I am the light of the world.
Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness,
but will have the light of life.

John 8:12
(NIV 1984)
How did God make the persecution of the church work for good?

God turned the persecution of the church into a chance to spread his saving Word.

Application: Even today, God’s Word will be spread in spite of persecution.

Response: We trust that God’s Word will be spread in spite of persecution.

Lesson Summary: Stephen, a leader in the congregation at Jerusalem, was arrested and brought to trial for boldly preaching about Jesus. When Stephen accused the Jewish leaders of killing the promised Savior, the furious enemies stoned him. Soon after this Saul began to lead a persecution against the church. This caused believers to scatter throughout Judea and Samaria, spreading God’s Word wherever they went.

*MATTHEW 28:20b
1 Peter 5:8
*The Third Petition of the Lord’s Prayer
Hymn 200:1,3† (See p. 106.)

persecute—to make a person suffer because of what he or she believes


Locate Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria on a map.

Almighty God, in this world Satan tries to stop your message about Jesus from spreading. Forgive me for the times I have helped him by being timid in sharing this gospel message. Help me be bold in spreading the good news about Jesus so that many more will be saved. Amen.
Sing: Sing “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (hymn 200:1,3,4 or hymn 201:1,3,4). This hymn reminds us that in spite of persecution, God will see to it that his Word is spread.

Pray: Dear Jesus, when people attack our faith, be with us and give us your strength. Make us your fearless followers. Amen.

You will need a map showing Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, such as Copy Master 1S.

Remind the children that on the day Jesus ascended into heaven, he told his disciples to be his witnesses. Ask where Jesus wanted them to witness. [In Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the farthest corners of the world.] Ask where the disciples began preaching about Jesus. [In Jerusalem.] Have a volunteer locate Jerusalem on the map. Explain that in today’s lesson the children will see what happened to cause God’s Word to be spread to Judea and Samaria, and have a volunteer point out Judea and Samaria on the map.

God caused this to happen even when his church was being persecuted—when God’s enemies tried to punish the believers for believing in him. Listen carefully to learn how God made the persecution of the church work for good.

To Do: Remember there are To Do at Home activity options in a separate file on the Teacher’s Guide CD.
God’s church in Jerusalem grew as more and more people became believers in Jesus. Soon the church became so large that the twelve apostles could not keep up with all the work that needed to be done. So they called a meeting of all the believers and said, “We really should be using our time to preach and teach the Word of God. But we also have been taking care of many other things, such as making sure that all the poor people have food and clothing. Choose seven men who are known to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. Put them in charge of handing out food to the poor people. Then we can spend our time praying and teaching the Word of God.”

So the believers chose seven men to help the apostles. One of these seven was a man named Stephen. God blessed Stephen with special gifts. He gave him the power to do miracles, as the apostles did. And the Holy Spirit gave Stephen the power to speak God’s Word with great wisdom and boldness.

Some Jews who hated Jesus did not like what Stephen said and did. They tried to stop Stephen from preaching. First they tried to prove he was wrong in saying that Jesus was the promised Savior. But the Holy Spirit gave Stephen such wisdom that he was able to show just how foolish their arguments were. When they found they could not stop Stephen in this way, they got some men to tell lies about him. These men spread the story that Stephen was speaking against Moses and against God.

When the Jewish leaders heard these lies, they believed them. They arrested Stephen and brought him to trial before the high priest and the other Jewish leaders. There Stephen’s enemies got men to tell more lies about him. The men said, “We have heard this man say that Jesus will tear down the temple and will change the laws that Moses gave us!”

When the leaders looked at Stephen, they saw that his face was shining like the face of an angel! The high priest asked him, “Are these things true?”

Stephen answered the leaders by reminding them how God had guided and blessed the people of Israel since the time of Abraham.
As you tell the story, silently pantomime some of the actions in it (men angrily pointing at Stephen, Stephen looking up to heaven, leaders covering their ears, people throwing stones, Stephen folding his hands in prayer). Have the children do the actions along with you.

**Ask** What sad things happened in today’s lesson? [Stephen was killed for preaching about Jesus, and Jesus’ enemies began persecuting his church—arresting believers and putting them into prison.]

**Say** Even though these were sad, scary events, God made good come of them.

**Ask** What were some good results? [Stephen got to go to heaven to be with Jesus. The believers spread throughout Judea and Samaria, sharing God’s Word in more places than they had before.] Are Christians persecuted today? How? [Yes. Sometimes people make fun of Christians, refuse to be their friends, give them bad grades in school for standing up for their beliefs, and in some parts of the world, arrest, beat, and even kill them.]

But again and again they had sinned by refusing to listen to the prophets God had sent to them. Then Stephen said to the Jewish leaders, “You stubborn people! You are just like the people of Israel who lived long ago! They persecuted God’s prophets and killed those who talked about the coming Savior. And now you have betrayed and murdered the Savior himself!”

When the leaders heard these words, they became so angry that they ground their teeth together. At that moment God let Stephen look up into heaven. “Look!” Stephen said. “I can see into heaven! There is Jesus, standing at the right hand of God!”

The Jewish leaders couldn’t stand to hear more. They shouted at the top of their voices and covered their ears with their hands so that they couldn’t hear another word Stephen said. Then they grabbed him and dragged him out of the city. There they picked up large stones and began to throw them at Stephen as hard as they could. As the stones hit Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, take my soul to heaven with you.” Then he fell to his knees and cried out, “Lord, forgive these men for this sin.” After he said this prayer for his enemies, Stephen died.

Some friends of Stephen took his body and buried it. They were very sad that he was dead. But a man named Saul was not sad about Stephen’s death. Saul had watched as Stephen was stoned. He thought that the leaders had done the right thing in putting Stephen to death. Now he tried to stop God’s church from growing. He went from house to house, searching for believers and having them thrown into prison.

The persecution against God’s church by Saul and others grew. Soon it was not safe for believers to live in Jerusalem. So they moved to cities throughout Judea and Samaria. But wherever they went, they told people the good news about Jesus.

**Discuss**

**Say** Stephen was one of seven men chosen to help the apostles.

**Ask** What did Jesus’ enemies do to try to stop Stephen from preaching about him? [They tried to argue with Stephen about what he was saying, and they told lies about him.]

What did the Jewish leaders do when they heard the lies about Stephen? [Arrested him.]
Say  At Stephen’s trial, some men claimed that Stephen said Jesus would tear down the temple and change the laws of Moses. These claims were lies. Listen to what Jesus did say in John 2:19.

Do  Read the passage.

Say  Jesus was not talking about the temple building.

Ask  What was Jesus talking about when he said this? [His body, which would be raised from the dead after three days.]

At what other trial was this same accusation used? [At Jesus’ own trial.]

Say  Stephen told the Jewish leaders that they were just like the people of Israel long ago who had refused to listen to God’s prophets.

Ask  What did Stephen say that the Jewish leaders had done? [Killed the Savior.]

Why did Stephen say this when he knew the leaders would get angry at him? [He wanted them to repent of their sins and come to faith.]

When Stephen said that he could see Jesus standing at God’s right hand, what did the Jewish leaders do so that they couldn’t hear him anymore? [They shouted loudly and covered their ears.]

What did this show about the Jewish leaders? [They refused to listen to God’s Word and repent.]

Do  Tell the children that sometimes people might become angry with us when we tell them what God’s Word says. Ask them to decide what they could say in each of the following situations:

1. After you ask a friend to please stop swearing, your friend says, “I hate it when you make such a big deal about swearing. I’m not going to be your friend anymore.”

2. When you tell your cousin that God doesn’t want him to tease his little sister, he tells you, “You think you’re so good and never do anything wrong!”

3. When you invite a neighbor to church, she says, “You go to church? Boy, is that ever dumb!”

[Possible responses:

1. “God tells us not to use his name in a wrong way. I don’t want to lose you as a friend, but it’s more important to obey God.”

Say  Let’s look at what Jesus told us about persecution the night before he died.

Do  Have the children open their Bibles to John 15:18-20 and read these verses together.

Say  Jesus not only warns us that believers might be persecuted—he says it will definitely happen! There are still people who hate Jesus. And they may persecute us when we speak about Jesus or stand up for what we know is right.

Do  Ask the children to look up and read or recite the Matthew 28:20b memory treasure.

Ask  How can this passage help us when we are persecuted for our faith? [It reminds us that even when we are being persecuted, we can trust that Jesus is with us.]

Say  Jesus also gives us his Holy Spirit so that we don’t need to be afraid of speaking in Jesus’ name.

Do  Tell the children to imagine that a friend says to them, “Last week my mom said that it seems like fewer and fewer people believe in Jesus. What if someday there are no believers left to spread God’s Word?” Ask the children whether they think this might happen. [No, it won’t, because just as in Stephen’s...]

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time, God will see to it that his Word is spread in spite of any persecutions his church may face. Even though the number of believers may grow smaller, we can trust that there will always be those who believe in Jesus and will continue to spread God’s Word.] Refer to Luke 21:33.

2. “I know I’m sinful just like everyone else. But Jesus forgave my sins, and out of love for him I want to obey God. He tells us to be kind to others.”

3. “I’m glad to go to church to worship God and hear his Word. I hope you will come with me sometime.”

Even if we are persecuted, God wants us to keep telling his Word to others.

As Stephen was being stoned, what did he pray for himself? [That Jesus would take his soul to heaven.]

Why could Stephen be sure that Jesus would take him to heaven? [Jesus promises to take those who believe in him to heaven. Stephen was also strengthened by the vision of heaven that God had given him.]

What else did Stephen pray? [He asked Jesus to forgive the men who were killing him.]

Who else said a prayer like this as he was being killed by his enemies? [Jesus.]

How did Stephen’s friends feel when Stephen died? [Very sad.]

How did Stephen feel after he died? [He was happier than we can imagine. He was—and is—in heaven!]

On that day a great persecution of God’s church began.

Why did Saul work so hard to stop God’s church from growing? [He did not believe that Jesus was the Savior. He thought that he was pleasing God by trying to stop people from believing in Jesus.]

What did the believers do in order to keep from being arrested? [They left Jerusalem and went throughout Judea and Samaria.]

What did the believers do wherever they went? [Spread the good news that Jesus is the Savior.]

Why did they do this? [Jesus had commanded them to spread this good news.]

Ask the children to agree or disagree with the following: “God used the persecution of the early Christians to spread his Word. So persecution is really a good thing.” [Persecution itself is not a good thing. It is a tool the devil uses to try to stop God’s Word from spreading. But God can even take something bad, like persecution, and make it work for good.]

God will make sure that his Word is always spread, even if the devil uses persecution to try to stop the spread of that Word.
You will need the map from Copy Master 1S and many tiny pieces of paper or confetti.

Do Lay the map on a flat surface, and have the children gather around it. Put the tiny pieces of paper (or confetti) on Jerusalem on the map. Remind the children that at the beginning of today’s lesson, the believers were mainly in Jerusalem. Then blow on the papers to make them spread over Judea and Samaria, and point out that this shows what happened to the believers once the persecution of the church began.

Ask How did God make the persecution of the church work for good? [God turned the persecution of the church into a chance to spread his saving Word.]

Say We can trust that even today, God’s Word will be spread in spite of persecution.

Do Pray: God, we know you work in all things for our good. When we and other believers are persecuted for our faith, turn this persecution into good. Cause your Word to continue to be spread in spite of persecution. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Do Have the children open their Bibles to Romans 8:28 and read the passage together.

Ask What does this passage tell us? [That God works in all things for good for those who love him.] How did God make the persecution of the church work for good? [God turned the persecution of the church into a chance to spread his saving Word.] What can we be sure of, even today? [Even today, God’s Word will be spread in spite of persecution.]

Say Let’s trust that God’s Word will be spread in spite of persecution.

Do Sing “The Church’s One Foundation” (hymn 538:1,3,5). This hymn emphasizes that God will not let his church be destroyed by its enemies.
Matthew 28:20b

*The Third Petition of the Lord’s Prayer*

Your will be done on earth as in heaven.

Here we pray that God’s will would be carried out. God wants his Word to be spread so that people will come to faith.

Hymn 200:1,3†

1 A mighty fortress is our God,  
A trusty shield and weapon;  
He helps us free from ev’ry need  
That has us now o’ertaken.  
The old evil foe  
Now means deadly woe;  
Deep guile and great might  
Are his dread arms in fight;  
On earth is not his equal.

3 Though devils all the world should fill,  
All eager to devour us,  
We tremble not, we fear no ill;  
They shall not overpow’r us.  
This world’s prince may still  
Scowl fierce as he will,  
He can harm us none.  
He’s judged; the deed is done!  
One little word can fell him.

† Because of space limitations, the text of the memory treasure hymn is not in the student lesson. For hymn texts, use the hymnal or the electronic memory treasure files for your grade level.

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**OPTIONAL mid-week Lesson**

- Begin by singing “Preserve Your Word, O Savior” (hymn 289), in which we pray that God will continue to spread his Word.

- Use Activity 1 under Lesson Activities to review the story.

- Use Activity 2 to help the children relate the lesson application to situations faced by missionaries today.

- Close by using one or more of the prayers the children wrote for the previous activity.
Lesson Activities

1. Review

Puzzle Piece Review

*Purpose:* To review the lesson events by drawing picture puzzle pieces from a bag and telling about them.

*Procedure:* Cut apart the puzzle pieces from Copy Master 1 and place them into a bag. Have the children take turns drawing one puzzle piece from the bag and telling what part of the lesson it reminds them of. See the first option under the alternate Learn section for more explanation of what the pieces represent.

2. Application

God’s Word Is Spreading

*Purpose:* To make the children aware of mission work still being done throughout the world in spite of persecution and to encourage the children to pray for missionaries who face persecution.

*Procedure:* Obtain a listing of our synod’s current world missions. Help each child use the map on Copy Master 2 to mark places where God is using our synod’s missionaries to spread his Word. Point out that in some areas of the world, our missionaries face persecution, but God is still making sure that his Word is spread. Then have the children write prayers for our missionaries who may face persecution. Encourage the children to ask God to strengthen these workers so that his Word continues to be spread. Pray one or more of these prayers at the end of the lesson.

3. Music

“The First Song of Isaiah”

*Purpose:* To sing a powerful song that the children can think of whenever they feel persecuted for their faith.

*Procedure:* Teach the children to sing “The First Song of Isaiah” (Let All the People Praise You, Northwestern Publishing House). This powerful song reminds us to trust in God and not be afraid, because he is with us in all situations, including when we make his deeds known.

4. Art

Mobiles

*Purpose:* To make mobiles that will remind the children that God will make sure his Word is spread.

*Procedure:* Give each child some poster board on which to draw and cut out shapes of the Bible and the world (a circle). Have the children use black markers to write “God’s Word” on both sides of the Bible shape and “Will Spread” on both sides of the world shape. They can then draw the continents on their worlds freehand and lightly color both shapes with crayons. Punch holes near the top and bottom of the Bibles and near the top of the world shapes. Then give the children yarn with which to connect their shapes, hanging the Bible above the world shape. These mobiles can be hung from the ceiling of your classroom or sent home with the children.
5. Review and Apply

Christians Suffer Persecution

*Purpose:* To number the lesson events in the correct order and identify statements about the lesson application as happening always, sometimes, or never.

*Procedure:* Have each child complete Copy Master 3. The answers are as follows:

Part One: 3, 2, 5, 1, 4, 6, 8, 7, 10, 9
Part Two: 1. always, 2. sometimes, 3. never, 4. always, 5. never

Spread God’s Word (Challenge)

*Purpose:* To have the children identify how God used bad things to achieve good results in the lesson and to have them find Bible passages that tell us God’s Word will be spread.

*Procedure:* Have each child complete Copy Master 4. The answers are as follows:

Part One:
Stephen: Bad thing—He was killed by his enemies. Good result—He went to heaven.

Believers in Jerusalem: Bad thing—They were persecuted (arrested). Good result—They spread God’s Word throughout Judea and Samaria.

Part Two: 1. in the nations and on earth; 2. sing his praise; 3. God wants all people to be saved and to know and believe his truths.

Projects will vary.

6. Other Ideas

Singing With Ourselves

*Purpose:* To help the children learn the memory treasure hymn stanzas by singing along with themselves.

*Procedure:* Make an audio recording of the children singing the memory treasure hymn stanzas, using their hymnals. Then replay the recording, and have the children sing along with themselves without looking at the words. Copies of the recording may also be sent home with students for individual practice.

Bible Study

*Copy Masters 5.1-5.4* contain an age-appropriate, theme-related Bible study. The Bible studies are from the original Christ-Light (© 1998) and use the 1984 edition of the New International Version Bible translation.