

POLYCARP

CHECKLIST: WHAT YOU NEED

- A stack of old newspapers and magazines, scissors, paper and glue. Include popsicle sticks, coffee stirrs or straws if you have them; alternatively use heavy paper
- 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: IDENTITY TOWERS

Before beginning the activity, share Galatians 3:28 with the group. (You may wish to write it on a board):

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Note that St. Paul wanted to make sure that Christians did not pull away from each other by placing these other “identity markers” above their identity in Christ. Ask your teens to point out the specific identity markers that are referred to by Paul, and to list a few other group affiliations or loyalties that people might have.

Provide a stack of old/unwanted newspapers and magazines. Ask the teens to cut them up to construct three-dimensional towers showcasing various groups in society that people identify with and/or feel loyal to in our world today.

IF YOU HAVE A GROUP OF SIX OR MORE, BREAK THEM INTO GROUPS OF THREE TO FIVE AND HAVE EACH GROUP PRESENT BRIEFLY WHEN THEIR TOWER IS COMPLETE.

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: THE SOCIAL FABRIC AROUND US

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.

- In your school (or neighbourhood), how do people group themselves? What “identity markers” are important to the most dominant groups? How do they respond to people that don’t belong to their group?
- How do you fit in?
- Do you think being a Christian should change if and how we fit in? Explain.

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

- Depending on where your teens go to school, they may come up with a broad range of descriptors, from preferred music style to political associations to team involvements.

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- Encourage your teens to be as honest as possible. Chances are they identify with one group or another and have a tendency to join with their own clique in demonstrations of “them versus us” – even if it’s only in the way they talk about others.
- Refer back to Galatians 3:28 (or, if you did not do the ice breaker, then read the verse out). Challenge your teens to remember that our faith in Christ is our central identity, one that should prevent us from turning against others in a way that could harm our witness.

THE LESSON: LOYAL TO THE TRUE KING

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 said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.’”
 (Mark 16:15)*

Jesus’ birth, death and resurrection happened in a particular place and time in human history. It was a time when people from diverse cultures had been united by a common language (Greek). The Roman empire had established political stability and constructed roads so that people and trade moved with ease – from modern-day Iraq, throughout northern Africa, and up to the southern tips of Britain and Russia. This meant that the stage was perfectly set for the Christian message to spread like wildfire: and it did. Both the Apostles and many unnamed believers carried the Gospel with them wherever they went, just as they’d been instructed to do.

*“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.”
 (Matthew 5: 11-12)*

Christians during this time faced great difficulty. Their beliefs were misunderstood and the Roman empire was hostile towards them. In particular, Christians refused to worship the emperor, and because of this they were considered “atheists”. Initially hunted down, it became government policy not to actively seek Christians out, but to put them to death if they were discovered, accused – and refused to reject their faith. The Roman empire was famous for its “games”. For the entertainment of its citizens, animals were slaughtered, gladiators fought to the death, and cruel executions were performed. In light of all this, believers knew that their faith in Christ could lead to a gruesome public death.

*“In your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.”
 (1 Peter 3:15)*

Polycarp was a bishop in Smyrna (modern-day Turkey). As a younger man he had been a disciple of the Apostle John, and had personally met many of those first disciples, men and women who had been eyewitnesses to Jesus’ resurrection. Much of Polycarp’s ministry was spent quietly pastoring his flock and opposing the false teachings which were circulating at that time, until the day when he became a target for those seeking to kill Christians.

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Polycarp's congregation urged him to go into hiding, which he did for a few days. While he prayed and waited, he came to believe that he'd been called to be a witness through his death: martyrdom. So when the authorities came to arrest him, he asked for an hour's delay so that he could pray for the church, especially those entrusted to his care, and then he calmly went with them.

Standing before the faces of an angry mob, Polycarp was called upon to reject Christ. Knowing fully what the consequence of his refusal would be, he gave them this reply: "Eighty-six years have I been His servant, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

Polycarp was tied to a stake, stabbed with a sword, and burned. An ancient letter from the church in Smyrna records his last prayer, spoken aloud, just before the fire was lit:

"O Lord God Almighty, the Father of Your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received the knowledge of You, the God of angels and powers and of all creation and of the whole race of the righteous, who live in Your presence; I bless You because You have granted me this day and hour, that I might receive a portion amongst the number of martyrs in the cup of Your Christ unto resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and of body, in the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit. May I be received among these in Your presence this day, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as You did prepare and reveal it beforehand, and have accomplished it, You that art the faithful and true God. For this cause, yea and for all things, I praise You, I bless You, I glorify You, through the eternal and heavenly High-priest, Jesus Christ, Your beloved Son, through Whom, with Him and the Holy Spirit, be glory both now and ever and for the ages to come. Amen."

(SOURCE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: DAVID FARMER, "OXFORD DICTIONARY OF SAINTS" | JUSTO GONZÁLEZ, "THE STORY OF CHRISTIANITY, VOLUME 1" | "THE MARTYRDOM OF POLYCARP / THE LETTER OF THE SMYRNAEANS", TRANS. J.B. LIGHTFOOT, REVISED R.N. SHROUT | 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.

- How do you think the (Roman) world saw Polycarp?
- How do you think God saw Polycarp?
- What do you think it would have been like to be a believer under Polycarp's care?
- What can we learn from Polycarp's example?

A few notes and reflections for reference:

- *We know that the Roman empire and the jeering crowds thought that Christians deserved death. They dubbed Christians "atheists" because of their refusal to join in emperor worship, and their loyalty to the empire was in question. Polycarp may have seemed like a stubborn old man, refusing to do what could have saved his life, yet perhaps some of those there that day realized that he had something they lacked, something that was worth dying for.*
- *Polycarp died a faithful believer, more concerned with how God regarded him than with how the people in the amphitheatre did. He died giving witness to his belief in Christ – a belief which was proved by what it was willing to suffer. We know that "precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints" (Psalm 116:15), and we all hope one day to hear him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant... Enter into the joy of your master" (Matthew 25:23).*
- *We can see the tenderness of the relationship between Polycarp and his flock by several things. We can see it in their urging him to go into hiding. We can see it in his desire to stop and pray for them as he was being arrested. And we can also see it in the fact of the letter from his church that records Polycarp's martyrdom, so that his testimony-by-blood would never be forgotten.*

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- *Most of Polycarp’s life was not sensational in nature. He pastored his flock. He opposed false teaching. But when the moment arrived to take a stand, he did so courageously, “prepared to make a defense” for his faith and prepared to die rather than “blaspheme” the King who had saved him.*

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 Polycarp’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 Polycarp.

- AND/OR -

Take some time to pray through the following collect.

Almighty God, by whose grace and power thy Martyr Polycarp was enabled to witness to the truth and to be faithful unto death: Grant that we, who now remember him before thee, may likewise so bear witness unto thee in this world, that we may receive with him 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.