

# When Following Jesus Gets You in Trouble

A curriculum for children for the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church

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# Introduction for leaders

Today is a special day set aside to honor and to pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ who are being persecuted for their faith in Jesus.

Hebrews 13:3 calls Christians to “remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.”

This verse is the focal point of today’s lesson—teaching children the importance of remembrance and prayer for those who are suffering across the world.

While we understand the seriousness of this topic, we also believe in educating today’s youth so they will grow up to be compassionate and missions-minded adults. With a few simple activities, you can help your class better understand the concept of religious persecution and how they can be a part of supporting the body of Christ worldwide.

This compilation of Bible verses, a simulated underground church meeting, a missionary story, and hands-on object lessons will illuminate the topic of persecution while also giving your children a small glimpse into what it may feel like to live in a country with restricted religious freedom.

In many parts of the world, persecution is a reality when people begin following Jesus Christ. **Currently, 1 in 12 of our Christian brothers and sisters worldwide is persecuted.** 1 in 12. Take a look around your church congregation or Sunday school classroom and think about that in personal terms.

How many of your friends or family members would be suffering at this very moment if we lived in a country that was closed to the gospel message?

How many would be imprisoned?

How many would be beaten or tortured?

How many would be abandoned and disowned by their own family?

How many would lose their jobs, denying their family a source of income?

How many would be without a church building in which to gather for worship?

How many would be without a Bible of their own?

How many would be living in constant fear of arrest, afraid of having their children grow up without them?

It’s a sobering thought, indeed.

You have the privilege of teaching the next generation the importance of remembrance and prayer for the persecuted church. Children have many needs the world over, but the biggest is to

know Jesus, no matter what country they live in, whether they have complete freedom to worship or none at all. As we learn about the persecuted church, let's remember that many children are adversely affected by the persecution that is happening right now. Children are displaced from their homes. Children are sold into slavery. Children are orphaned. Children are abused and neglected and overlooked and marginalized in societies that attempt to smother the light of truth with the darkness of lies. Though that light seemingly grows dim at times, it can never be quenched because the One who came to save the world is greater than the one set against him and his people.

Our hope and prayer for you today is that you and the children gathered with you rise up in prayer to push back the darkness of persecution in the name and power of Jesus Christ our Lord. The Bible tells us that the prayers of a righteous person are powerful and effective (James 5:16). So, too, are the simple, heartfelt prayers of children. May you experience that truth with them as you join in prayer for our brothers and sisters across the nations.

## Pre-lesson preparation

*The following object lessons will help reinforce today's topic of persecution. Please note that we have provided more material than may fit in one class period. We encourage you to adapt to your particular schedule. Be sure to gather the necessary supplies and prepare the activities ahead of time.*

## Secret cylinder treasure hunt

This activity communicates the scarcity of Bibles in many countries that are closed to the gospel message. Not only do Christians in places like North Korea, China, etc., seldom own Bibles, in many places it is illegal. If Bibles are found in a person's possession, the Bibles will be confiscated and the owner may be arrested. Often one Bible is shared among many believers, each keeping just a portion of scripture and committing it to memory. Pages of the Bible are quite literally hidden treasures in the hands of persecuted Christians.

### Supply list

- 4 empty paper towel tubes
- 4 sheets of 8 1/2" x 11" paper
- 8 squares of fabric (4" x 4")
- 8 rubber bands
- black marker

### Assembly instructions

Cut fabric into 4" squares, two per tube.

Using a black marker, copy portions of Hebrews 13:3 onto four sheets of paper as indicated:

- 1) *Remember those in prison*
- 2) *as if you were together with them in prison,*
- 3) *and those who are mistreated*
- 4) *as if you yourselves were suffering. – Hebrews 13:3*

Roll up each portion of the scripture and insert it into a tube, then cover the ends of each tube with a square of fabric, securing it in place with a rubber band. Before children arrive, hide the "secret cylinders" in your classroom.

## Persecution and blessing bags

The Bible includes many examples of men and women remembered for their faithful endurance. Some of them were miraculously delivered from trials, while others suffered to the point of death.

All of them were honored by God. This activity demonstrates that no Christian deserves persecution or blessing more than others, and it emphasizes the call to remember and pray.

### Supply list

- small brown paper bags, one per child
- items to represent various forms of persecution (e.g., rope, stones, links of chain, empty bags representing solitary confinement or loss of income, etc.)
- items of blessing (e.g., snacks, coins, stickers, or other small treats)
- lengths of Paracord or similar material to fasten small chain bracelets, one per child
- lengths of small chain to form a bracelet, one per child

### Assembly instructions

Prepare each bag with either a persecution or a blessing theme. Be sure that each “blessing” bag has enough of each item to be shared among all class members: One bag may contain enough stickers for each child in the class; one bag may contain enough coins for each child in the class, etc. Have one of the “persecution” bags filled with enough small links of chain to form a bracelet for each child. Place all the bags in one large container and set aside until needed.

## A sure foundation

Having a firm foundation of faith helps those who are being persecuted to remain strong even when they face arrest or imprisonment. None of us really knows how we would react if faced with persecution, but we can build a strong relationship with God now and pray that we will bring honor to him every day of our lives, no matter what (see Matthew 7:24–27).

### Supply list

- two large containers
- a small pile of sand (placed in the center of one container)
- a concrete block or brick (placed in one container)
- two pitchers of water

Have the containers and pitchers prepared beforehand and stored in your classroom for easy access.

## Remembering the persecuted church

During today’s lesson, dim the lights and gather in a corner of your classroom. You may choose to use a few battery-powered lamps or candles in place of traditional lighting. Instead of tables and chairs, spread blankets or rugs across the floor and sit closely in a circle while using quiet voices throughout your time together. Pretend that you are living in a country where it is illegal to worship God.

# Lesson plans

## Welcome

Today is a special day of remembrance and prayer. It is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church.

For most of us who live in the United States, Christianity is a relatively easy path to choose. We talk of being “blessed” and walk in and out of church doors multiple times throughout the week. Our church buildings are inviting and safe places to gather together and worship. This isn’t the case for many Christians. Their circumstances are very different from our own lives of comfort.

Can anyone tell me what it means to be persecuted? *(Allow responses: to be hurt, mistreated, discriminated against, excluded or left out on purpose, attacked, etc.)*

For many Christians throughout the world, persecution is a part of their daily lives. Once they come to salvation in Jesus, things can become very difficult for them. It’s hard for us to understand that today there are people all across the world who are being persecuted for their faith. In fact, one in twelve of our brothers and sisters in Christ is facing persecution at this very moment. That means that one out of every twelve Christians is suffering—just for loving Jesus.

Think about that in relation to people you know. How many of your friends and family would be suffering at this very moment? *(Allow responses. Depending upon the size of your class, you may take this opportunity to count around the room, noting that one in twelve gathered there would be suffering for their faith. If your class size is smaller, compare it to your church congregation.)*

How does that make you feel? *(Allow responses)*

How many of you have ever had a bad dream in the middle of the night? *(Allow responses)*

Most of us feel lonely and scared when we have a bad dream, don’t we? What do you want when that happens? *(Allow responses: we want our parent to come and stay with us, to be held by our parent, etc.)*

When we are sad or afraid, we want someone with us because that brings us comfort and helps us to feel safe. When Christians are being persecuted, they need to know that Jesus is with them. His presence brings hope and comfort to them even in dark, scary situations. That is why the persecuted church needs our prayers and support. They need to remember they are not alone—Jesus is with them even if bad things are happening.

Persecution comes in many forms. Depending upon the country in which they live, Christians may be rejected by their own family members—either cut off from them completely and forced to leave their home, or held captive within it. Sometimes they lose their jobs and are unable to provide for their families. Churches are burned and Bibles are taken away as Christians are arrested and placed in prison. And sometimes Christians are beaten or even killed because they have chosen to follow Jesus.

Can you imagine gathering for church in your darkened home because it was illegal to meet in a church building?

Or not being able to sing songs of worship out loud for fear of being overheard?

Or having to hide your Bible because you could be sent to prison for owning one?

Or having to have a plan in place just in case the authorities raid your home?

It's a scene that most of us have never even thought of, yet for our Christian brothers and sisters living in persecuted countries, it is a situation that is all too real.

While it is hard for us to think about these sad situations, it is important for us to remember those who are suffering. That is why we are meeting quietly today in a darkened room—to help us remember that many of our fellow Christians are forced to meet together this way all the time, if they are able to gather at all.

We also are free to read from the Bible, but many Christians do not have a Bible of their own. In fact, some have never even seen one! In some countries, it is not just difficult to own a Bible, it is actually illegal. If Bibles are found in a person's possession, the Bibles will be taken away and the owner may be arrested. Often there is one Bible to share among an entire church of people. When that happens, they literally tear pages from a Bible and share it so each of them has at least a small part of the scriptures. They memorize the words, then trade their pages with another person. These portions of the Bible are treasures in the hands of persecuted Christians.

## Secret cylinder treasure hunt

Today I have hidden four secret cylinders containing a treasure in our classroom. Let's see if we can find them.

Instruct children to search the room until all four cylinders are found, then invite them to gather, open the cylinders, and piece the scripture passage together in the correct order. You may choose to tape it on a bulletin board or post it in a predominant place where everyone can see it. Remind children of the special treasure we have in being able to own and read Bibles of our own. Repeat Hebrews 13:3 several times, helping children commit it to memory much like they would need to do if they lived in a persecuted country.

## Hebrews 13:3 and 1 Corinthians 12:12–26

Hebrews 13:3 tells us to “remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.”

Have any of you ever been placed in prison because you loved and followed Jesus? (*no*)

How do you think you might feel? (*sad, afraid, lonely, abandoned, etc.*)



Christians who are in prison also feel sad and lonely and afraid, and that is why it is so important to pray for them and for their families.

1 Corinthians 12:12–26 tells us that we are one body; when one part suffers, we all suffer. When one member is lifted up, we all rejoice.

Let's read about it together: *(You may choose to paraphrase or shorten these verses according to the age level of your children. Read from your own Bible, have children look up the text in individual Bibles, project the verses onto a screen, etc. The following text is from the New Living Translation.)*

"The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit.

"Yes, the body has many different parts, not just one part. If the foot says, 'I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand,' that does not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear says, 'I am not part of the body because I am not an eye,' would that make it any less a part of the body? If the whole body were an eye, how would you hear? Or if your whole body were an ear, how would you smell anything?

"But our bodies have many parts, and God has put each part just where He wants it. How strange a body would be if it had only one part! Yes, there are many parts, but only one body. The eye can never say to the hand, 'I don't need you.' The head can't say to the feet, 'I don't need you.'

"In fact, some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary. And the parts we regard as less honorable are those we clothe with the greatest care. So we carefully protect those parts that should not be seen, while the more honorable parts do not require this special care. So God has put the body together such that extra honor and care are given to those parts that have less dignity. This makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad.

"All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it." (NLT)

Invite kids to quietly raise their hands and wiggle their fingers, then ask them to quietly stomp their feet, then stick out their tongues, then wiggle their noses, etc.

How many bodies did you have to use to make the movements I asked? *(Just one)*

If your body was one big, giant hand, would you have been able to stomp your feet? *(No!)*

What if your body was made up of one big mouth, would you be able to wiggle your fingers? *(No!)*

Just like it took several parts of your body to make all the motions I directed you to make, so it takes all of us Christians working together to accomplish all the things God desires for his body to do. If each of us tried to be like a hand, then how would we move from place to place? If all of us desired to be one, big eye, then how could we speak of the wonderful things God has done?

God has put all of us together just the way he desired. The eye can never say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” and the ear would not say to the foot, “I have no use for you!” It takes all the parts working together, relying on each other to accomplish each specific task.

If I cut off your hand, would your body hurt? (Yes!)

Persecuted Christians in other countries and Christians like us who live with the freedom to worship God openly are not two separate bodies; rather we are one body. Just like our physical bodies hurt when our hands or feet are hurting, the body of Christ hurts when brothers and sisters in other countries are being persecuted because of their faith in Jesus. The persecuted church needs us who are free to support them and, most importantly, to pray for them.

A Christian missionary named Brother Andrew once said, “Our prayers can go where we cannot... There are no borders, no prison walls, no doors that are closed to us when we pray.”

That’s pretty awesome to think that our prayers can reach across continents and beyond prison doors—all because God’s Spirit can be everywhere, with every Christian at the same time!

## Prayer

Let’s pray together now as we remember those who are persecuted. (Invite children to pray for persecuted Christians. Ask God to comfort those who are hurting, provide for those who are without jobs, free those who are being held in prison, strengthen those who are afraid, etc.)

Thank you for praying with me! I know God heard our prayers and that people were encouraged right now because you remembered them and cared enough to pray for them!

## Missionary Moment

Here’s a story that tells us how important it is for those who are persecuted to know that they have not been forgotten:

The government in North Korea regularly arrests, imprisons, and kills Christians. In spite of this, the gospel continues to spread.

One method of sharing the Good News of salvation in Jesus is the gospel balloon. When the wind is favorable, Christians in a neighboring country launch balloons printed with the gospel message. The balloons eventually deflate and float down to be found by the North Koreans.

One day a young girl found one of these balloons and ran to ask her grandmother what it was. When the grandmother saw the orange plastic and read the words printed on the balloon, she began to weep. Clutching the balloon to her heart, she cried, “I thought they had forgotten us.”

Through the balloon, her hope was restored.

How do you think the grandmother felt when she realized Christians in other countries cared enough to send the gospel message into her own country? *(Allow responses)*

If you lived in a county that persecuted Christians, how do you think you would feel knowing that other Christians were praying for you? *(Allow responses)*

God sees and remembers every person who is suffering, and he always hears our prayers. That's why it is so important to remember to pray for persecuted believers.

(You can read more about this particular story at [advancingnativemissions.com/christians-north-korea-forgotten](http://advancingnativemissions.com/christians-north-korea-forgotten) or check out similar articles @ [advancingnativemissions.com/tag/persecuted-church](http://advancingnativemissions.com/tag/persecuted-church).)

## Bible truth

Persecution of Christians is not a new thing. In fact, Jesus himself was familiar with suffering at the hands of the very people he came to save. Even though Jesus was the Son of God, he was falsely accused of all sorts of crimes, deserted by his friends, spit upon, beaten, whipped, and nailed to a cross by those who refused to believe and accept his message of love and salvation.

How do you think Jesus felt when he was being hurt by the very people he loved so much? *(Allow responses)*

How did Jesus respond to those who hurt him? Did he get angry and yell at them? *(No, he loved and forgave them. "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. – 1 Peter 2:23; Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." – Luke 23:34)*

Jesus' suffering was a blessing in disguise. His death led to his resurrection from the grave and complete victory over sin and death. Because Jesus was willing to suffer and to die for all of mankind, we can be saved and receive eternal life when we choose to believe in him. His power is greater than any sin and suffering!

Rather than respond in anger and hatred like those who are persecuting Christians, Jesus challenges us to act like him. He tells us to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matthew 5:44–45)."

Do you think it was hard for Jesus to respond with love and forgiveness? *(Allow responses)*

Do you think it is hard for Christians who are being persecuted to respond with love and forgiveness? *(Allow responses)*

Why do you think Jesus wants us to pray for those who persecute us? *(Our prayers invite God into our situation; God loves the persecutors and wants them to know and to receive his love in return; God wants our hearts to stay soft and filled with his mercy; etc.)*

Even in the midst of persecution, God is concerned about those who do not believe in him. He actually uses these hard times to allow people to have opportunity to hear about the good news of salvation in Jesus.

## Persecution and blessing bags

*Bring out the container filled with the “blessing” and “persecution” bags and invite children to take turns choosing a bag. Have them wait and open their bags at the same time, then discuss the differences in the items each child received, noting the significance of the items and what they represent. (i.e., prison, lack of income, solitary confinement, beatings, etc.) Allow children to share how they felt when they opened their bags.*

Some of you received a “persecution” bag. These bags are meant to make you feel sad, not special. Others of you have received a “blessing” bag. You were blessed with a special treat.

Did any of you do anything bad to receive the “persecution” bags? (No)

Did any of you do anything good that means you deserved to receive the “blessing” bag? (No)

Christians are being persecuted in many places of the world, but we are not. Those Christians did not do anything bad to deserve to be punished, and we did not do anything good to deserve to escape the same suffering they are experiencing.

What should we do with our blessings? (*Share with those who did not receive them*)

*Encourage children who have the “blessing” bags to share their treats with those who received the “persecution” bags, reminding them that we who are free and have resources are called to help those in need.*

None of us have suffered to the point of being beaten or imprisoned because of our faith, but some people have. There are people who need our prayers so they remain encouraged and faithful in standing strong in Jesus.

How can we help to ease the burden of the persecuted church? (*Allow responses: pray, share our resources, learn about the persecuted church and missions, etc.*)

A good place to start is with our verse from Hebrews 13:3. Let’s say it together: “Remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.”

*Gather the lengths of small chains from the “persecution” bag and bring out the Paracord to help children assemble bracelets.*

We are making these chain bracelets as a way to help us remember the persecuted church. I encourage you to wear your bracelets this week as a reminder to pray for those who are suffering because of their faith in Jesus.

You may be wondering how so many Christians throughout the world live every day of their lives in constant fear of persecution. How are they able to remain faithful to Jesus when the risk of doing so comes at such a high cost?

The Bible tells us that it is only by God's grace that we are saved, and it is that same grace that keeps us strong in him when times of trials and persecutions come. Those who believe in Jesus have a hope that goes beyond this life. While the fear they live with may be very real, persecuted Christians are finding that God's love is stronger than anything they face—even death. Because of their trust in him, they continue to believe and share the gospel boldly.

## A sure foundation

We never know what life will hold, but we are certain that it will bring some stormy weather. One of the stories Jesus told reminds us of the importance of building our life on the solid foundation of faith so we will be able to stand strong, even when hard times come our way.

Listen to Jesus's words from Matthew 7:24–27:

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

*Set out the container with the pile of sand as you compare it to the foolish man who built his house (faith) upon sand (things of this world that are fleeting).*

### Discuss

What are some things in this world people rely upon? (*money, good jobs, a career that makes them feel important, power, entertainment, nice cars, a comfortable house, having nice things, etc.*)

None of these things in and of themselves is bad, but if we are placing our trust in them instead of in God, will they hold us steady when trials come our way? (*No!*)

*Invite a volunteer to pour a pitcher of water (representing troubles or storms of life) over the sand (representing the things of this world).*

What happened to the pile of sand when the water was poured over it? (*It was moved, washed away*)

Sometimes storms come into our lives, like the persecution that comes against Christians in other countries.

What are some storms that come into your lives? (*Allow responses*)

What happens to us when the storms come if we don't have our lives built upon faith in Jesus? (*We will be like the sand; we won't have the strength to stand firm; etc.*)

*Set out the container with the block and discuss how building our house (faith) upon the rock (Jesus) is a wise thing to do, then invite a volunteer to pour the second pitcher of water over the block.*

What happened to the block when the storms of life washed over it? *(It did not move at all)*

Did the block still get wet? *(Yes)*

Just like the block got wet, the storms of life will always affect us. We may feel hurt or pain, but we do not have to be destroyed by it.

What will happen to the block if we allow it to sit for several hours in the sunshine? *(It will eventually dry completely)*

If we stay close to Jesus and soak in his love, then we will be able to recover from every storm of life that comes our way. Christians who are persecuted because of their faith in Jesus may suffer great hurts in this life; some may even lose their lives in this world, **but** they are guaranteed eternal life with God in heaven. That means they will never really be destroyed.

No one can take away the faith we have or the rewards of following Jesus. No one can ever destroy a person whose faith is built upon the rock of Jesus Christ. They can never be moved from the grip of eternal life with God. Now that's a faith worth building upon!

## **Prayer**

We are free to gather and worship the One True God without fear, so we should take advantage of that privilege. Let's end our time today thanking God for Jesus, the solid Rock, and ask him to help persecuted Christians stand strong in their faith.

*Close in prayer.*

## Invitation to connect and collect

In addition to praying, there are also other ways for kids to get involved, learn about missionaries who may be enduring persecution, and care for their needs. We provide many opportunities:

**Adventure Packs:** Gather items to help care for refugees who have been forced to flee their country due to religious persecution.

[advancingnativemissions.com/packs](http://advancingnativemissions.com/packs)

**Bibles:** Collect money to send Bibles to people who have never had them.

[advancingnativemissions.com/cause/bibles](http://advancingnativemissions.com/cause/bibles)

**Read:** You can find more stories of Christians who are standing faithfully for Jesus and are sharing the good news of salvation across the nations at [advancingnativemissions.com/blog](http://advancingnativemissions.com/blog).

The World Watch List ranks the 50 countries where Christians face the greatest persecution. Learn about their suffering and pray for a different country each week:

<https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/>.