



Name: _____

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WEEK 3, DAY 1:

THE IMPERIAL FIRE AND NERO'S PERSECUTION

Scripture Focus

"Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings..." — 1 Peter 4:12-13 (NKJV)

Historical & Apologetic Overview

For the first few decades, the Roman government mostly saw Christianity as a small, harmless group within the Jewish religion. However, everything changed in July of AD 64 when a huge, disastrous fire destroyed more than half of the city of Rome. Rumors spread quickly that the cruel and unstable Emperor Nero had secretly ordered the fire himself to clear out space for his new palace. Looking for an easy target to blame and turn away the public's intense anger, Nero blamed Rome's growing Christian population. This started the very first wave of brutal, government-approved Roman persecution. Christians were arrested in large numbers, covered in wild animal skins to be torn apart by dogs in arenas, or nailed to crosses and set on fire to act as actual human torches to light up Nero's private evening garden parties.

Not-so-Fun Fact

Historical records show that during this intense wave of Nero's persecution, both the Apostle Peter and the Apostle Paul were killed in Rome. Peter was crucified upside down, and Paul, because he was a Roman citizen, was given the faster execution of being beheaded.

Fill in the Blanks

1. The brutal Roman Emperor who first blamed Christians for the great fire of Rome in AD 64 was _____.
2. In 1 Peter 4:12, the Apostle Peter uses the phrase "_____ trial" to describe the painful testing believers face.



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WEEK 2, DAY 5:

PAUL'S APPOINTMENT IN ROME AND THE PRISON LETTERS

Short Answer Questions

Why did the Roman public find it so easy to believe Nero's fake accusations against Christians? What misunderstandings did pagans have about Christian practices?

Skeptics sometimes claim that the disciples just stole Jesus' body and lied about the resurrection. How does the historical reality of thousands of early Christians willingly going through Nero's horrific tortures show the mistake in that theory?

A JOURNEY THROUGH TIME

BY KATIE SWANK

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CASH, 10 MADISON, 12



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Chapter 1: The Spark and the Scroll

The dust in the back of the Oceanside secondhand shop smelled like old paper and salt air. Twelve-year-old Madison wiped her brow, her fingers brushing against a thick, leather-bound volume buried beneath a stack of faded magazines. The cover had no title, only a deeply debossed pattern that felt strangely warm to the touch.

When she opened it, the pages didn't show standard English print; instead, complex, shifting geometric lines converged around a single handwritten phrase: "So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me."

"Hey, Maddy, look at this!" Cash's voice shattered her focus.

He was peering out the open back door of the shop, pointing toward an old, modified 125cc dirt bike tucked behind a stack of shipping pallets. "The owner says if we clean out the back shed, we can keep the bike. It's got some weird modifications on the engine block, though. Look at these copper coils wrapped around the exhaust."

Madison carried the book over to the doorway, stepping into the bright California sunlight. "Cash, look at this book. The text is literally moving."

"Sure it is, and this dirt bike is a spaceship," Cash scoffed, throwing a leg over the worn vinyl seat. He gripped the handlebars and kicked the starter. The engine didn't just roar—it whistled a high, piercing note that resonated with the book in Madison's hands.

Suddenly, the shifting lines in the text locked into the shape of a compass pointing directly at the bike. The air around them began to ripple like heat rising off asphalt. Madison instinctively jumped onto the back of the seat behind Cash, clutching the book tight against her chest.

"Cash, turn it off!" she yelled.

"I can't! The throttle's stuck!"

The copper coils on the engine flared into a brilliant blue light. The world around them blurred into a tunnel of rushing gray wind, the sound of the ocean vanishing instantly. The leather book grew intensely warm against Madison's ribs, its pages flipping wildly until they stopped on a single date stamped in dark crimson ink: Rome, 64 AD.

With a violent thud that shook their teeth, the tires hit solid ground. The fresh scent of the Pacific Ocean was gone, replaced by the pungent aroma of wood smoke, roasted meats, and open drainage. They were sitting in a narrow, stone-paved alleyway beneath massive, towering arches of brick and marble.



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Chapter 2: The City on Fire

Cash killed the engine, his hands shaking on the grips. "Maddy... where are the palm trees? Where's the shop?"

Madison looked down at her book. The moving lines had settled, displaying a crude map of ancient streets. "We aren't in Oceanside anymore. Look at the buildings. Look at what people are wearing."

A crowd of men in coarse wool tunics and leather sandals hurried past the mouth of the alley, their faces smudged with soot. In the distance, a low, ominous roar echoed through the stone corridors of the city, accompanied by a thick, dark column of smoke that blotted out the midday sun.

"Fire!" a voice shouted in a language they couldn't understand, yet the book in Madison's lap seemed to whisper the translation directly into their minds. "The Great Fire has crossed the Aventine!"

"We need to get out of here," Cash said, trying to kickstart the bike again. The engine sputtered, but the copper coils remained dull and dark.

"It's dead." Cash said as he ran his strong hands through his hair, "The battery or whatever powers those coils is totally drained."

Leaving the bike hidden behind a collapsed stone wall, they crept toward the edge of the street. Rome was a maze of panic. Soldiers in polished iron breastplates pushed through the crowds, their expressions grim. Amidst the chaos, Madison noticed a small group of people standing near a fountain.

Unlike the screaming citizens around them, these individuals were calm, handing out water and helping an elderly man who had fallen in the stampede. Before Madison could call out, a heavy hand dropped onto Cash's shoulder. They spun around to face a towering Roman guard, his gladius drawing halfway from its sheath.

"Identities!" He bellowed, "Why are you dressed like barbarians, and why are you fleeing the Emperor's legions?"



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Chapter 3: The Emperor's Shadow

The guard dragged Cash and Madison through the massive gates of the Palatine Hill, where the air was thick with the scent of burning cedar and sweet incense. The palace gardens were filled with courtiers speaking in hushed, terrified tones. At the center of the terrace stood a short man with a curled beard, wearing a laurel wreath and a purple toga that trailed behind him on the marble floor.

It was Nero. He didn't look like a grand ruler; his eyes were wide and erratic, fixed on the smoke consuming the lower districts of his city.

"The people are whispering, Tigellinus," Nero muttered to a stern adviser standing nearby. "They say I set the fire. They say I want to clear the city to build my Golden House. I need a target. I need someone else to blame."

Tigellinus bowed low. "The Christians, Caesar. The ones who refuse to worship your image or sacrifice to the gods. They speak of a king who will return in fire to judge the earth. The citizens already detest them for their secret meetings."

Nero's face contorted into a dark smile. "Perfect. Decree it by morning. They are the arsonists of Rome."

The guard who had captured Cash and Madison stepped forward, pushing the two to their knees. "Great Caesar, I found these two near the forum dressed in bizarre garments, carrying strange artifacts."

Nero barely glanced at them, waving a dismissive, manicured hand. "Throw them into the Mamertine with the others. If they are with the secret sects, they will burn with them."

As they were dragged down into the dark, damp subterranean cells beneath the city, Cash gripped Madison's arm. "Maddy, this isn't a game. They're going to kill people for something they didn't even do, a total lie! Why would anyone believe any of that?"

The Mamertine Prison was a damp, suffocating stone vault cut directly into the rock. The air was cold, thick with the smell of mold and despair. Dozens of prisoners were huddled together in the darkness—men, women, and young children.

Cash sat against the damp wall, burying his head in his knees. "Dad always told us that faith wasn't just something you talked about on Sundays. And these people... they're going to die just because they believe in Jesus. Why aren't they fighting back? Why aren't they angry?"



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Madison flipped the page, her face growing serious. "Because to the Romans, the Christians are a mysterious group. The public finds it so easy to believe Nero's fake accusations because they don't understand them. The pagans have terrible misunderstandings about Christian practices."

"Like what?" Cash asked, his athletic frame tense.

"Well, when Christians take Communion, they talk about eating the 'body' and drinking the 'blood' of Jesus. The pagans take that literally and think they practice cannibalism!

And because Christians call each other 'brother' and 'sister' and greet each other with a holy kiss, outsiders think their private meetings are inappropriate."

Madison sighed, looking back out at the city. "Plus, because Christians won't bow to statues of the Roman gods or the Emperor, the Romans call them 'atheists' and blame them for every bad thing that happens."

The scene shifted in Madison's book, showing a vision of what was to come in Nero's private gardens later that evening. Madison gripped Cash's arm, her voice shaking slightly but filled with awe.

"Cash, Nero is going to start the first massive wave of government-approved persecution. Christians are going to be arrested in huge numbers. Some will be covered in wild animal skins to be torn apart by dogs in the arenas. Others will be nailed to crosses and set on fire just to act as human torches to light up Nero's garden parties."

Cash looked at the Christians being led away. They weren't fighting back with violence, and they weren't crying out in anger. Instead, they were praying and holding hands.

"Maddie," Cash whispered, his voice full of realization. "Think about what some kids at school say. Skeptics sometimes claim that the disciples just stole Jesus' body from the tomb and lied about the resurrection. But look at these people!"



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Madison smiled proudly at her younger brother. "Exactly, Cash! That theory has a huge flaw. How does the historical reality of thousands of early Christians willingly going through Nero's horrific tortures show the mistake in that theory? It's because people don't die for a known lie."

"Right," Cash agreed, his spiky hair shifting as he nodded. "If the disciples had just stolen the body, they would know it was a hoax. They wouldn't let themselves be turned into torches or torn apart by dogs for a story they made up. And these ordinary people wouldn't choose unimaginable torture over just throwing a pinch of incense to a fake Roman god unless they knew for a fact that Jesus is alive."

Madison closed the book with a firm thud. "Their willingness to die proves they have an absolute, unshakeable certainty. Jesus really did rise from the dead."



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Chapter 4: Light in the Mamertine

Inside the Mamertine Prison, Madison was watching an older man with calloused hands and deep-set, peaceful eyes comforting a crying child. He didn't look like a criminal; he looked like a shepherd.

"I have been listening to your discussion, children, and yes, we share in a kingdom that is not of this world," the man said softly, turning toward them. His Greek was translated smoothly by the ancient book tucked under Madison's arm.

"My name is Linus. Why do your hearts trouble you so deeply? You are safe in the hands of the Father." He spoke in tender tones that only sparked Cash's interest.

"Safe?" Cash's voice cracked. "Do you know what Nero said up there? He's blaming you all for the fire! They're building crucifixion crosses in the gardens!"

Linus smiled gently, his face illuminated by a single torch hanging near the guard's station. "We heard. But Caesar can only touch the flesh; he cannot touch the soul. We did not set the fire, but we will use our breath to praise the One who conquered death itself. Do not fear what man can do to you."

The absolute certainty in Linus's voice sent a chill down Madison's spine. It wasn't bravado or stubbornness. It was a tangible, immovable power that made the stone walls of Rome look fragile by comparison.

Madison felt a knot tighten in her throat as she stared at the young Roman Christian. The absolute certainty in Linus's voice sent a chill down Madison's spine. It wasn't bravado or stubbornness. It was a tangible, immovable power that made the stone walls of Rome look fragile by comparison.

Standing there in his dust-stained tunic, Linus didn't look like a warrior. He had no sword, no armor, and no 125cc dirt bike to whisk him away from danger. Yet, as he spoke about the resurrection of Jesus, his eyes held a steady, brilliant light that completely defied the terror of Nero's Rome



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Madison had read about faith in her ancient book, and she had heard about it in church back home in California, but she had never seen it like this. It wasn't a hope or a wishful thought. To Linus, the reality of the risen Christ was more real than the cobblestones beneath his sandals or the smoky air filling his lungs. It was an anchor dropped so deeply into eternity that no earthly storm—not even the horrific threats of Nero's arenas—could drag it loose.

Looking at him, Madison finally understood why the "stolen body" theory was so foolish. Linus wasn't risking his life for a rumor or a clever political plot; he was standing flat-footed on a historical fact that he knew to be true down to his very bones. Emperor Nero possessed all the military might of the empire, but as Linus smiled softly at the two time-traveling kids, Madison realized that Nero was completely powerless against a faith this absolute.



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Chapter 5: The Night of Trials

Hours passed like days. The heavy iron door at the top of the stone stairs ground open, and the heavy boots of Roman guards echoed down into the cell. They began calling out names, pulling men and women from the shadows.

"They are preparing the evening spectacles in the gardens," a guard muttered coarsely, shoving a young woman toward the stairs.

Cash stood up, his fists clenched, his knuckles white. "Stop it! She didn't do anything!"

A guard turned, raising a leather lash, but Linus stepped between them, taking the blow across his shoulder without a flinch. He looked down at Cash, his voice steady and commanding. "No, son. We do not meet hate with hate. That is the way of Rome. Our weapon is love."

As Linus was led up the stairs, he turned back to Madison and Cash. "Your garments are strange, and your arrival was mysterious. I believe the Lord has brought you here to see our testimony. When you return to wherever you came from, tell them that the church in Rome did not falter. Tell them we loved them to the end."

The door slammed shut, plunging the vault back into near-total darkness. Cash sank to the floor, tears streaming down his face. "Maddy... I've never believed in anything enough to die for it. I don't think I even know what real faith is until right now."

Madison opened the book in her lap. In the dim light, the pages began to glow with a soft, white luminescence, the lines shifting once again to reveal a passage from the letters of Paul:

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life... will be able to separate us from the love of God."



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Chapter 6: The Secret Assembly

The following night, a sympathetic guard—a secret believer who had been moved by the prisoners' grace—unlocked the rear grate of the cell, slipping Cash and Madison out into the smoky Roman streets.

"Get out of the city," he whispered. "Go toward the catacombs along the Appian Way. The believers who survived are gathering there."

They navigated the ruins of the city, avoiding patrols until they reached the low, narrow openings of the underground burial tunnels outside the walls.

Following the distant sound of singing, they crept deeper into the earth until the tunnels opened into a wide, torch-lit cavern.

Hundreds of Christians were gathered, their faces worn with grief but shining with an unmistakable intensity. At the center stood an older man with sharp, intelligent eyes and a brilliant, authoritative voice.

"That's him," Madison whispered, her fingers tracing a sketch in her old book that perfectly matched the man's profile. "That's Paul of Tarsus. He's under house arrest in the city, but he must have slipped out to see them."

Paul raised his hands, and the room fell silent. "Our brothers and sisters have finished their race," he said, his voice echoing off the stone walls. "Nero thinks he can extinguish the light of Christ by scattering our ashes. But the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church! Do not lose heart. Stand firm in the grace that was given to us!"

Cash stood at the back of the cave, watching the faces of the crowd. He saw no fear—only a profound, unshakeable unity. He realized then that the power of these Christians wasn't political or military; it was the supernatural presence of a living God working through ordinary people.



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Chapter 7: The Choice on the Appian Way

As the meeting dispersed, Paul walked through the crowd, his eyes locking onto Cash and Madison. He approached them, his gaze piercing but kind.

"You carry a long journey in your eyes, children. And you hold the words of the journey," he noted, glancing at the book in Madison's hands.

"We saw them, sir," Cash said, his voice steady now, devoid of his previous panic. "We saw Linus and the others in the prison. We tried to stop it, but we couldn't."

Paul placed a heavy hand on Cash's shoulder. "You cannot stop the storm, young man, but you can stand firm within it. The Lord did not send you here to alter Rome's destiny, but to clarify your own. What have you discovered here?"

Cash looked back toward the dark tunnels, then down at his own modern shoes. "I discovered that everything I thought mattered—sports, being popular, having cool things—it's all nothing compared to this. Knowing Jesus is the only thing that actually lasts."

Paul smiled, a deep warmth filling his weathered face. "Then your journey is complete. Go back to your world, and be a witness to what you have seen. Tell them that the chains of Rome could not bind the Gospel."

Suddenly, a distant shout echoed from the mouth of the catacombs. "Legions! The praetorian guards have tracked us!"



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Chapter 8: The Spark Ignited

"Run!" Cash shouted, grabbing Madison's hand. They raced through the twisting, dark corridors of the catacombs, using the map shifting across Madison's book to navigate the labyrinth before the soldiers could cut them off.

They burst out into the narrow alleyway where they had hidden the dirtbike days before. The city was still shrouded in smoke, the sky a bruised purple as night fell over Rome.

"We have to get the bike started!" Madison cried, throwing her book into Cash's hands while she jumped onto the passenger seat.

Cash scrambled over the frame. He looked at the copper coils on the engine block. They were cold, grey, and lifeless. He didn't have a wrench or a battery, but as he looked down at the moving script in Madison's book, he understood what the energy source truly was. It wasn't electricity. It was the alignment of faith and purpose.

He closed his eyes, pressing his hands against the copper coils. "God, I don't know everything, and I want to spend the rest of my life serving You. I see the truth so much clearer now. Give us the strength to get home so we can tell their story."

A brilliant, electric blue light erupted from his fingertips, pulsing violently through the copper coils. The engine didn't just sputter—it roared with a deafening, resonant hum that caused the stone walls around them to vibrate.



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Chapter 9: The Return to Oceanside

"Hold on!" Cash yelled, kicking the starter one final time.

The alleyway vanished in a blinding flash of white and blue light. The smells of ancient woodsmoke, ancient sweat, and burning marble were replaced instantly by the cool, crisp breeze of the Pacific Ocean. The roaring engines of the ancient city faded into the steady, rhythmic sound of breaking waves.

The dirt bike skidded to a halt on the gravel lot behind the Oceanside secondhand shop. The sun was just beginning to set over the water, casting a warm orange glow across the palm trees and asphalt.

Cash killed the engine. It sat silent, the copper coils now looking like ordinary, weathered metal. He sat there for a long moment, his hands still gripping the handlebars, his shoulders shaking slightly as the weight of the last three days washed over him. Tears poured down his cheeks and the weight of his new understanding fell heavy on his strong shoulders.

Madison climbed off the back, holding the ancient book close to her chest. The shifting geometric lines had finally stopped moving, locking permanently into a classic, beautifully styled script that read:

Acts of the Apostles.

"We're back," she whispered.

Cash turned around, his clear blue eyes bright and focused. "Yeah. We're back. But everything is different now."



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Chapter 10: The Modern Witness

Three months later, the youth room at the local Oceanside church was packed. Cash stood at the front of the room, microphone in hand, a completely transformed expression on his face. He had always been bold in his faith, but now, his faith had been made fierce.

"People ask me why I care so much about studying the Bible, or why I'm spending my weekends helping out at the downtown food kitchen," Cash said, looking out at the crowd of 7th and 8th graders. "They think something broke inside my head like my last slip on my dirtbike."

A few kids laughed, but the room quickly grew quiet as Cash continued.

"The truth is," he continued with a smile, "I understand so much more about faith and it is not just a set of rules or something stuck inside a book. I learned that real faith is a gift that makes worldly empires look small."

"I met people who lost everything but kept their joy because they knew Jesus. And once you see that kind of love—the kind that faces a cross or a prison cell without blinking—you can never go back to living a life without personal faith." Cash gently placed the microphone down on the table in front of him and caught the gaze of his best bud and sister.

In the back row, Madison smiled lovingly at her brother, folding her hands on top of the old leather-bound book on her lap. Its pages completely still now, serving as a permanent anchor of the wild adventure they would never forget. Somewhere deep inside, she knew that this adventure was the first of many to come.



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Write a Response to this Short Story about Cash and Madison:

