understand what the Christians of the early Church had to endure.

In any case, preadolescents need to know at least some of the struggle, the difficulties, and the severe persecution that the Church has experienced throughout history. Students need to understand this aspect of the life in the Church to help them in resisting the "gospel of health, wealth, and happiness" that's so popular among many Christians today.

The students will also grow with the confidence that the Church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, will survive the challenges it faces. It will help the students remain firm in their faith, even if it can produce unpleasant feelings at times.

Our preadolescents need to understand the powerful external, outside forces that oppose the Church, and also the internal, inside forces, such as indifference, disunity, and lack of faith, which are usually the most serious.

## BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

Despite the opposition, the Church continued with its task to be witnesses of the Gospel. They understood that the Gospel was for everyone, so they did everything in their power to get people to listen to the message (Acts 11:19-21). The Christians in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch, and he recruited Paul to help him in teaching (11:22-26).

Paul and Barnabas felt that the Holy Spirit moved with power in Antioch, but things got horrendous, really terrible, in Jerusalem. King Herod began to persecute Christians, trying to please the Jews. He sent someone to kill James. He then imprisoned Peter with the intention of killing him after the Passover. Herod thought that he could stop the advance of the Gospel by killing preachers.

This presents us with a disturbing question: "Have any of us suffered death threats to stop us from talking about Jesus?"

Surely, in 90 percent of cases, the answer is probably no. But do we ever wonder why we are not threatened? Probably because our words do not shake the people who are in power and have influence.

The teaching of the early Church, with Peter as leader, threatened the safety and comfort of powerful people. Because of this, the political leaders wanted to stop the advance of the Gospel. For this reason, Herod ordered the persecution of its most prominent representatives (James was killed with a sword and Peter barely escaped for a time.)

God protected the Church in the midst of the persecution. Although Christians suffered in many ways, God guaranteed that the Church would not stop in its task of preaching the Gospel (Acts 12). He helped Peter out of prison and brought down his main persecutor, Herod.

How did the Church react after the death of James and the imprisonment of Peter?

What could a weak and defenseless Church do against the enormous power of Rome?

The believers gathered to pray.

Many people would not think of a prayer meeting as the first alternative against persecution. Fighting may seem a more reasonable response. But the Church did not have an army. Nor did it have political influence. Not even weapons to defend themselves against the oppressors who attacked them.

But they prayed.

Prayer caused the prison doors to open. Prayer freed Peter from the chains and took him to the house where the prayer meeting was being held. Prayer defeated evil as no other weapon could. Prayer sustained the Church in a time of enormous threats.

Acts 12 is a powerful chapter because it reminds us that God takes care of us in the midst of problems. "The chapter begins with the death of James, Peter in prison, and Herod triumphant, but it ends with Herod dead, Peter free, and the Word of God triumphant."

Our Christian lives will probably not be as dramatic as Peter's. For most of us our persecution is probably not as severe as James's. It is doubtful, though not impossible, that someone wants to kill us to stop our teaching and witnessing for Jesus.

But, with the enormous changes that our world is experiencing today, it is good for us to remember the two things we'll learn from this scripture passage:

That Christians are not immune to persecution, but in facing it, God does not abandon them.

That persecution will not destroy the Church. God guarantees it.

## INTRODUCE THE LESSON

### The church in Antioch

Pass out Student Activity Sheet #404-A (The Church in Antioch). Ask for volunteers to read the four sections based on Acts 12:1-24. You may want to comment on what they read. Then ask questions about the main characters in the passage. Mention that more and more Gentiles accepted Jesus as their Savior. People believed in the message given by the apostles. The Gospel message extended to other countries.

Important words

Write the words and the meaning on poster board and place them on the church mural. Make an extra set to hide in the room and then have the students look for them.

Pray: personal communication with God.

Persecution: physical abuse, ridicule, and other kinds of suffering that a person experiences from others because of what he believes or does.

## TEACH THE LESSON

### “The Great Escape,” drama

One week before the session, take the parts taken from the Bible for students to study for the drama. Another option is for them to act out what you read from Acts chapter 12. You can be the narrator. Assign seven roles to different students: Herod, Peter, the angel, two guards, Mary, and Rhoda. The rest of the students will be part of the group of believers. Encourage them to be creative. They can wear clothes made with blankets and sheets.

At the end of the drama, use the following questions as a review:

What was Peter doing when the angel entered the prison the night before his trial and possible execution? (Sleeping)

Do you think King Herod had more power than Peter and the Christians who prayed? (No, they trusted God.)

What do you think was Peter’s attitude towards his problem? (Although we do not know for sure, it seems that Peter was not afraid. He knew that James had already died. He probably expected to be next. Even so, he slept peacefully. He trusted God, even though he could be executed in the morning.)

What do you think about the power that rulers and kings have? Who is more powerful? (Listen to the answers and clarify concepts.) Tell the students that there was a time in the life of the Church when Christians confused and embarrassed their persecutors. They faced suffering and death with joy and courage.

What did believers do to try to get Peter out of jail? (They prayed; it was the best they could do. Going to the Lord with their problems was the way to show everyone that they trusted God and depended on him.)

Do you think they did everything they could to get Peter released? Was there anything else they could have done, such as petition Herod or organize a demonstration in front of the palace? (Praying was the best thing they could have done. By presenting their problems to God, the Christians proved themselves dependent on him. They might ask God what else they could do. Praying and seeking the help of the Lord is always wiser than try to get out of trouble with human answers.)

What should be our attitude towards persecution? (We can trust that God will always be with us (Christians) during the persecution. Although he does not always prevent persecution, he gives us strength and helps us face the situation.)

Ask two students to read Matthew 16:16-18 and Acts 12:24. Ask: “What do these verses say about God’s ability to keep the Church alive despite persecution?” (We can trust that God does this. He promised that nothing and no one will destroy the Church.)

Teacher: While the issue of persecution is real, it can scare and worry preadolescents. Be positive in your presentation. We know with certainty that God promises to be with us, even in the most difficult moments. That’s what the preadolescents should carry in their hearts and thoughts. They must have the faith and the certainty that the Lord has all the power to help them face persecution, no matter how it is presented and how difficult.

## CONNECT THE LESSON

### Unstoppable!

Pass out Student Activity Sheet #404-B (Unstoppable!). Ask them to cut out the pictures of the people and paste them on the map to show how the Church expanded from Jerusalem to other parts of the world. This is a good time to do a simple review of Paul’s travels. Students need to understand that the message did not stop despite the persecution, but quite the opposite. Believers were looking for where to preach. They moved to other cities where they could talk about Jesus; that way the message spread.

If the Church had not spread with the message of salvation, it would never have reached us today. We must thank God for the courage of the first Christians, even though persecuted, they continued to preach the Good News of salvation “to the ends of the earth.”

## PRACTICE THE MEMORY VERSE

[Download Additional Memory Verse Activities PDF](#)

## Download Suggestions for Bible Memorization PDF

This is the last session of this unit. We hope the preadolescents have learned the complete memory passage. Encourage those who learned it by memory to recite it. You can have a competition to see how many girls and boys learned it correctly.

First part: "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit ..."

Second part: "... and teaching them to keep all the things that I have commanded you. And I am with you every day, until the end of the world. Amen" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Pass out Student Activity Sheet #404-C (How to Grow). Explain: "You are to use the key on the page to decipher the messages. You will discover some ways in which you can help the church grow. Then, you can use the code to create your own message. Discuss their answers.

## WRAP-UP

### Pray

Pray for God to help the students be brave and have the courage to share the message of Jesus to all people. Pray so the students do not feel ashamed to tell others about their faith and love for the Lord. Ask if anyone wants to remember the name of someone who makes fun or belittles him for being a Christian. Pray for those people, that they do not want to continue making the child feel bad. This is also a good time to pray for those who suffer persecution in countries that are not open to the Gospel. Many missionaries and Christians are victims of persecution for their faith in Christ.

### Encourage

Sing a chorus or hymn appropriate to the series of lessons about the Church.

### Invite

Encourage the students to attend the next session which begins a new unit. Remind them that this is a good time for new members to join the group.