

*Jacob's Well***Lesson Title:** The Life of Paul—Persecuting the Way

**Key Concept:** Paul was highly influential in the early church, and examples from his life still guide us individually and as a church body. His first influence on the church, however, was not as its missionary, but as its persecutor.

**Scriptures:**

So God's message continued to spread. The number of believers greatly increased in Jerusalem, and many of the Jewish priests were converted, too.  
(Acts 6:7 *New Living Translation*)

<sup>1</sup>A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria. . . . <sup>3</sup>But Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church.  
(Acts 8:1, 3 *New Living Translation*)

**Context Scriptures:** Deuteronomy 13:1–5; Acts 4; 5:17–42; 6–8; 9:1–2; 22:3; 23:6; Galatians 1:13–14; Philippians 3:4–6; 1 Timothy 1:13

**Lesson Thoughts:**

Around AD 30, the church seemed unstoppable. Three thousand joined on Pentecost, two thousand more after the healing of the lame man. The numbers were so great that, to give themselves time to do God's work, the apostles had to appoint seven deacons (ministers) to manage the food. Even many priests joined "the Way," and those who didn't couldn't hurt the apostles lest the people stone them. And when the Sanhedrin tried to silence the apostles by locking them up overnight, an angel let them out of prison. Truly, this was a church triumphant.

But then, tragedy struck. Stephen, one of the deacons, was killed. False witnesses provided a justification for the Sanhedrin to stone him, and no angel saved the day this time. Then the high priest gave Saul, an up-and-coming Pharisee, free

*Jacob's Well*

rein to hunt and imprison followers of The Way, many of whom joined Stephen as martyrs. Saul's pedigree was perfect for destroying the church. From the tribe of Benjamin, his Jewish heritage was beyond question. He came from a family of Pharisees, grew up in Jerusalem, and studied under Gamaliel, the most honored rabbi in all of Judaea. To top it all off, he followed the law of God perfectly, a Pharisee if there ever was one. Saul had religious skill, political connections, and most terrifying of all, a fervent belief that he was fighting for God. Under attack from this religious zealot, the church, which once lived as a tight-knit community in Jerusalem, was shattered into a million pieces spread across Syria-Palestine.

Despite Saul's persecution and scattering of the church, even *because* of it, the church expanded exponentially. God's disciples didn't wallow in grief, they went out and did what they were called to do: spread the Word! For probably the first time since Jesus met a pariah at Jacob's well, the Samaritans heard the gospel, this time in the main city of the region. And God was just getting started. The Word went as far north as Damascus (~150 miles from Jerusalem) and as far south as Ethiopia, beyond the bounds of the Roman Empire! All because of a vicious, prideful murderer named Saul. Not only did God not let Saul destroy his church, he used Saul for *his* purpose, to spread his gospel even further!

**Discussion Questions:**

- 1) Have you ever found yourself sitting still and contented like the Jerusalem church? What led you to that place? What are the dangers of contentment?
- 2) Why do you think the church needed a persecutor like Saul to push them to fulfill Jesus' Great Commission (Matthew 28:19; Acts 1:8)?
- 3) Think of how you react to sudden and dramatic change in your life. What lessons can we take away from the church's reaction to persecution?
- 4) What are some obstacles in your life that seem like nothing good could come of them? How might God be able to use them for his purpose?
- 5) Have you ever fought against God's will (knowingly or not) because you relied on your own understanding like Saul?

**Next Lesson:** God's Irrevocable Calling

## *Jacob's Well*

### **Notes and Reflections**

- 1) Saul had as great an education in God and the law as one could ask for, yet he still somehow got it wrong. Think about the ways in which you can become blinded to the will of God by overconfidence in your own understanding of his will.
- 2) They say that a weapon is only as dangerous as its user. What qualities can be just as constructive in the hands of God as they are destructive in the hands of humans? Do you have any of these? What about your obnoxious neighbor?