

Lesson 12 | February 18, 2024

Ongoing Challenges for the Church

Study Text: Acts 7:51 through 8:1; 2 Thessalonians 3:6–14; Hebrews 6:9–12; 2 Peter 2:1,18–22; Revelation 2:8–17

Central Truth: Through Jesus Christ, the Church will stand strong.

Key Verse: Matthew 16:18

Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (KJV).

“Upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it” (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will acknowledge that persecution and opposition are a natural part of the Christian life and commit to responding with the attitude of Christ.
- Students will examine the characteristics of false teachers and recognize ways false teaching might spread today.
- Students will develop a deeper sense of responsibility to care for others’ needs by contributing to the well-being of the church through faithful labor and encouraging words and actions.

Introducing the Study

Say: The challenges we continually face come from a variety of sources—even from within ourselves. In today’s lesson, we will see that the same can be said of the Church.

Opening Activity—Challenges

Ask: What are the biggest challenges you have faced? Note that many of our challenges come from other people and the circumstances they create, while other challenges come from ourselves. These can include physical challenges, personality traits, or sinful inclinations.

Say: Just as we face ongoing personal challenges, the Church faces ongoing challenges as well. The Bible has plenty to say about overcoming any kind of challenge. When we read and apply the truth of God’s Word, we can be victorious by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

If someone asked you to name the Church’s biggest challenges today, what would you say? The range of answers would likely focus on oppression from without as well as struggles from within. This lesson covers both. Many of the Early Church’s challenges came from persecution, while others came from false teaching and the people’s struggles to live according to God’s commands. As we explore the Scriptures and see how the apostles addressed these difficulties, we will become better equipped to face challenges in the Church today.

Part 1—Persecution of Believers

The First Christian Martyr

Acts 7:51 through 8:1

Say: How much would you be willing to sacrifice for Christ? Many of His followers would say they are willing to die for Him. And Christians through the ages have done exactly that, beginning with Stephen in Acts 7. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Stephen served as a deacon in the Jerusalem church. Luke describes him as “a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5, NLT). He “performed amazing miracles and signs among the people” (verse 8, NLT), but as is often the case, anointed ministry brought opposition. He was brought before the Sanhedrin or high council of Jewish leaders (verse 12) and falsely accused of speaking blasphemously against the temple and the Law. These charges carried a penalty of death by stoning (Leviticus 24:13–14). However, Stephen had said no such things. Instead, God’s favor was clearly upon him. Amid the accusations, “everyone in the high council stared at Stephen, because his face became as bright as an angel’s” (Acts 6:15, NLT).

In the face of these allegations, Stephen gave one of the longest and most interesting speeches in all of Scripture (Acts 7:2–53). His address was not so much a personal legal defense as a defense of Christianity. It served as a rebuke to his fellow Jews, confronting them with truth much like the prophetic messages of the Old Testament had done. Stephen highlighted the way God’s people had repeatedly rejected messengers of truth, which makes his words extremely relevant for us today.

Stephen’s speech culminated with a summary of his arguments against the Jewish leaders. They were stubborn and sinful, refused to listen to the truth, and continually resisted the Holy Spirit (verse 51). And when the long-awaited Messiah had arrived, they rejected, betrayed, and murdered Him (verse 52).

This enraged the Jewish leaders, so they dragged Stephen out of the city to stone him. But Stephen was steadfast despite their rage. “Full of the Holy Spirit,” he saw a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God (verse 55, NLT). These verses draw a sharp contrast between the leaders’ murderous rage and Stephen’s godly serenity. He is a shining example of someone enduring persecution through the power of the Holy Spirit.

As the leaders began to stone Stephen, his prayer no doubt infuriated them all the more. In Judaism, prayer was only to be directed at God. By addressing his prayer to Jesus, Stephen was asserting again that Jesus was the Son of God, the Messiah. The Sanhedrin’s attempt to convince Stephen otherwise had failed. His final words were a prayer of submission and forgiveness, similar to Jesus’ prayer at His crucifixion (verses 59–60; Luke 23:34,46).

Acts 8:1 is one of the most significant verses in the New Testament, marking the beginning of the fulfillment of Acts 1:8. The Church was expanding, and the gospel was being preached amid an explosion of persecution. As Christians were targeted and fled from Jerusalem, they carried the gospel with them. Even as they faced injustice and false accusations, the Holy Spirit empowered them to share the message of Christ.

This pattern of persecution has been repeated countless times throughout Christian history. The life-changing message of Christ inevitably brings opposition. In such times, believers can imitate Stephen by standing firm in the faith, responding in truth, and keeping their focus on Jesus.

Resource Packet Item 1: Responding to Opposition

Distribute the worksheet and complete it in groups or as a class. Discuss the scenarios, and as time permits, talk about other examples of opposition or persecution. How should Christians respond?

Discuss

- ? What do Stephen's actions in Acts 7 teach us about responding to persecution?
- ? What are some right and wrong ways to respond to persecution? Explain.

Focus on the Reward

Revelation 2:8–11

Say: Revelation 2 offers a new perspective on the story of Stephen and anyone else who is persecuted for Jesus' sake. As the church in Smyrna learned, faithfully enduring opposition on earth ensures a great reward in heaven. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Smyrna was the second of the seven churches addressed in Revelation 2 through 3. The letter is both sobering and hopeful—sobering because they had suffered greatly for their faith and hopeful because Jesus was well aware of their situation.

The city of Smyrna was particularly devoted to Rome. As such, its antagonism toward Christianity was strong. Christians had a hard time making a living there, leaving them impoverished (2:9). They were also being slandered by the Jews, which was a common persecution in the first century (Acts 13:50; 14:2; 17:5). Scholars have identified six common accusations leveled against Christians of that time: cannibalism, lust, breaking up homes, atheism, disloyalty to Rome, and inciting trouble.

The letter to the church in Smyrna warned that persecution would get worse, landing believers in prison (Revelation 2:10). Scholars note that prison was often a place to await execution in the ancient world. The phrase “ten days” most likely symbolized an extended period that would eventually end.

Along with this sobering message came a hopeful promise. The crown of life awaited those who remained faithful. They would not be “harmed by the second death” (verse

11, NLT). Verse 8 also alludes to this hope, describing Jesus as “the First and the Last, who was dead but is now alive” (NLT). Even if persecution led to death, it has been conquered by the One who lives forever.

This is great news for believers today. It is unlikely we will face the level of persecution Smyrna experienced. But as Paul wrote, “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Timothy 3:12, NLT). Any persecution we face in this life can be endured because of our hope in Christ.

Discuss

? What are some ways Christians are slandered by unbelievers today? How should we respond to such slander?

? How is your everyday life impacted by your hope in Christ?

Part 2—False Teaching

False Teaching Is Deceptive

2 Peter 2:1,18–22

Say: When you think of a false teacher, what do you imagine? Maybe you picture a person who looks a bit suspicious, acts a little strange, and says things that are clearly wrong. But Scripture warns that the most dangerous false teachers are subtle and even appealing. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

As we shift from studying persecution to taking a look at false teaching, our focus moves from external to internal challenges facing the Church. The New Testament often warns Christians to beware of false teaching. Peter devoted a great deal of his second epistle to describing its dangers. He explained that just as false prophets existed in Old Testament times, they would continue to spread “destructive heresies” in the Church and “even deny the Master” (2 Peter 2:1, NLT).

Peter makes an especially important point: False teachers are clever—so clever that they threaten to mislead growing believers. “Cleverly” (NLT; “privily,” KJV) conveys the sense that they secretly infiltrate the congregation with their lies. Maybe they make a statement or argument about Scripture that seems correct and appealing but is discovered to be wrong on further examination. Maybe they appeal to human logic or emotion to support arguments Scripture does not address. False teachings often seem appealing at first. But over time, they end up denying the basic truths of Scripture along with Christ himself.

Peter went on to describe the methods false teachers were using in the Early Church (verses 18–19). Their speech was boastful, and they invited their hearers to indulge their sinful desires. They asserted a kind of confidence that drew people in. Specifically, they appealed “to twisted sexual desires” (verse 18, NLT) to trap people in sin. Scholars believe these false teachers may have been telling believers that there would be no judgment for sexual sins.

Today's false teachings may have different specifics, but the deceivers' methods will be similar. They will come across as appealing, conveying a confidence that can seem genuine. They will deliver a compelling message that seems good on the surface but twists the truth. Their deception will lead people back into the grip of sin and subject them to judgment.

The word translated "tangled up" (verse 20, NLT) or "entangled" (KJV) was also used to describe braiding hair, implying a deliberate process and intentional choice to return to sin. Peter makes a strong assertion in verse 21: People who reject the holiness of God and listen to false teaching would have been better off "if they had never known the way to righteousness" (NLT). When a person rejects the truth of Christ, they become almost immune to its power (Hebrews 10:26–27). By illustrating his point using dogs and pigs (2 Peter 2:22)—both of which were repulsive to his readers—Peter showed his utter contempt for false teachers and the destructive messages they bring.

Discuss

- ? What are some ways false teachers might deceive people today?
- ? What kinds of teachings might be most effective at misleading people?

Don't Tolerate False Teaching

Revelation 2:12–17

Say: Before delivering His message to the Pergamum church in Revelation 2:12–17, Jesus described himself as "the one with the sharp two-edged sword" (verse 12, NLT). Sometimes we need a two-edged message like the one He gives: a word of encouragement plus a word of correction. (Share your highlights from the following text.) v (***Play the video highlighting the site of the Pergamum church—available at RadiantLifeCurriculum.com/Adult.***)

The city of Pergamum was a center of Roman worship in the province of Asia (modern-day Turkey). It included multiple temples to Roman gods and a huge altar, probably dedicated to Zeus, which may have been "Satan's seat" (KJV) referred to in Revelation 2:13. Amid the opposition and influence of this idolatrous culture, the church had remained true to Christ.

But the Pergamum church also had a problem: They were tolerating false teaching (verses 14–15). Jesus' message refers to Balaam (Numbers 22–25), who played a role in the rebellion of God's people by leading some of the men of Israel to indulge in immorality and idolatry (31:16). By New Testament times, Balaam had become synonymous with all kinds of corrupt teachers who led believers into spiritual compromise with the world.

In Pergamum, this compromise involved the deception of the Nicolaitans (Revelation 2:15). Scripture does not appear to be clear on the specifics of the Nicolaitans' heresy. However, Irenaeus, one of the Early Church fathers, described them as followers of

Nicolas of Antioch (Acts 6:5), a church leader who had forsaken sound doctrine. Specifically, he is believed to have modeled self-indulgence and taught that it doesn't matter how Christians behave. Interestingly, the two names *Balaam* (contracted from two Hebrew words meaning "destroyer of" or "to conquer" and "people") and *Nicolas* (from two Greek words meaning "victory" or "to conquer" and "people") are synonymous. In Revelation 2:14–15, each refers to a teacher who used his influence to lead people into heresy.

The Pergamum believers who followed the Nicolaitans' false teaching were like the Israelites who followed Balaam's advice: Rather than completely abandoning their faith, they assimilated the religious and social values of their culture into their beliefs about God. Unless they repented, they would face judgment (verse 16). However, Christ ended His message to Pergamum with a wonderful promise. Those who turned from their sinful ways and returned to Him could look forward to receiving a "white stone, and on the stone will be engraved a new name that no one understands except the one who receives it" (verse 17, NLT). This stone may have referred to any number of things, perhaps even the Roman procedure by which a juror declared a prisoner's innocence by casting a white stone into an urn. Regardless of the specifics, Jesus' message is clear. Those who turn from sin and remain faithful to Him will experience the joys of heaven.

Resource Packet Item 2: Identifying False Teachings

Distribute the worksheet and divide the class into four groups. Have each group discuss their assigned Scriptures. Then talk about their responses in class.

Discuss

- ? Why might an individual Christian or a church tolerate false teaching?
- ? What worldly values and beliefs might be appealing to believers today? How can we identify and combat these teachings?

Part 3—Careless Living

Avoid the Dangers of Idle Living

2 Thessalonians 3:10–13

Say: To effectively confront the challenges facing the Church from within and without, we must reject ungodly values and choose to live by the Word of God. Such a lifestyle includes working hard to care for ourselves and one another. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

To fully understand the command in 2 Thessalonians 3:10—"Those unwilling to work will not get to eat" (NLT)—we must examine its context. The word "idle" in verse 6 carries the sense of being out of line with how Christians should behave. In verse 7, it refers to laziness or an unwillingness to care for one's own responsibilities. In verse 11, idleness had led to "meddling" (NLT) in the business of others in the congregation. These issues are interrelated. Idleness leaves a person unoccupied, which gives way to an array of

problems like gossip and a critical spirit. Idle people place a double burden on the local church: They consume resources intended to care for people who cannot work. They also create additional problems that break down the fellowship of believers. Whether they are working or resting, Christians must be careful to use their time for the glory of God.

Discuss

- ? How does idleness impact churches today?
- ? How should Christians and church leaders respond when an idle person engages in the behaviors described in these verses?

Make Caring for One Another a Top Priority

Hebrews 6:9–12

Say: Hebrews 6:8 gives a rather harsh warning to the readers. But then the writer moves to an encouraging exhortation to love one another. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

After describing the apostasy of certain former believers, the writer of Hebrews expressed confidence that these readers were meant for better things (verse 9). The fruit of righteousness could be seen in their lives, especially in the way they served God and helped the needy among them (verse 10). They would be wise to continually guard against indifference and instead “follow the example of those who are going to inherit God’s promises because of their faith and endurance” (verse 12, NLT).

As we work hard to care for one another, we also have examples to follow—in Scripture, in Church history, and in our own congregations. By growing closer to God and our fellow believers, we become living examples others can follow as well.

Resource Packet Item 3: Be an Example

Distribute the worksheet and discuss our powerful influence as believers.

Discuss

- ? In what ways should the Christian community's values differ from the world's?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: The body of Christ is made up of active participants, not spectators. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can endure outside opposition, pursue biblical and doctrinal truth, and exemplify the love of God.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Pray that God will help you stay committed to Him when you face difficulty or trouble because of your faith.

- Commit to study the Scriptures more deeply so you are prepared to counter false teaching and correct those who have been misled.
- Look for opportunities to bless your church family this week with your words and actions.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Murderous Pursuer.
1 Samuel 23:7–14

Tuesday:

Lying Prophets and Deceitful
Priests. Jeremiah 14:13–18

Wednesday:

Dangerously Comfortable.
Amos 6:1–7

Thursday:

Warning about False Prophets.
Matthew 7:15–23

Friday:

Promise to the Persecuted.
Mark 13:9–13

Saturday:

Rebuke of Idle Talkers and Deceivers.
Titus 1:10–16