

Week Two - Catalyst Two: Persecution

Acts 5:17-42

Spend FIFTEEN - Day One

1. Start today's FIFTEEN by reading about how one of Jesus' apostles handled persecution in Acts 5:17-32, 40b-42. Focus especially on the last three verses. What did the leaders do to persecute Peter and the other apostles? How did Peter respond?
2. How does this persecution compare to how our government treats Christians today?
3. Now read an earlier story about how Peter handled persecution in John 18:7-12. How did Peter's methods in Acts change from his earlier days?
4. Look again at Acts 5:40-42. Where were Peter's priorities? Pushing back against the government or preaching the good news of Jesus Christ?
5. What principle from this story should we apply to our priorities as 21st century American Christians? Do you think you spend more time worried about government persecution or about sharing the good news of Jesus?
6. Close your FIFTEEN in prayer. Ask God to change your perspective on persecution in the same way he changed Peter's. Ask for help in rejoicing when people do you wrong, because it means that God has given you honor!

Spend FIFTEEN - Day Two

7. Now let's read an unbeliever's perspective on persecuting Christians. Read Acts 5:33-39. What was Gamaliel's advice to the rulers?
8. Was this advice wise? Should the Jewish rulers have listened to it? Why or why not?
9. Now read Romans 8:31-39. How does Paul's speech in this passage compare to Gamaliel's?
10. Why might these two passages give us confidence in the face of persecution?
11. In the struggle between Christians and an unbelieving world around them, what ally do we have that the world doesn't? Knowing this, how should it change our attitude in engaging with hostility toward our faith?
12. As you conclude your FIFTEEN, pray for God to break you out of any fear or any way that you are not trusting in His

ultimate power to prevail against anything mankind might try to do against Him.

Spend FIFTEEN - Day Three

13. Read Jesus' challenging words in Matthew 5:38-40. How do you think he meant this command, literally? Explain your answer.

14. What would living out this command mean if someone stole your car? Should a Christian press charges in this situation? What if someone falsely smears your reputation? How should a Christian respond? What if someone broke into your house? How would you reconcile self-defense laws with what Jesus says in Matthew?

15. Christian theologian Stanley Hauerwas in his Theological Reflections on Violence and National Identity, says that Christians should never partake in violence to defend their rights. Atheist critic Noah Berlatsky responded to the book this way: "If, after all, Christians were actually to take up Hauerwas' challenge, if they were actually to bear witness to nonviolence and transform the world—well, I'd hate to say it, obviously, but it would be hard to escape the suspicion that that might actually be the work of God." Which does Berlatsky think is a stronger witness, a Christian who fights back against persecution or one who doesn't?

16. In light of Jesus' commands and the examples of non-violent movement leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. or Mahatma Gandhi, why do you think so much of Christian rhetoric and response to persecution is aggressive?

17. What could we do differently in our daily lives to model a "turn the other cheek" mentality when people treat us wrongly?

18. As you finish your FIFTEEN, pray and confess to God all the times you've defended yourself rather than turn the other cheek. Ask Him to help you trust Him to defend you so that you no longer have to try to defend yourself.

Spend FIFTEEN - Day Four

19. Start your time in the Word today by reading Daniel 3:8-18. What choice did the three believers – Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego – face?

20. How does this compare to the level of persecution Christians face in the United States today?

21. Look at verse 16 again. What startling claim do the three friends make?

22. In contrast, much of the debate today – politically and socially – sees Christians being either defensive or angry. How could a different approach, similar to the example in Daniel 3, be more effective in the cause of the faith?

23. In what specific ways can you change the tone of your engagement with the world?
24. Ask God to help you be the beginning of the change in how Christians respond to those who disagree with them. Pray for the opportunity to show a peaceful, confident face to those who challenge us.

Spend FIFTEEN - Day Five

25. Tertullian, an early church father, said, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” How accurate is this statement in the modern day? How comfortable does this make you feel?
26. This question is a little over-simplistic, but, in large strokes, does the Christian church do better when it’s persecuted or when it’s comfortable? What implications does that have for how we should want the culture to treat us?
27. The Christian church is losing ground in North America and Europe, but it is absolutely exploding in Africa and Asia. What do you think might be the reason for those two trajectories?
28. Read Romans 5:1-5. What are the necessary prerequisites for us to develop character and hope?
29. If you’ve spent any time at The Voice of the Martyrs website (*persecution.com*), you know that American Christians are quite comfortable compared to our brothers and sisters around the world. What effect do you think this has had on the quality of our own characters and hope in terms of our faith?
30. If a Christian brother or sister said that they were praying for American Christians to experience more persecution, would you agree or disagree with them? Why?
31. Finish your FIFTEEN by praying for all the Christians that are being persecuted around the world. Ask for God to continue to bolster the faith of all those who must stand up to evil in His name.