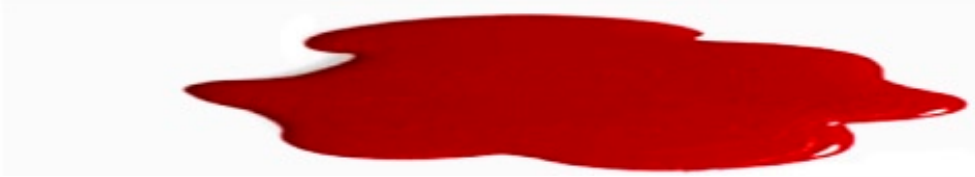


## – RESOURCES FOR OLDER CHILDREN –

(Ann Connan prepared these IDOP Children's Materials)

### The Age of Persecution

Exactly as Jesus predicted, Christians have always faced persecution for their faith. This was especially true in the first three centuries of the early Church. Roman emperors issued laws that forced the new Church into hiding. As years passed, courageous voices rose only to be met by renewed opposition. Though the Roman world allowed for the worship of many gods, it did not allow room for the only true God. Authorities tried to wield a strong sword, thinking that by making an example of some Christians they would sway many from the faith and stamp them out.



Have you ever spilt something, then stood in it? Yes, it spreads! And that was what the Roman persecution of the early Christian Church did to its growth. Weak believers were strengthened by the devotion of those who endured torture. Even pagan officials were converted to Christ because of the grace they witnessed in the lives of these martyrs.

**FALSE ACCUSATIONS!** In the first 300 years of Christianity it seemed that every time society needed someone to blame, the Christians were at the top of the list.

- \* They were blamed for burning the city of Rome, although most believed the emperor Nero himself was responsible.
- \* They were accused of being cannibals because of a misunderstanding of the sacrament.
- \* They were labelled traitors because they refused to worship the emperor.
- \* They were blamed for natural and public disasters because of superstitions.

### Bible Reading

Look up the 1st letter of Peter to the early Christian community. Read Chapter 4, verses 7-19. In verses 15 and 16 find the two kinds of suffering Peter writes about.

- a.
- b.

Peter gives advice to Christians who are suffering. He tells them to:

- v. 7
- v. 8
- v. 9
- v.10
- v.11
- v.13
- v.19

Try to learn verse 16



## The Catacombs

During these early years of persecution Christians were forced underground. They dug miles of passageways beneath city streets and buildings in Rome, Paris, Alexandria, Naples and other cities. The catacombs were first used as underground cemeteries. Christians dug shelves into the walls to bury their dead. Secret worship services were often held in open areas of these complex tunnels.

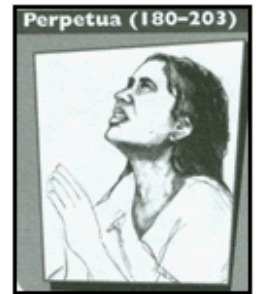


Excavations have revealed many carvings, symbols, sayings and beautiful paintings. The catacombs in Rome covered 350 miles with between two and four million tombs.

## Perpetua

About the year AD 202, when the Emperor declared Christianity an illegal religion, a 22-year-old Christian woman named Perpetua lived in the city of Carthage (present day Tunisia in North Africa). Perpetua was imprisoned with four friends and her baby. While in jail her wealthy father tried to persuade her to give up her faith, but she would not. They were all sentenced to death. The baby went to live with Perpetua's mother.

On the day of execution they were led into a large arena, where crowds gathered to watch as if it was a sporting event. First of all, the men had to face a bear, a wild boar and a leopard as the crowd cheered. Next the women were tortured by a fierce cow. When the crowd finally shouted, "Enough," they were sent to be beheaded. On the way, Perpetua saw some grieving friends. She called out, "Stand firm in the faith! Love one another and don't let our suffering weaken you."



## Uganda 1973



Easter morning began joyously for the Redeemed Church. People began arriving just after sunrise. They came from almost every tribe, from as far away as eighty miles. Most came on foot – old men with walking sticks, mothers with babies on their backs, children with flowers, doctors, businessmen, farmers and government workers. All 7000 arrived with the same greeting "Aleluya, Azukide! He is risen!" They climbed trees, sat on the roofs of trucks, stood in the street. After weeks of violence, they came to rejoice in the message of God's power over evil and death.

The minister closed the service with the words of Simeon, "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace," and after greeting friends went into the vestry to change. As the door closed five men pointed their rifles at him. They were the secret police. "We are going to kill you," said the leader. "If you have something to say, say it before you die." His face was full of hatred. The minister was astonished to hear his own voice saying, "I do not need to plead for my life. It is hidden in Christ. It is your lives that are in danger because of your sins. I will pray to God for you." The tallest one stepped towards him then stopped. The hatred in his face changed to curiosity. He lowered the gun from his face. The others did the same. "Will you pray for us now?" he asked. "Yes, I will pray for you," the minister answered. "Please close your eyes." The tall one motioned for the others to lower their heads too. The minister wondered if it was a trick as he prayed, "Father in heaven, you have forgiven men in the past, please forgive these men and save them through Jesus." When he lifted his head, the men standing in front of him were not the same. Something had changed in their faces. "You have helped us," said the leader, "and we will help you. Do not fear for your life. We will protect you."

Later the assassins began attending church claiming a commitment to Christ. They used their position to help church members in danger and helped many escape from Uganda.



### Think

*Persecution against Christians is as widespread and cruel today as ever. More Christians were martyred (killed) for their faith in the twentieth century than all other times in history.*

Do you think the persecution of Christians will become better or worse during your lifetime?

What form of persecution have you faced for your faith in Christ?

Can you name four Christian friends who might be willing to face persecution with you?

How could you help each other remain true to God?

### MORE STORIES OF TODAY'S FAITHFUL



**FROM CHINA:** I was at a house church worshipping when four officers barged in and stood before me. Though I was frightened for a moment, my heart soon calmed. One of them struck me in the face, knocked me down and then beat me with his baton. He didn't stop until a woman of the church bravely intervened. The officers cuffed me and asked me many questions. I answered with wisdom from God, as promised in the Bible: "But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say."

When Christians live from day to day in a world that hates and persecutes them, it makes a person feel hopeless. But when in the midst of that despair, a believer receives a Bible from someone from a free country, there is a rush of hope.



**PRAY** that the 50 million Chinese who don't have a Bible may be unafraid to complete the paper work in order to purchase one from Government-run churches, so they may be properly instructed, have an anchor for their faith and be able to apply God's word to their lives.



**FROM AFRICA:** Sudanese Christian leaders have been teaching from memorised Bible verses for years. Almost all the Bibles owned by the Christian community were burnt or lost during the war. Life is hard. Happiness is sparse. Suspicion governs each day. More than 200 million African Christians long for a Bible. Some share a few tattered copies, as each person takes a page home to read, then exchanges it for another at their next gathering. Persecution has made the Church grow.



**PRAY** for protection for African Christians and that they will have strength to live out their faith on a daily basis.



**FROM THE MIDDLE EAST:** Recently the Palestinian Bible Society's Bookshop in Gaza was bombed. In the early hours of the morning two cars of masked gunmen kidnapped the security guard and placed a large bomb at the doors. There was a lot of damage, but no injuries. Two months later a bomb exploded just 300 metres from the Bible Society Centre in Beirut, Lebanon.

This was thought to be part of the battle between Islamist militants in the Palestinian refugee camps and the Lebanese army.



**PRAY** for Middle East Christians that they retain their resilience in spite of dangers and that they never lose sight of God's presence.



**FROM UZBEKISTAN:** In the first few years after the collapse of the Soviet Union there was an incredible openness and great opportunities for church growth. But since 1997 it has become much harder. Outdoor preaching and street evangelism are not permitted in this “closed” country. There are limitations on importing and distributing religious literature. For years, people wishing to buy a single Bible have had to first ring a bell at the Bible Society and enter through tall metal gates. Transporting a whole box of Bibles to a needy community can bring extremely undesirable attention from the authorities.



**PRAY** for those who try to supply God’s word to new Christians in Uzbekistan despite many hardships and difficulties.



**FROM ERITREA:** Eritrean security forces began a harsh crackdown against the country’s evangelical Protestant community in 2002, outlawing all churches not under the umbrella of the Orthodox, Catholic or Evangelical Lutheran denominations. Anyone caught worshipping outside government-approved religious institutions, either in church buildings or in private homes, has been subjected to arrest, torture and extreme pressure to deny their faith. Even weddings and other social activities held within Christian communities have been raided and the participants hauled off to jail.



**PRAY** for the more than 2000 Eritrean Christians, including pastors and priests, now under arrest or without trial or legal charges, solely for their religious beliefs, some for more than 3 years.



**FROM INDONESIA:** Into a courtroom filled with shouting young Muslim men walked three housewives – Rebekka, Ratna and Eti – charged with attempting to Christianise under age Muslim children. The penalty: 5 years in prison.

The women were accused of teaching Christian songs, praying Christian prayers with the children, giving them Christian books to colour and giving prizes which enticed other Muslim children to come to the “Happy Week” program.

These three ladies belong to a church in what was originally a Christian town. Some time ago the church was burnt down and a big mosque built on the land next door. Eti’s parents built a house on the church land and that was where Happy Week was held. The locals were happy with the program as most of the grandparents came from a Christian background.

Held in detention awaiting trial, these women showed joy and calmness despite drunken prison officers who often beat the prisoners. Ordinary Indonesian housewives – a Chinese, a Batak and a Javanese – they hope their case will change the law and there will be an investigation into the difficulties Christians face in the building of churches.



*Praise God for Christians such as these!*

## DO

\* Using gold cardboard, markers, stickers, scissors and tape, make and decorate a crown.



Somewhere on the crown write these words from the last book of the Bible, Revelation 2:10c –

“Be faithful, even to the point of death,  
and I will give you the crown of life.”

Keep it somewhere where it will always remind you of God’s promise.

\* With your class or with a friend pretend that Christianity is banned in your town. Make a list of plans to meet for worship, teaching, prayer and fellowship in secret.

- where could you meet?
- how would you protect your secrecy?
- how could you share your faith without risking the safety of the entire church?
- what signals or codes would you need?
- how could you hide your Bibles, prayer books, hymnbooks, communion equipment, etc?