

Thank you for your interest in the “*Folks Like Us*” Bible studies by Fran Sciacca. Whether you’re using them for your own spiritual growth and journey, or as a resource for your small group, Sunday school, or homeschool program, you’ll soon discover why these studies originally sold over 600,000 copies in their print editions. The recent decision by the publisher to discontinue print editions and to return the publishing rights back to Fran has given him the freedom to make the nearly 70 individual character studies available to you...at no cost.

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Now that you’ve begun to explore the Bible study resources developed by Fran Sciacca, you will almost certainly benefit from the other things that he has made available:

- “***The Road to Shalom***” *podcast* – thought-provoking and thoroughly biblical, Fran explores what the Bible calls “shalom,”—the way things are *supposed* to be in God’s Kingdom, why they’re not, and how to restore them. All three seasons are available on the website.
- ***Biblical literacy courses*** – Three, 13-week Bible courses covering the entire Bible. Includes individual course books, audio, and optional animated slide supplements. Course books and animated slide supplements may be purchased on the web store.
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FOLKS Like Us

THE BELIEVERS IN THESSALONICA
“The purifying fire of persecution.”

Timeless truths from our ancient past,
for a journey with God in the modern era.

Fran Sciacca

“Folks Like Us” — an introduction

Over the years I’ve written and published a number of Bible studies that collectively have sold well over a half-million copies. They were forged, most of them, in the furnaces of pain, doubt, and loneliness. Maybe that’s why they were well-used, they touched people where they hurt most.

Recently, my publisher decided that they no longer wanted to handle the books that contained these 60 or so individual studies. So, I’ve decided to make them available to any who might benefit from them. At no cost.

I have always believed that because God thought it best to become human in the Incarnation, that perhaps “incarnational truth” was His preferred method of revealing Himself and His purposes to us. I suppose that’s where the basic genre of these studies originated. I wanted to provide believers with Bible studies rooted in our ancestral past. The lives of men and women, who it turns out, are “folks just like us” in so many ways.

So, please take your time and work slowly through as many of these studies as you care to do... there’s a lot of them! And may God use the combination of the struggles and insights of your *ancient* brothers and sisters, combined with those of mine, your modern brother, to help you in your spiritual journey. That is the goal of this project.

Warmly in The Lamb,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Fran Sciacca". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Fran Sciacca
Birmingham, AL

THE BELIEVERS IN THESSALONICA

“*The purifying fire of persecution.*”

ABIDING PRINCIPLE – Mistreatment, injustice, misunderstanding, and persecution all serve the same end in the plan and purposes of God, and we are forced to choose whose likeness we wish to reflect—that of the world, or Jesus.

“*It is better to enter heaven maimed than to coast into hell. This was Jesus' conclusion and it should be ours.*” — Allan Dykstra

For the early church, hearing that the apostle Paul had come to town was how you might feel if you heard that the 60 Minutes camera crew had come to expose a personal conflict in your home or office! Wherever Paul went, riots, beatings and imprisonment seemed to piggyback on all his great spiritual activity. And if you happened to get too close to him, you would likely *yourself* at the other end of a fist or in the center of an angry mob! Nowhere was this more vividly portrayed than in the strategic city of Thessalonica in Macedonia. Named after the sister of Alexander the Great, this influential urban area was situated on the main highway that connected Rome to the areas north of the Aegean Sea. It is still there today. Paul visited Thessalonica twice, planting the church there on his second missionary journey.

The young believers in Thessalonica stand tall in the pages of scripture as an illustration of a group of believers *strengthened* by the blows of persecution. Even more importantly, in their response to undeserved suffering we can see the grand role that persecution is designed to play in God's plan of sanctification—for them *and* for us living nearly twenty-one centuries later.

KEY SCRIPTURE: Acts 17:1-14 and 1 Thessalonians 1-3

STUDY QUESTIONS...

1. Read Acts 17:1-3 several times. In as much detail as possible, describe what Paul and Silas are doing.
2. What resulted from their ministry (see Acts 17:4)?
3. Who is Jason, and how did Paul affect his life (see 17:1-9)?
4. Read about Paul's visit to Philippi in Acts 16:11-12, 16-36.

How was this visit *similar* to his stay in Thessalonica?

How was it *different*?

5. Shortly after Paul was thrown out of Thessalonica and then Berea, he penned his first letter to his newly planted church. This is our letter of 1 Thessalonians. From it, we get amazing insight about what happened to these new converts as a result of the gospel "coming to town." Read the following verses and thoughtfully answer the questions associated with them.

What was the *cause* of the Thessalonians' persecution? (1 Thessalonians 2:13-16)

From the following verses, explain how the believers were able to respond the way that they did:

a. 1 Thessalonians 1:4-6 –

b. 1 Thessalonians 2:2-9,13 –

c. 1 Thessalonians 3:4 –

What do these passages tell us about how Paul was able to accept and handle the battles these new believers were experiencing because of *his* ministry to them? (1 Thessalonians 1:2-3; 2:10-12; 3:1-5).

6. From the verses below, explain what resulted from the patient endurance of the Thessalonians as they faced opposition for their faith.

1 Thessalonians 1:6-8 –

1 Thessalonians 3:7-9 –

1 Thessalonians 4:9-10

1 Thessalonians 5:11,23-24

7. Read Paul's counsel to the persecuted believers in the following verses. How were they instructed to continue their effectiveness for the cause of Christ?

1 Thessalonians 4:1 –

1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 –

1 Thessalonians 5:15 –

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 –

1 Thessalonians 5:25 –

8. The apostle Peter also was well acquainted with persecution. According to the following passages, how and why did Peter suffer for his faith? (Acts 5:25-33,40-42)

How do you think what Jesus said *prior* to his resurrection might have impacted Peter's response to persecution *after* the Resurrection? (Matthew 5:11-12)

9. Jesus made some other sobering and almost startling predictions about persecution because of our faith. Look carefully at the passages below and summarize what Jesus is saying about persecution.

Matthew 5:10 –

Mark 4:1-6,15-17 –

Mark 10:29-30 –

Luke 6:26 –

John 15:19-21 –

10. Paul makes a strong statement about persecution and our own spiritual transformation in 2 Timothy 3:12. What is he saying, and why do you think this is the case?
11. Summarize what you've personally discovered about persecution in this chapter. Be sure to include your insights about the possible causes of persecution, the place it plays in sanctification, and how we should interpret its presence in our lives.

LOOKING BACK...

Persecution and discipleship were two sides of the same coin in the first century. Jesus warned His aspiring followers that they were destined to *inherit* the unbelieving world's response to Him and His message. What happened to Him would happen to them. Yet Peter and Paul both perceived persecution as God's *endorsement* on their lives! They welcomed it as evidence that they were living like Christ, and did not conclude it was unusual or unjust. On the contrary, they may have doubted the validity and vibrancy of their faith if it had vanished!

Persecution is not only a means of spiritual transformation, it may be evidence of it. Those who seek to resemble Jesus must anticipate experiencing life as He did. And...that will include persecution. In some way, at some time, for each of us.

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

1. First Peter 4:13-15 tells of undesirable causes of persecution that God's people must avoid. Describe what they are, in your own words.

The word translated "meddler" (ESV, NIV) is a powerful word. It describes a people who envisions themselves as "supervisors" over the affairs of others, while neglecting the same standards for themselves. Why do you think this behavior incites such hostility toward us on the part of unbelievers?

How are the causes of persecution in this passage *different* from what you studied earlier in this study?

2. The following verses provide instruction regarding how we should respond both to persecution *and* our persecutors. Put each command into your own words and give a personal example of a time when you have had opportunity to do this.

Matthew 5:44 –

John 15:18-21 –

I Peter 2:23 -

1 Peter 3:9 –

Romans 12:14,20 –

3. List a few instances from your own life where you felt you encountered genuine opposition for your being a Christian. (If you have little or nothing to write here, give a thoughtful explanation as to why you think you have *not* experienced persecution). Be honest!

4. Look back over your list above and next to the ones that resulted from you trying to introduce God into a conversation, put a G for "God." Next to those that more than likely were due to your own personality or conduct, write an S for "self." Finally, if what you experienced was the unfortunate result of you inserting yourself into someone else's business, mark an M for "meddler."

5. Read Paul's resumé as an apostle in 2 Corinthians 4:10-16. How does what Paul says in verse 10 relate to verses 11-13 and 14-16?

6. At the present time, would you consider yourself willing to be called a "fool" for Christ's sake? Explain your answer.

7. Check as many of the statements below that honestly apply to your life.
 - I've never known persecution from sharing the gospel.
 - I've been insulted for trying to share the gospel.
 - I've been ridiculed for taking my relationship with God too seriously.
 - I've been attacked for my "Christian views" on social or political issues.
 - I've offended others by meddling.
 - I've responded with gratitude when persecuted, seeing it as identification with Christ.
 - I'm willing to be called a "fool for Christ."
 - I've been unwilling to be called a "fool for Christ."
 - I consider persecution normal.
 - I consider persecution abnormal.
 - As far as I know, all people speak well of me, and have reason to.
 - I pray for those who persecute me.
 - I typically "hit back" when people say things to me I don't appreciate.
 - I do not return insult for insult.

If you have *never* known opposition, do you think it's because something is missing in your life? (The answer could be because your primary desire is to please all people, or possibly because you do not know how to share the gospel and your faith, or because you do not associate with unbelievers or people who don't think like you). Do you think there are some changes you could make? If so, write out what you'd like to do as a first step, to put yourself more into an environment where your faith would matter, then share your plan with a friend who can help you.

You might want to use what has been revealed in your "self-audit" above to guide you in an extended time of personal (or group) prayer regarding your own life and witness.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY (optional)

- The proper *perspective* on persecution – Matthew 5:11-12
- The proper *response* to persecution – I Peter 2:21-23