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 use the persecution of early Christians for the good of his church?

God used the persecution of early Christians to spread his Word so that many people were brought to faith.

*Application*: God still causes his Word to be spread in spite of persecution.

*Response*: We trust that God will cause his Word to be spread, even when Christians face persecution.

*Lesson Summary*: Stephen, a church deacon, was brought before the Sanhedrin for blasphemy. Through a summary of the Old Testament, he showed the Jewish leaders that they had rejected God’s prophets. The men stoned him to death. This event started a severe persecution of Christians in Jerusalem led by Saul. Many Christians fled to other cities and spread the gospel.

Isaiah 41:10
Matthew 28:19,20
1 Peter 5:8
*The Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed
Hymn 200:1-4

*Memory Treasures*:

blasphemy—speaking against God or against someone or something connected with God


Heavenly Father, it is comforting to know that no persecution will ever destroy your church. Strengthen my faith and my resolve to speak openly about you, even when I face persecution. Give courage to all who face persecution for Jesus’ sake. Amen.
Sing: Sing “Explain that God is our fortress—our protection against the devil and any persecutions he may use to try to destroy God’s church. Sing “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (hymn 200:1,2).

Pray: Heavenly Father, protect and strengthen believers throughout the world who suffer persecution because of their faith. Help us never be afraid to confess our faith in you, even in the face of persecution. We pray in your Son’s name. Amen.

No pain, no _____.

Have students complete the phrase. [No pain, no gain.] Have someone tell what the phrase means. [People often have to endure something unpleasant to get something good.] Ask for examples. [Training to win race, studying for a good grade on a test, cleaning to make a room look nice, working to save money to buy something.]

In our lesson today, God brings gain out of the terrible pains of persecution suffered by the early Christians. We will answer the question, **How did God use the persecution of early Christians for the good of his church?**
1. Stephen was one of seven men chosen as assistants to the apostles. Today we might call them deacons. Put a check mark in front of the sentences that describe Stephen.

- 1. He sold everything and gave the money to the church. ✓
- 2. He was able to do great wonders and miraculous signs. ✓
- 3. He was faithful and full of God's grace and power. ✓
- 4. He rescued other believers from jail. ✓
- 5. He spoke with the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

2. Since the Jews had no reason to arrest Stephen, what did they do? [They brought false witnesses to accuse him of blasphemy.]

3. In Acts 7:1-52a, Stephen reviewed parts of the Old Testament. He summarized his words in 7:51,52a by saying that the Jews were stubborn people who resisted the [Holy] [Spirit] and persecuted the [prophets] whom God sent to tell about the [Righteous/Just] One, Jesus.

4. How did the Jews to whom Stephen was speaking show that they were no different than their ancestors? [They persecuted Stephen. First they falsely accused him, and then they killed him.]

**KEY POINT**

What severe persecution did a member of the early church suffer?

[Stephen] was killed by [stoning].

**Prayer Request**

Because we live in a land that allows religious freedom, it's unlikely we will be imprisoned or killed because we confess Jesus. But many other countries either frown upon or do not tolerate Christianity. Use your creativity as you fill in the following prayer request for a prayer group at church:

Please pray for my friend Sam. He and his family moved to __________ because his dad's job is there. Sam and his family are being persecuted for being Christians. They are not allowed to ______________. I pray that they ______________. Hearing about this has made me thankful that ___________________.

[Example: China; worship openly; will remain strong and be safe; I can worship God whenever and wherever I want.]
5. Put the references from God’s Word on the board. Pair up the students. Have them write “Saul Persecuted Christians” in a box at the center of their papers. They should draw four short rays coming from the box and a large oval at the end of each ray. Have them write each Bible reference in a separate oval and record what action Saul took.

Subtle Persecution

Explain that usually the persecution that happens to Christians isn’t as obvious as what happened to Stephen. Ask the students to identify how Christians are being persecuted in these examples.

• Jeff’s dad has a boss who tells him to write false information in the company’s financial records so that they won’t have to pay higher taxes. When Jeff’s dad tells his boss that he can’t obey him, he does not get the big promotion he had earned. [Asking an employee to lie; withholding a better job.]

• Members of Mike’s history group want to copy an older student’s report. When Mike says he can’t take part in turning it in as if his group had done the work, the group members threaten to hurt him if he doesn’t join in.

5. Saul made it his job to ruin the church. Look up each Bible reference and write what evil action Saul took.

Acts 7:59–8:1: [Approved of Stephen’s death.]
Acts 8:3: [Dragged off men and women; imprisoned them.]
Acts 22:4 [Persecuted believers; arrested men and women; imprisoned them.]
Acts 26:10,11 [Put saints in prison; voted to have them killed; punished them; tried to force them to blaspheme; tracked them down in other countries.]

KEY POINT After Stephen’s death, how did Saul try to destroy God’s church?

Saul persecuted [Christians] in order to destroy the [church].

The devil may not use such obvious persecution today as he did at Saul’s time, but the devil is still hard at work attacking the church. Identify what belief the devil is attacking in the following statements:

• Television shows portray people living together before marriage as a good way to get to know each other. [God says that people should marry first and then live together.]

• The government makes abortion legal. [God says not to murder, but the devil convinces people that abortion is a necessary thing that is not wrong.]

• A friend makes fun of you for obeying your parents’ strict rules. [God says to obey your parents, but the devil leads people to question authority.]

• Your cousin says that it doesn’t matter what people believe as long as they believe in something. [God says we should worship the true God and no one else.]

What comfort does God give you in the Isaiah 41:10 memory treasure? [God is with me and helps me.]
**Acts 8:4-8**

6. The people paid close attention to Philip. Describe what they heard and saw.

[They heard about Christ. They heard the shrieks of evil spirits being removed.]

[They saw Philip doing miraculous signs and people being healed.]

7. How is what happened to Philip a good example of how God can use troubles for the benefit of his church? [Because of persecution in Jerusalem, Philip went to Samaria and preached God’s Word and healed many people.]

**Key Point** How did God ruin the plans of those who wanted to stop the spread of his Word?

God had the Christians scatter to other [cities/places] and [preach] the Word.
Isaiah 55:11
Have the students read Isaiah 55:11. Ask how this passage comforts us when we see people using persecution to try to stop the spread of God’s Word. [God promises that his Word will never return empty/void. In other words, it will continue to be spread and to be used by the Holy Spirit to bring people to faith. We can trust that persecution will not defeat God’s church.]

Have the students complete the at-home Bible study on Copy Masters 5.1-5.4.

A Mighty Fortress

When we face persecution or see other Christians facing persecution for spreading God’s Word, Martin Luther’s hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (hymn 200) can comfort us. Find lines in the hymn that mean the following: [Note: Do this as a class discussion. Students won’t have room to write the answers in their lessons.]

a. Those who fight against God’s people (us) cannot stop them from spreading his Word.

b. Even if Satan and unbelievers are everywhere and want to hurt us, Jesus’ enemies cannot get rid of him and his Word.
d. We will belong to God’s kingdom here on earth and forever in heaven.
e. Jesus is always with us, helping us and sending the Holy Spirit to us.

[a. They shall not overpower us.
b. Though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us
c. The Word they still shall let remain.
d. The kingdom’s ours forever!

e. He’s by our side . . . with his good gifts and Spirit.]

Aim: How did God use the persecution of early Christians for the good of his church?

Truth: God used the persecution of early Christians to spread his Word so that many people were brought to faith.

Application: God still causes his Word to be spread in spite of persecution.

Response: We trust that God will cause his Word to be spread/shared, even when Christians face persecution.

Ask a parent to describe a time when he or she experienced a persecution or hardship. Could your parent see how God used the problem for good? If so, how? Read Jeremiah 29:11 for encouragement and for assurance that God knows and does what is best.

Student’s initials: __________  Parent’s initials: __________
On the board write “_____’ pain, our _____.”

Have the students look at the Get Set! phrase and then ask which two words fit in the blanks (on the board) and tell about salvation. [Jesus’ pain, our gain.] Have a student explain the new phrase. [Because of Jesus’ pain, we gain forgiveness of sins and life in heaven. That gain is not because of anything we’ve done.] Explain that we can trust that God will make sure that word of Jesus’ saving work is spread, in spite of persecution.

Sing “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (hymn 200:3,4). Point out that stanza 4 reminds us that no matter what the world does to us, Jesus has already won the victory.

Isaiah 41:10

*The Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed*

I believe in the Holy Spirit; the holy Christian church, the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

What does this mean?

I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him.

But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

In this Christian church he daily and fully forgives all sins to me and all believers.
Lesson Activities

1. Review

Who Am I?

Purpose: Students will review the facts of the lesson as they identify descriptions of Saul, Stephen, and Philip.

Procedure: Have the students complete Copy Master 2. The answers are as follows:

[Saul: 2, 5, 7, 10, 11, 14; Stephen: 1, 3, 6, 8, 12, 13; Philip: 1, 4, 6, 8, 9. Never, gospel, spread.]

Tic-Tac-Toe Review

Purpose: Students will review the facts of the lesson by playing a game.

Procedure: Draw a tic-tac-toe grid on the board. Have two teams take turns asking their opponent questions about the lesson. When a team answers the opponent’s question correctly, the team puts either an X or an O on the grid. Then that team gets to ask a question. The first team to draw three Xs or Os in a row wins. Suggestion: Have pairs of students do this activity.

2. Application

Persecuted

Purpose: Students will make a chart about present-day persecution.

Procedure: If Copy Master 1 was not used in the alternate activity for God’s Word Today 1, have the students complete the copy master.

[Examples: Home: My uncle might stop visiting because he doesn’t like the fact that we’re Christians. Neighborhood: The family next door might spread rumors about our family because they don’t like our beliefs. State or Province: Our state or province could make laws that contradict our Christian values. Country: The national media often makes fun of or ignores Christians. World: There are places where people are hurt or killed for being Christians.]

Responses will vary for how God might use us to spread the gospel but might include the following: I can be a kind Christian example to family and neighbors and share the Word as opportunities arise; I can contact officials and media personnel and express my concerns and beliefs; I can pray for others; I can donate money to help spread the gospel throughout the world.]

Memory Treasures Exercises

• Which passage tells who is behind the persecutions of Stephen’s time and today? [1 Peter 5:8.]

• Look up the other two passages. What encouragement does God give you as you live for him and witness of him? [He will be with me and strengthen me.]
Why, God?

*Purpose:* Students will be reminded that God can use evil in our lives for our eternal good.

*Procedure:* Remind the students that persecution is not the only bad thing that can happen to Christians. Then use the following steps to show them that God can use bad things for their eternal good:

- Have students name bad things that can come into the lives of Christians. (Hunger, sadness, sickness, poverty, depression, loneliness, death, divorce, mental illness, etc.)
- Distribute paper. Give the students two minutes to write down at least one bad experience they have had—an experience that made them ask, “Why, God?”
- Ask the students to name at least one reason why God might allow evil to come into their lives. (To turn them to his Word and strengthen them; to remind them of their sinfulness and their need for a Savior.)
- Have the students write down anything good that came from their bad experiences. Remind them that sometimes we aren’t able to see the good right away.
- Read Romans 8:28 together. Have the students use markers to write the passage across their bad experiences.

3. Music

**Go Into the World**

*Purpose:* Students will sing about sharing the Word throughout the world.

*Procedure:* Thank the Lord for sending the early Christians and the Christians after them to various locations to spread the gospel, eventually allowing you to hear and believe it. Remind the students that Jesus’ command to “make disciples of all nations” applies to all believers. Teach the song “Go Into the World” (*Copy Master 3*).

4. Art

**Cross and Crown**

*Purpose:* Students will make symbols about the crown of glory earned through Christ.

*Procedure:* Have the students read Revelation 2:10 and name the person from today’s lesson the passage describes. *[Stephen]*. Show *Copy Master 4* and explain that through Christ’s death on a cross and his resurrection, we will be given a crown of life in heaven. The students can color the copy master with markers, or they can draw and color their own cross and crown symbols within a frame. Cut out the symbols, punch a small hole at the top, and add a loop of fishing line or string for hanging. *Suggestion:* Rub over the entire colored symbol with a cloth dipped in cooking oil. Rub off excess oil, and let the symbol dry. The oil will give the paper a see-through effect when the project is hung in a window.

**Condolence Cards**

*Purpose:* Students will make cards that express condolences to Stephen’s family after his death.

*Procedure:* Have the students make cards to “send” to Stephen’s family. The front of the card could be decorated with an original design, computer generated art, or pictures cut from magazines. Have the students suggest messages that could be written inside.

5. Writing

**LOOK at the Characters**

*Purpose:* Students will write descriptive paragraphs about characters in the Bible lesson.

*Procedure:* Have each student write “LOOK” in very large letters on white paper. Then have the students draw the faces of two Bible lesson characters (Stephen, Saul, or Philip) inside the Os. Below the Os they are to write brief paragraphs describing the characters’ roles in
today’s lesson. Post the pictures under the phrase “LOOK at the Characters.”

**What Did They Think?**

*Purpose:* Students will examine the story from other points of view.

*Procedure:* Ask the students to imagine what the people present at Stephen’s stoning might have thought about as they watched. Then have the students draw a pile of stones on white paper and write the people’s names and thoughts inside the stones. Some people to consider are Stephen, Saul, another Jew who was angry with Stephen, an apostle who might have been there, or someone just learning about Christianity.

**6. Bible Study**

**How God Protects His Church**

*Copy Masters 5.1-5.4* contain an age-appropriate, theme-related Bible study. Use it as an additional classroom activity, or encourage parents to conduct this Bible study with their children at home. The Bible studies are from the original Christ-Light (© 1998) and use the 1984 edition of the New International Version Bible translation.