

PERPETUA

CHECKLIST: WHAT YOU NEED

- Copies of the downloadable “622 service” and “Prayers & Thanksgivings” booklets
- Copies of the lesson handout
- Copy of the leader's notes
- OPTIONAL: Bibles (ESV or similar recommended)
- OPTIONAL: A white board, easel pad, or chalk board with markers/chalk
- OPTIONAL: Have notebooks on hand for teens to take home and use as prayer journals if they wish

ICE BREAKER: AIM TO ENTERTAIN

In groups of 2-5, ask your teens to come up with a brief skit based on a reality show competition. Depending on how many people there are on a team they may choose to have one or two judges and between one and three contestants. Assign each group a different type of contest (for example, singing, baking, dancing, modelling, etc.), and give them a few minutes to come up with a brief skit that is as entertaining as they can make it. If you have multiple groups, allow them to perform for one another. If you only have one group, allow a longer performance time and the leader can stand in for an audience.

622: BEGINNING WITH PRAYER

Begin the formal part of the lesson by saying together the first part of the order for service for young people in the booklet, up to the middle of page 4.

AT THIS POINT IN THE LESSON, ASK IF THE TEENS SUCCEEDED IN DOING LAST WEEK'S CHALLENGE, HOW IT WENT, AND WHETHER THEY HAVE ANYTHING TO SHARE.

DISCUSSION: JOY AND PAIN

As an introduction to the lesson ask the teens to discuss the following questions.

DEPENDING ON THE COMFORT LEVEL FOR SHARING IN YOUR GROUP, IT MAY BE EASIER TO HAVE THEM VOLUNTEER ANSWERS WITH ALL RESPONSES WRITTEN TOGETHER ON A BOARD.

- If you did the ice breaker: Were you tempted to use “meanness” as a way to be entertaining?
- Do we have forms of entertainment in our culture that are actually cruel?
- What brings you joy, and why?
- Are there things your peers take delight in that you don't? Why do you think that is?

A few things worth pointing out (if they don't otherwise arise during the discussion):

- *Many reality shows feature a “mean” judge, or demean people for the entertainment of the audience. This can be a formula that we absorb without realizing it.*
- *There are plenty of secular entertainments which don't fall into this category. But you will also probably find that your teens can name many musicians who revel in vice and violence, and many shows designed to shame and devastate people for the entertainment of viewers. Perhaps they have personally been involved in a group that took pleasure in planning something that would cause harm to someone else. As Christians, we're not perfect, but we should be different. If we find that we are not, then that's something we should think and pray about.*

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- God has given us a world in which delightful things abound: the laughter of friends, flowers in spring, an affectionate pet, the kindness of strangers, delicious food, beautiful music, anything that has been made with care or done well. See what your teens come up with.
- Beyond simply matters of personality and preference, believers are likely to find that there's a moral difference between the good things that they find pleasure in and the sometimes cruel or sin-prone enjoyments of our non-believing peers. This is an indication that the Holy Spirit is at work in us as we seek to walk in newness of life and find that our hearts, our minds and our lives are being changed to be more and more like Christ. This might show up in the jokes we find funny, the way we spend our money, how we treat others, the music we listen to, and so on.

THE LESSON: HIS SONG IS WITH ME

Lessons 13-42 follow a slightly different format from previous lessons. The story of the saint being studied is interspersed with verses from scripture that provide added perspective. You may prefer to read the lesson text aloud together as a group, or ask the teens to read it silently to themselves.

“Jesus told his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.’”
(Matthew 16:24)

Towards the end of the second century, the Roman empire came under a new emperor, Septimius Severus. The empire was still that vast swath of land from modern day Iraq, throughout northern Africa, and up to the southern tips of Britain and Russia. And it was still a place where the population was kept entertained by the spectacle of cruel executions. Christians were still at risk of being arrested and killed for failing to worship other gods. But during this time they faced an additional threat: new conversions to Christianity became punishable by death.

“And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.”
(Acts 4:29)

Carthage was a major city on the northern tip of Africa in what is now Tunisia, and in that city in the year 203 there lived a 22-year-old woman named Perpetua. Perpetua was married and had recently given birth to a baby boy. She was also a new convert to Christianity and was receiving instruction in preparation for baptism, together with a few others: Felicitas, a pregnant slave, her husband Revocatus, who was also a slave, and two young men named Saturninus and Secundulus. They were all arrested and imprisoned. Much of what we know comes from a prison diary kept by Perpetua prior to her execution. In it, she wrote:

“After a few days we were taken into prison, and I was much afraid because I had never known such darkness. O bitter day! There was a great heat because of the press, there was cruel handling of the soldiers. Lastly I was tormented there by care for the child... Such cares I suffered for many days; and I obtained that the child should abide with me in prison; and straightway I became well and was lightened of my labour and care for the child; and suddenly the prison was made a palace for me, so that I would sooner be there than anywhere else.”

“By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.”
(Psalm 42:8)

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In the end, the martyrs were led into an amphitheatre to be mauled by wild animals and then run through with swords to the cheers of a live audience. But there is more to the story than this, as Perpetua's journal shows. While in prison, Perpetua was given the opportunity to share her faith with her father and pray for her brother. Her witness brought about the conversion of many others, including a guard. She was able to encourage her fellow prisoners. And she was given visions and songs of hope, which actually brought her joy as she faced execution. After receiving one such vision, she wrote, "And I awoke; and I understood that I should fight, not with beasts but against the devil; but I knew that mine was the victory."

*"In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures for evermore."
(Psalm 16:11)*

The concluding narrative of Perpetua's passion was added to her journal by an unnamed editor, who leaves us in no doubt as to how she faced her final moments in this life:

"Now dawned the day of their victory, and they went forth from the prison into the amphitheatre as it were into heaven, cheerful and bright of countenance; if they trembled at all, it was for joy, not for fear... Perpetua began to sing... Thereupon she called her brother to her, and that catechumen, and spoke to them, saying: Stand fast in the faith, and love you all one another; and be not offended because of our passion."

(SOURCE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: DAVID FARMER, "OXFORD DICTIONARY OF SAINTS" | JUSTO GONZÁLEZ, "THE STORY OF CHRISTIANITY, VOLUME 1" | "THE PASSION OF PERPETUA AND FELICITY", TRANS. W.H. SHEWRING, PAUL HALSALL | GERARD SAMPSON, "LAYMAN'S BOOK OF SAINTS".)

Then ask the teens to respond to what they've just read. Here are some questions to help guide the discussion.

- Imagine your catechesis class was arrested and condemned to execution. What do you think you would be feeling?
- What evidence is there that this was not easy for Perpetua?
- What were some of the things that enabled Perpetua to overcome her fear?
- How do you think God might have been at work, in spite of the terrible situation?
- What can we learn from Perpetua's example?

A few notes and reflections for reference:

- *Most of us live in relative peace and security without this sort of threat on the horizon. To be arrested for our faith and facing execution we'd likely be shocked, angry and fearful.*
- *We know that Perpetua was young and close to her family. She had many reasons to want to live, including a young baby. From her journal, it is clear that this was one major source of concern. But she was also candid about the fear that she faced. The prison was hot and crowded. The soldiers were unkind. And she was worried about her child.*
- *Perpetua's account speaks of moments of great anguish but also of moments of material relief – like when she was permitted to have her infant son with her in prison. But more than this, Perpetua was strengthened and even found joy in Christian fellowship, in hymns of praise, and in the special visions that she received.*
- *Though the suffering and death that Perpetua and her companions went through were terrible, God was present with them. They were in prison for some time before their execution, and during that time their faith and fellowship was a testimony to all those who came in contact with them. Moreover, the account that was written and survives to this day has served to encourage and inspire believers ever since.*
- *Perpetua was a newly converted Christian, and yet she was steadfast in her faith. In spite of fear and struggle, she encouraged and prayed for others, sang songs of praise and never stopped pointing others to the one who was able to give ultimate victory.*

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DURING EACH LESSON, IF THE TEENS RAISE THEOLOGICAL OR BIBLICAL QUESTIONS THAT YOU DON'T FEEL CONFIDENT ABOUT ANSWERING, SAY SO, BUT LET THEM KNOW THAT YOU'LL FIND THE ANSWER AND RESPOND AT THE NEXT MEETING.

PREVIEW: AT-HOME CHALLENGE

Take a brief moment to look at the at-home challenge together.

THE WEEKLY "AT-HOME CHALLENGE" IS TYPICALLY A SIMPLE ASSIGNMENT TO SPEND SOME QUIET TIME IN PRIVATE PRAYER. ENCOURAGE THE TEENS TO GET NOTEBOOKS THAT CAN BE USED AS PRAYER JOURNALS. ASSURE THEM THAT THEY WILL NOT BE REQUIRED TO SHOW THEIR JOURNAL OR THEIR PRIVATE PRAYERS TO ANYONE.

Each morning and evening, follow your own rule of prayer.

(IF YOU DON'T HAVE ONE, TRY SAYING THE MORNING AND EVENING PRAYERS FROM THE "FORMS OF PRAYER TO BE USED IN FAMILIES", WHICH BEGINS ON PAGE 728 OF THE BCP. IF YOU DON'T HAVE A COPY, YOU CAN LOOK IT UP HERE: [HTTP://PRAYERBOOK.CA/RESOURCES/BCPONLINE/FAMILY-PRAYER.](http://prayerbook.ca/resources/bcponline/family-prayer))

Review today's lesson. Choose a line of scripture or a phrase from Perpetua's story that you find edifying, inspiring or instructive:

Throughout this week, spend some time prayerfully reflecting on the phrase you've chosen. Close your time of reflection with a prayer of gratitude for the witness of Perpetua and her companions.

- AND/OR -

Take some time to pray through the following collect.

Almighty God, by whose grace and power thy Martyr Perpetua was enabled to witness to the truth and to be faithful unto death: Grant that we, who now remember her before thee, may likewise so bear witness unto thee in this world, that we may receive with her the crown of glory that fadeth not away; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with thee and the Holy Spirit liveth and reigneth, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

(SUPPLEMENTARY COLLECT OF A MARTYR, P. 310)

CLOSING PRAYERS (622 AGAIN)

Close with any prayers that might be appropriate in the context of the discussion of the day.

AT THE END OF EACH LESSON, IF YOU FIND THAT YOU STILL HAVE LOTS OF TIME REMAINING, YOU MIGHT CHOOSE TO TAKE SOME TIME TO EXPLORE THE "PRAYERS AND THANKSGIVINGS" SECTION IN THE BCP (PAGES 39-62, OR YOU CAN USE THE DOWNLOADABLE BOOKLET). AS YOUR GROUP MEMBERS COME ACROSS PRAYERS THAT THEY FIND RELEVANT, PAUSE AND PRAY THEM TOGETHER. IF YOU'RE PRESSED FOR TIME, YOU MIGHT CLOSE WITH THE THEMED PRAYER FROM THE AT-HOME CHALLENGE.

Then finish with the "Grace", the final prayer in the booklet.