

Use “The Scene” to introduce “The God of Courageous Witnesses” the High School Sunday school lesson for February 19, 2017. The lesson is found on page 75 of *High School Teacher* by Standard Publishing.



Iranian pastor Behnam Irani was arrested in 2010 for “action against the state” for refusing to stop leading a Bible study. In 2014, more charges were brought against him, including “spreading corruption on Earth,” which carries the death penalty with it. He was kept in prison for more than six years, sometimes being interrogated for hours or tortured. Eventually the charges against him were reduced, and he was recently set free.

Evangelical Christians make up a small minority in the largely Shia-Muslim country of Iran, but some reports say their numbers are growing at an incredible rate of 20 percent a year, which would make it one of the fastest growing church families in the world. Back in 1979, when the Iranian revolution established a hard-line Islamic regime, many thought the Christian church in Iran was destined to die. Bibles were banned, Christian pastors were killed, and evangelism was made illegal. Persecution of Christians became an everyday reality.

But instead of dying or fading, the church in Iran is going strong. The violence has caused Iranians to question the religion of Islam and has caused Christians to speak out, instead of shutting up. As a result, as Mark Howard of the Gospel Coalition observed, “more Iranians have become Christians in the last 20 years than in the previous 13 centuries put together” (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-story-of-the-irans-church-in-two-sentences>).

As students arrive, give each of them a copy of the above article to read. Then discuss it in this way:

Imagine you were faced with imprisonment and torture for continuing to practice your faith. What would you do? Why?

There are all kinds of suffering in the world, and it’s often hard to see the reasons for it. What do you think about suffering that comes from persecution? How would you explain the reasons for that kind of suffering?

What do you think? Does the principle of freedom of religion help or hurt a country? Explain.

Sometimes those who are innocent and even virtuous suffer more than those who practice evil. Today we will read about Stephen, an early church leader, who died because he shared his faith. Let’s see what role such unjust suffering has in God’s plan.