

Counted Worthy

Jesus Freaks, the book of martyrs from dc Talk and The Voice of the Martyrs, read beside Foxe, the oldest accounts and the Bible in six sessions

“Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.”

ACTS 5:41

dc Talk Toby McKeehan, Michael Tait and Kevin Max; authors with The Voice of the Martyrs

The Voice of the Martyrs Ministry to persecuted Christians founded by Richard and Sabina Wurmbrand in 1967; co-author

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dc Talk, Jesus Freak (ForeFront Records, 1995) August 1, 1995 · 4:22

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

In 1995 dc Talk sang that they did not care if people called them a Jesus freak. In 1999 they and The Voice of the Martyrs published *Jesus Freaks*, a book of martyr stories for teenagers, and said the title belonged first to the people who died for Jesus. This study opens that book in six sessions and reads it beside the Bible, beside John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, and beside the oldest accounts we have.

You will meet Stephen, Polycarp and Perpetua, a blind woman in Derby who paid pennies to hear the New Testament, a Romanian pastor who spent fourteen years in prison, and a girl at Columbine whose story is more complicated than the one you may have heard. Some of what the book says holds up. Some of it needs correcting, and this study says where. Scripture is the authority here, not the book, and not this study.

You need a Bible, a pen, a notebook and an internet connection. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, Perpetua's diary and Foxe are all free online, and the sources at the end tell you where. Take one session a week, in three sittings. Several sessions describe violence; each has a care note written for you.

Each session moves the same way. **What Was Said** summarizes that part of the story with quotes, word for word. **Into the Text** sets out the passages in full with a short commentary and, where the Greek or Hebrew opens something up, a word study. **Go Deeper** gives cross-references, a Bible story, a moment from church history and a book. **Hold It Carefully** names the real tension and where faithful Christians disagree. Then **Reflect**: prompts for your journal, one thing to practice this week, and a prayer to pray.

A RHYTHM FOR ONE

Day 1, 20 to 30 min Read the story

Read the summary and the quotes slowly. Then open the primary source named in the session (Acts, the Martyrdom of Polycarp, Foxe or Tortured for Christ) and read the passage for yourself. Write down the one line that stopped you.

Day 1, 10 min

What was said

Mark the quote you want to underline and the one you want to argue with. Write one sentence about each.

Day 2, 30 min

Into the text

Read each passage aloud with a pen in your hand. Read the commentary and the word study after the passage, not before. When you finish each passage, write one sentence back to God.

Day 2, 5 min

Memory verse

Copy the memory verse onto a card. Keep it where you eat, and read it at every meal until the next session.

Day 3, 15 min

Hold it carefully

Read it through. Where a story needs correcting, write the true version in your own words. Where you disagree with the study, write down why and name the verse you are standing on.

Day 3, 20 min

Reflect

Answer the journal prompts by hand. If time is short, answer three. The prompt you want to skip is usually the one that matters.

Day 3, 5 min

Practice and pray

Put the practice on your calendar with a day and a time. Pray the session prayer aloud. Say the memory verse without looking.

NOTES ON THE TEXT

THE BOOK, RETOLD

Jesus Freaks is a copyrighted book, and this study does not reproduce it. When we say “*Jesus Freaks* tells the story of...,” the retelling is ours. Page numbers refer to the 1999 Albury edition, taken from *The Voice of the Martyrs’* free study guide to the book, which we quote briefly and by session. The 2020 revised edition may differ.

THE SONG

“Jesus Freak” is copyrighted, and this study quotes none of its lyrics beyond the title. Session 1 describes the song and links to the official video on dc Talk’s channel.

HISTORICAL QUOTATIONS

The words of the martyrs come from the oldest sources we could fetch and check: the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* and the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* in the public-domain Ante-Nicene Fathers translations, John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, and Richard Wurmbrand's *Tortured for Christ*. Each quote is cited by chapter, section or page. Old spellings are kept as printed, including "Saviour," "driveth" and "plough." Where Foxe's editions differ, the study says which one it quotes.

SCRIPTURE

All Scripture is quoted from the ESV. When a speaker or an old source quotes a verse from another translation, the study says so.

CHECKING CLAIMS

Every historical claim the study relies on was checked against the sources listed at the end. "Listening with Discernment" includes a table of the book's main factual claims and how each one holds up. Testimony is received as testimony. Where the witnesses disagree, as at Columbine, the study says what the closest witnesses reported.

What Is a Jesus Freak?

A grunge anthem in 1995, a book of martyrs in 1999, and a much older word: fools for Christ.

FROM THE BOOK	START HERE	MEMORY VERSE
The song “Jesus Freak” and the idea behind the book	Read this part	Romans 1:16

WHAT WAS SAID

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a wave of young converts came to Christ out of the counterculture on the West Coast. The Jesus movement had arrived, and the culture had a name for its people: Jesus freaks. The label was often meant as an insult. Many of the converts took it and wore it.

Twenty-five years later, a trio from Liberty University picked the word up again. On August 1, 1995, dc Talk released “Jesus Freak,” the lead single from their fourth album. Toby McKeehan wrote it with Mark Heimermann. The sound was grunge and rap rock, loud and distorted, and the message was plain: I belong to Jesus, and I do not care what that makes me in your eyes. The album *Jesus Freak* followed on November 21, 1995, on ForeFront Records. It won the 1997 Grammy for Best Rock Gospel Album.

Then McKeehan started reading martyr stories. In 1999 dc Talk and The Voice of the Martyrs published *Jesus Freaks: Stories of Those Who Stood for Jesus, the Ultimate Jesus Freaks*. It is a teenager’s book of martyrs: short, blunt stories of believers from Stephen to the 1990s who would not deny Christ, many of the older ones drawn from John Foxe. The Voice of the Martyrs’ own study guide for the book defines a Jesus freak as someone who commits wholeheartedly to Christ “without apology or compromise.” The subtitle says who the label belongs to first: those who stood for Jesus, “the ultimate Jesus freaks.”

The idea is older than the 1960s. Paul called himself and the apostles “fools for Christ’s sake.” Jesus’ own family went to seize him because people said, “He is out of his mind.” The council looked at Peter and John and saw “uneducated, common men” who had been with Jesus. A Jesus freak is not a style. It is a person the world cannot explain without Jesus.

“I looked up the word freak ... It said ‘an ardent enthusiast.’ Then, when I began to read these stories, I realized that being a Jesus Freak is deeper than being an ardent enthusiast.”

Toby McKeehan · to Christianity Today, December 6, 1999

“Someone who commits themselves wholeheartedly to Jesus Christ without apology or compromise (which makes them oddly different!)”

The Voice of the Martyrs study guide to Jesus Freaks, Carol Sallee’s free Bible study written for the book · Session 1, “Freaks!”

“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.”

Jim Elliot, killed in Ecuador in 1956 while trying to reach the Waorani people · journal, October 28, 1949

Two words to define

Freak. McKeehan found “an ardent enthusiast” in the dictionary. The 1970s meant it as mockery. The song means it as a badge.

Martyr. The Greek *martys* means “witness,” someone who testifies to what they have seen. In the New Testament the word is first about speaking. Only later, because so many witnesses were killed for their testimony, did it come to mean someone who dies for the faith. Session 2 opens the word.

INTO THE TEXT

1 CORINTHIANS 4:9-13

⁹ For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. ¹⁰ We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. ¹¹ To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, ¹² and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; ¹³ when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

Paul is writing to a church that wanted to look impressive. He answers with a picture from the Roman arena: the apostles are the condemned men brought out last, “a spectacle” (the Greek is *theatron*, a theater) for the whole world to watch.

Then he says what the spectacle looks like up close. Hungry, badly dressed, beaten, homeless, working with their hands. And under pressure they do three strange things: they bless the people who revile them, endure the

people who persecute them, and entreat the people who slander them. That is the freak part. Not the volume. The reaction.

WORD STUDY: "FOOLS"

The Greek is *mōroi*, the root of our word "moron." Paul uses the same family of words in 1:18-25: the word of the cross is "folly" to those who are perishing. He is not asking the Corinthians to act strange. He is telling them that the gospel will look stupid to people who do not believe it, and that anyone who carries it faithfully will share its reputation.

MARK 3:20-21

²⁰ Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. ²¹ And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, "He is out of his mind."

The first person called a Jesus freak was Jesus. His own family came to take him home. They had heard he was skipping meals, drawing crowds and casting out demons, and they concluded he had lost it.

Notice who says it. Not his enemies. His family. The label that hurts most usually comes from people who love you and want you to be normal again. Jesus did not go home with them (3:31-35). He also did not stop loving them. His mother was at the cross, and his brother James later led the church in Jerusalem.

WORD STUDY: "OUT OF HIS MIND"

The verb is *existēmi*, literally "to stand outside" oneself. Mark uses the same verb in 2:12 for the crowd that was "amazed" when a paralyzed man walked. Paul uses it of himself in 2 Corinthians 5:13: "For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God." The same word covers astonishment and madness. People who meet Jesus end up in one category or the other.

ACTS 4:13

¹³ Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.

Peter and John have just been arrested for healing a man and preaching the resurrection. The most educated men in Jerusalem look at two fishermen and cannot explain them. The only explanation that fits is a person: “they had been with Jesus.”

That is the best definition of a Jesus freak in the Bible. Not a haircut, a band or a T-shirt. A life that makes no sense until you account for Jesus.

WORD STUDY: “BOLDNESS”

Parrēsia means plain, open speech, the freedom to say everything. It is the word Luke returns to again and again in Acts (4:29, 4:31, 28:31). The council calls them *agrammatoi*, “unlettered,” and *idiōtai*, ordinary laymen. Boldness here is not a personality type. It is what the Holy Spirit gives to ordinary people who have been with Jesus.

GO DEEPER

CROSS-REFERENCES Acts 26:24 (Festus: “Paul, you are out of your mind”); 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; 2 Corinthians 5:13; Hebrews 11:36-38; 1 Peter 4:4.

A BIBLE STORY 2 Samuel 6:14-22. David dances before the ark with all his might, and his wife Michal despises him for it. His answer: “I will make myself yet more contemptible than this.” Worship that forgets to look respectable is older than rock music.

FROM CHURCH HISTORY The Jesus movement began on the West Coast in the late 1960s and early 1970s and spread across the country. In June 1971 *Time* put it on the cover. “Jesus freak” came out of the counterculture’s own slang, and outsiders often used it with a sneer. Many in the movement embraced it. dc Talk borrowed it back a generation later.

A BOOK Elisabeth Elliot, *Through Gates of Splendor*. The story of five missionaries, Jim Elliot among them, speared to death in Ecuador on January 8, 1956, while trying to reach the Waorani. Elisabeth later went to live among the people who killed her husband.

I **Weird is not the goal**

A freak, in the song's sense, is not someone who works at being odd. Paul was called a fool because of the cross, not because of his manner. When Christians are mocked for rudeness, arrogance or plain strangeness, that is not persecution for Christ. Peter says it outright: "let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler" (1 Peter 4:15). Make sure the offense is the gospel and not you.

2 **The messengers are not the message**

One of the three voices on the song has since fallen hard. In January 2025 Michael Tait left the Newsboys. In June 2025, after an investigation by The Roys Report, he publicly admitted to about two decades of cocaine and alcohol abuse and to touching men in an unwanted sensual way. *Christianity Today* reported his confession on June 10, 2025.

Name it once, soberly, and do not go looking for details. The men who wronged no one and the men who wronged many all need the same Savior. The martyrs in this book point past every messenger, including the ones who carried their stories to us. Hold truth and grace together: sin is sin, those who were harmed matter, and the stories of Stephen, Polycarp and Perpetua stand on their own witness, not on anyone's tour bus.

3 **Mocked is not martyred**

The song is about social pressure: what people will think and what they will say. That is real, and it is where most of us will be tested. But a raised eyebrow at school is not the arena. Keep the categories straight. It will make you braver in small things and humbler about them.

REFLECT

Write, don't just think. A sentence is enough.

01 Write down every label you have been given for your faith, kind or unkind. Which one stung? Which one did you secretly like?

02 Where do you hide that you follow Jesus? Name the room, the people and the reason.

03 Read Mark 3:20-21. Who in your life would say you are “out of your mind” if you followed Jesus all the way? Write a short prayer for that person.

04 Paul blessed, endured and entreated (1 Corinthians 4:12-13). Think of the last time you were mocked or misunderstood. What did you actually do? What would a blessing have sounded like?

05 Finish this sentence three times: “If I had really been with Jesus, people would notice...”

PRACTICE THIS WEEK

Choose one place where you normally keep quiet about Jesus. Before the week ends, do one unashamed thing there. Then write down what you feared would happen and what actually happened. Say Romans 1:16 out loud before you go in.

PRAY IT

Lord Jesus, your own family said you were out of your mind, and you went on loving them. I am more afraid of looking strange than I want to admit. Make me unashamed of your gospel. Let people look at my ordinary life and see that I have been with you. Amen.

A Jesus freak is a life the world cannot explain without Jesus.

SESSION 02

The First Witnesses

Stephen under the stones, Polycarp at eighty-six, Perpetua with her infant son, and the word that became “martyr.”

FROM THE BOOK	START HERE	MEMORY VERSE
Stephen, Polycarp, and Perpetua and Felicitas (1999 edition pages 37 to 39, 136 to 138 and 298 to 302)	Read this part	Revelation 2:10

A CARE NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

This session describes executions: a stoning, a burning and deaths in a Roman arena. Read at your own pace, and put it down when you need to. If stories like these stir up trauma of your own, tell someone you trust this week. If you are in a dark place or thinking about suicide, call or text 988 (the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline in the U.S.) at any hour, or chat at 988lifeline.org.

WHAT WAS SAID

The Voice of the Martyrs’ study guide to *Jesus Freaks* (1999) calls Stephen “The First Jesus Freak.” Acts tells his story. He was one of seven men chosen to serve tables for widows, “full of grace and power” (Acts 6:8). Accused of speaking against the temple and the law, he preached the longest sermon in Acts, and it ended with the council grinding their teeth. He saw Jesus standing at God’s right hand. They dragged him out of the city and stoned him. A young man named Saul held their coats.

About a century later, in Smyrna on the coast of Asia Minor, the Roman proconsul told an old bishop named Polycarp to curse Christ and go free. His answer is one of the most famous sentences outside the Bible. The account of his death, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, was written by his church as a letter to another church. A note attached to the account dates his death to about 155 or 156. The historian Eusebius placed it about ten years later. He was burned in the stadium. The letter says that as he entered, a voice from heaven told him, “Be strong, and show yourself a man, O Polycarp!” It says the fire formed an arch around him, and that when an executioner stabbed him, the blood put the fire out.

In Carthage in North Africa, around 203, a young noblewoman named Vivia Perpetua, “about twenty-two years of age,” with “a son an infant at the breast,” was arrested with a pregnant slave named Felicitas and several others. Perpetua kept a prison diary, and it survives inside *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*. Her father begged her to

deny Christ. She pointed at a water pitcher. Felicitas, eight months pregnant, gave birth to a daughter in prison after the others prayed with her three days before the games. Both women died in the arena. *Jesus Freaks* retells all three stories for teenagers. The primary sources are better, and you are about to read them.

“Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?”

Polycarp of Smyrna · Martyrdom of Polycarp 9, ANF translation

“hear me declare with boldness, I am a Christian.”

Polycarp of Smyrna · Martyrdom of Polycarp 10, ANF translation

“Can it be called by any other name than what it is? ... Neither can I call myself anything else than what I am, a Christian.”

Vivia Perpetua, to her father, pointing at a water pitcher · Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas 1.2, trans. R. E. Wallis

“The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.”

Tertullian of Carthage · Apology 50, trans. S. Thelwall

INTO THE TEXT

ACTS 7:54-60

⁵⁴ Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.

⁵⁵ But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” ⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. ⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Everywhere else in the New Testament, Jesus is seated at God’s right hand. Here he is standing. Luke does not explain it. Many readers since the early church have seen the risen Lord rising to receive his first witness home. Whatever it means, Stephen was not alone.

Listen to Stephen's last two sentences. "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" echoes Jesus' own prayer from the cross (Luke 23:46). "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" echoes "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34). He died the way his Lord died, praying for the men killing him. One of them was standing right there holding coats. His name was Saul, and God answered Stephen's prayer in a way no one in that crowd could imagine.

"He fell asleep." After a scene of rage and stones, Luke ends with the gentlest word he has.

ACTS 1:8

⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

This is the outline of Acts. And the word for "witnesses" is *martyres*. Jesus did not tell his followers to die. He told them to testify. Stephen was the first whose testimony cost him his life, and from then on the word began to carry that weight.

WORD STUDY: MARTYS

In ordinary Greek a *martyr* is a witness in court: someone who says what they saw. Paul, retelling Stephen's death, calls him "Stephen your witness" (Acts 22:20). In Revelation 2:13 Jesus speaks of "Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you." By the time the church in Smyrna wrote about Polycarp, *martyr* meant someone who sealed their testimony with their blood. The word never lost its first meaning. A martyr is a witness first. The death is the testimony, not the goal.

REVELATION 2:10

¹⁰ Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

These words were addressed to the church in Smyrna. Polycarp was that church's bishop a generation or two later. When the proconsul threatened him with beasts and fire, his church already had a letter from Jesus in its Bible telling them not to fear.

Jesus does not promise Smyrna an escape. He promises a crown. The word is *stephanos*, the victor's wreath at the games. It is also the name of the first martyr. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* says the old bishop was "crowned with

the wreath of immortality” (chapter 17).

HEBREWS 12:1-2

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

The “cloud of witnesses” is Hebrews 11: the faithful who were stoned, sawn in two, killed with the sword. The word is *martyrōn*. They are not spectators in the stands. They are witnesses whose lives testify that God keeps his word. We read martyr stories so that we will run.

But notice where the eyes go. Not to the cloud. “Looking to Jesus.” The martyrs are the crowd that cheers you on. Jesus is the finish line and the one who ran the race first.

WORD STUDY: “ENDURANCE”

Hypomonē is literally “remaining under”: staying under a load without throwing it off. It is the virtue the New Testament asks for most often from suffering Christians (Romans 5:3-4; James 1:3-4; Revelation 13:10). It is not a burst of courage. It is the long, quiet faithfulness that makes a burst of courage possible on the last day.

GO DEEPER

CROSS-REFERENCES

Acts 6:8-15; Acts 8:1-4 (the persecution that scattered the church and spread the gospel); Acts 22:20; Revelation 2:13; Revelation 6:9-11; Hebrews 11:35-36.

A BIBLE STORY

Acts 9:1-19. The coat-holder meets the Lord Stephen saw standing. Saul hears, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” Stephen prayed for his killers. One of them became the apostle Paul.

FROM CHURCH HISTORY

Irenaeus and Tertullian both say Polycarp had been a disciple of the apostle John. If they are right, the man who told the proconsul he had served Christ eighty-six years had learned the faith from someone who had leaned on Jesus at the Last Supper. The chain of witnesses is short.

READ IT YOURSELF

The Martyrdom of Polycarp is about ten pages. *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* is about twenty. Both are free at newadvent.org in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* translation. Read them in one sitting. They are among the oldest Christian writings outside the New Testament, and much of Perpetua's is in her own words.

HOLD IT CAREFULLY

I The church did not want volunteers

The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* tells of a man named Quintus who talked himself and others into turning themselves in. When he saw the beasts, he lost his nerve and offered the sacrifice. The letter draws the lesson plainly: "we do not commend those who give themselves up [to suffering], seeing the Gospel does not teach so to do" (chapter 4). Polycarp himself meant to stay in the city, but at his friends' urging he left for a country house and was found only after a servant was tortured into betraying him.

The early church honored martyrs and refused to glamorize martyrdom. Jesus said, "When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next" (Matthew 10:23). A martyr does not seek death. A martyr refuses to deny Christ when death comes looking.

2 Wonders in the old accounts

The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* reports a voice from heaven, a fire that arched around him "like the sail of a ship," and a stream of blood that put out the flames. The writers say they were eyewitnesses and wrote so "that we might report to others what then took place" (chapter 15). Receive the account as what it is: the testimony of his church. God can do such things. Historians also note that ancient martyr stories were retold and sometimes expanded. You can honor the witness without building your faith on the details.

3 Dates and details

Jesus Freaks dates Polycarp to 168 and Perpetua to 202. The date of Polycarp's death is disputed: a note attached to the *Martyrdom* points to about 155 or 156, and Eusebius to about 166 or 167. Perpetua is usually dated to about 203. These are small differences in a book for teenagers. They are a reason to read the primary sources, not a reason to dismiss the stories.

4 Old hostility, not ours

The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* says "the Jews especially" helped gather the wood (chapter 13), and Foxe's abridged text says his body was burned "at the instigation of the enemies of the Gospel, especially Jews." Read that as a record of a second-century conflict and a later bias, not as a license. Stephen died praying for the men who stoned him, and every one of them was Jewish, as was Stephen. Christians have used lines like this to justify cruelty. Do not.

REFLECT

Write, don't just think. A sentence is enough.

- 01 Stephen saw Jesus standing. When you picture Jesus watching you in your hardest moment, what posture do you imagine? Why?

- 02 Write the sentence Polycarp wrote with his life: "For ____ years I have served him, and he has..." Finish it honestly.

03 Perpetua said she could not call herself anything other than what she was. Where are you tempted to call yourself something else, or nothing at all?

04 Stephen prayed for the men killing him, and one of them became Paul. Who is the Saul in your life right now? Pray for them by name on this page.

05 *Hypomonē* means remaining under a load. What load are you carrying right now that you want to throw off? What would remaining under it faithfully look like this week?

PRACTICE THIS WEEK

Read *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* straight through in one sitting at newadvent.org. Copy chapter 9, the eighty-six years, by hand into your notebook. Then write your own four-line testimony: who Jesus was to you when you met him, and who he has been since.

PRAY IT

Lord Jesus, you stood to receive Stephen. Thank you that no witness of yours dies alone. Make me faithful in the small things now, so that I will be faithful in whatever comes later. Teach me to pray for the people who hurt me, the way Stephen did. Let my life testify to what I have seen of you. Amen.

A martyr is a witness first. The death is the testimony, not the goal.

SESSION 03

Such a Candle

Tyndale's plowboy, a blind woman in Derby who paid pennies to hear the New Testament, and two bishops at one stake in Oxford.

FROM THE BOOK	START HERE	MEMORY VERSE
Joan Waste (1999 edition pages 248 to 249), with Foxe on Tyndale and on Latimer and Ridley	Read this part	Psalm 119:130

A CARE NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

This session tells of people burned alive for their faith in sixteenth-century England and Flanders. If accounts like these are hard for you, read at your own pace and tell someone you trust. If you are in a dark place or thinking about suicide, call or text 988 (the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline in the U.S.) at any hour, or chat at 988lifeline.org.

WHAT WAS SAID

William Tyndale wanted English farmhands to read the Bible in their own language. Foxe tells of a learned clergyman who told him, "We were better to be without God's laws than the pope's." Tyndale answered that if God spared his life, he would make a plowboy know more Scripture than the scholar did. He translated the New Testament from the Greek. It was printed in full at Worms in 1526, and copies were smuggled into England with the pages hidden between other books. Betrayed in Antwerp in 1535, he was held about eighteen months in the castle of Vilvoorde near Brussels. In 1536 he was strangled at the stake and his body burned. Scholars estimate that between 55 and 83 percent of the King James New Testament keeps his wording.

Twenty years later, under Mary I, England burned at least 280 people for heresy. One was Joan Waste of Derby, "blind from her birth," about twenty-two. *Jesus Freaks* tells her story, and Foxe tells it in full. She saved her wages to buy a New Testament she could not read, then paid an old man in debtors' prison a chapter a day to read it to her. When he was sick she paid the parish clerk a penny or two. She learned whole chapters by heart. She was burned at Derby on August 1, 1556.

On October 16, 1555, outside Balliol College, Oxford, two bishops were burned together: Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley. As the fire was lit at Ridley's feet, Foxe reports, Latimer turned to him and said the words England would not forget. The Bible they died for is the one in your hands.

“If God spared him life, ere many years he would cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scripture than he did.”

William Tyndale, Foxe reports his words in the third person · Foxe, ch. XII, “The Life and Story of the True Servant and Martyr of God, William Tyndale”

“Lord! open the king of England’s eyes.”

William Tyndale, at the stake, Vilvoorde, 1536 · Foxe, ch. XII

“she was able not only to recite many chapters of the New Testament without book, but also could aptly impugn, by divers places of Scriptures, as well sin, as such abuses in religion, as then were too much in use”

John Foxe, of Joan Waste · Actes and Monuments, “The martyrdom of Joan Waste, a blind woman, in the town of Derby”

“Be of good comfort master Ridley, and play the man: we shall this day light such a candle by God’s grace in England, as (I trust) shall never be put out.”

Hugh Latimer · Foxe, Acts and Monuments (1583), p. 1794

INTO THE TEXT

PSALM 119:129-130

- ¹²⁹ Your testimonies are wonderful;
therefore my soul keeps them.
- ¹³⁰ The unfolding of your words gives light;
it imparts understanding to the simple.

This is the plowboy’s verse. God’s words do not only reward the learned. They “impart understanding to the simple.” Tyndale staked his life on it. Joan Waste, who could not see a letter, proved it: she held whole chapters in her memory and could answer a bishop from them.

Notice verse 129: “therefore my soul keeps them.” Wonder leads to keeping. People who find the Word wonderful go to great lengths to hold on to it.

WORD STUDY: “UNFOLDING” AND “SIMPLE”

The Hebrew *pethah* means an opening, a doorway. The King James Version, leaning on Tyndale’s tradition, rendered it “The entrance of thy words giveth light.” When the Word comes in, it is like opening a door in a dark room. The “simple” (*petayim*) are the untaught and open-minded, people with no defenses and no training. The psalm says the door opens for them first.

ACTS 2:5-8

⁵ Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. ⁶ And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. ⁷ And they were amazed and astonished, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?

At Pentecost God could have made everyone understand Aramaic. Instead he spoke to each one “in his own native language.” The Greek is *dialektos*, the local tongue you grew up in. From its first day, the church has believed that God speaks the language of the hearer.

That conviction is why Tyndale translated, why Bible translators still work in thousands of languages, and why a blind rope-maker’s daughter in Derby could say the Scriptures were hers.

2 TIMOTHY 2:8-10

⁸ Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, ⁹ for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! ¹⁰ Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.

Paul writes from prison near the end of his life. He is chained. The Word is not. Tyndale spent his last year and a half in the castle prison at Vilvoorde, and his New Testaments kept crossing into England hidden between the pages of other books. Joan Waste was locked up in Derby, and the chapters she knew by heart went into the cell with her.

You can burn a translator. You cannot unprint a Bible.

MATTHEW 5:14-16

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Latimer’s candle is Jesus’ lamp. The point of light is to be seen, and the point of being seen is that people “give glory to your Father.” Latimer did not expect to be remembered. He expected the gospel in English to go on burning after he was ash.

GO DEEPER

CROSS-REFERENCES

Deuteronomy 6:6-9; Nehemiah 8:8 (reading the Law “clearly” and giving the sense); Psalm 19:7; Jeremiah 36 (a king burns Jeremiah’s scroll, and God has it written again); Acts 8:30-31.

A BIBLE STORY

Jeremiah 36. King Jehoiakim cuts up Jeremiah’s scroll column by column and throws it into the fire. God tells Jeremiah to write it all again, and Baruch adds “many similar words.” The burning of the Word has never been the end of it.

FROM CHURCH HISTORY

Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments* first appeared in English in 1563, printed by John Day, and grew in later editions in 1570, 1576 and 1583. It became one of the most widely read books in England after the Bible. Latimer’s candle line does not appear in the first edition. It was added later, after someone reported it to Foxe.

THE WORD TODAY

Ask your group how many Bibles are in their homes. Then remember Joan Waste, who saved her wages to own one she could not read, and paid others to read it to her. The Bible on your shelf was a treasure people died to put into ordinary hands.

I Both sides lit fires

Foxe was a Protestant writing about Protestants burned by a Catholic queen, and his book is partisan. The full story is worse and more humbling. English authorities also executed Catholics: the Catholic Church honors forty martyrs of England and Wales executed between 1535 and 1679, among them Edmund Campion. In 1527 the Protestant council of Zürich drowned Felix Manz for rebaptizing adults. Christians of every tradition have killed Christians.

Do not read this session as a victory for your side. Read it as a warning about what happens when any church takes up the sword to force belief. The martyrs are honored because they refused to deny Christ, not because they belonged to the right team.

2 What the law actually punished

The Voice of the Martyrs' study guide, retelling *Jesus Freaks*, says laws were passed that made it illegal to own a Bible. Foxe's account is more specific. Under Mary, Parliament reinstated the heresy laws, and from January 20, 1555, heresy against the Roman Catholic faith could be punished. The articles against Joan Waste were about the sacrament of the altar. She answered that "she believed therein so much as the Holy Scriptures taught her." Her Bible shaped her convictions, and her convictions were the charge. Tell the story precisely. The truth is strong enough.

3 Courage is not stubbornness

Foxe does not hide fear. Threatened with "grievous imprisonments, torments, and death," Joan Waste was, in his words, "half astonished through their terrors and threats," and she looked for a way out. Then she stood. Faithfulness does not always look fearless. Latimer's own words were "Be of good comfort." He said them because Ridley needed comfort.

REFLECT

Write, don't just think. A sentence is enough.

01 Joan Waste saved her wages for a Bible she could not read. What have you given up, if anything, to have the Word in you?

02 Tyndale's last prayer was for the king who let him die. Whose eyes do you want God to open? Write their name and the prayer.

03 Read Psalm 119:130. Describe one time a verse opened like a door for you. What was the room like before?

04 When you hear that Protestants and Catholics both burned people, what is your first reaction? What does it reveal about how you think of your own tradition?

05 What chapter of the Bible would you want to have by heart if every printed copy were taken from you? Why that one?

PRACTICE THIS WEEK

Choose one chapter to learn by heart. Psalm 23 or Psalm 121 is a good start. Read it aloud every morning this week and write it from memory every evening. If you have a friend who struggles to read, offer to read a chapter aloud to them, the way John Hurt read to Joan.

PRAY IT

Father, thank you for the Bible in my own language, paid for with other people's lives. Forgive me for leaving it closed. Open the door of your words in me and give light to my simple heart. Make me a lamp on a stand, and keep the candle burning in my generation. Amen.

You can burn a translator. You cannot unprint a Bible.

Tortured for Christ

Richard and Sabina Wurmbrand, fourteen years in Romanian prisons, the ministry they founded, and the persecuted church today.

FROM THE BOOK Richard Wurmbrand (1999 edition pages 63 to 68) and “How you can help” (pages 358 to 361)	START HERE Read this part	MEMORY VERSE Hebrews 13:3
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A CARE NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

This session describes torture in communist prisons and the killing of Christians today. The details are kept brief, but they are real. Read at your own pace. If they stir up trauma of your own, tell someone you trust this week. If you are in a dark place or thinking about suicide, call or text 988 (the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline in the U.S.) at any hour, or chat at 988lifeline.org.

WHAT WAS SAID

After the communists took power in Romania, they called a congress of all the churches in the parliament building. Richard Wurmbrand, a Lutheran pastor, was there with his wife, Sabina. He writes that four thousand priests, pastors and ministers chose Joseph Stalin as honorary president, and one after another rose to praise communism and pledge the church’s loyalty. Sabina leaned over and told him to stand up and “wash away this shame from the face of Christ.” He warned her she would lose her husband. She answered him in one sentence. He stood up and preached Christ to the whole country over the radio. *Jesus Freaks* retells the scene, and Wurmbrand tells it himself on page 16 of *Tortured for Christ*.

In 1948 he was arrested. Sabina was imprisoned for three years. Richard spent three years in solitary confinement, was released in 1956 after eight and a half years, was arrested again in 1959 and sentenced to twenty-five years, and came out in a general amnesty in 1964. Fourteen years in all. The government demanded \$10,000 to let him go, and in December 1965 the family left Romania. In May 1966 he testified before the U.S. Senate Internal Security Subcommittee and stripped to the waist to show eighteen scars from torture.

In 1967 he published *Tortured for Christ*, and in April of that year the Wurmbrands founded Jesus to the Communist World, later named The Voice of the Martyrs. That ministry wrote *Jesus Freaks* with dc Talk thirty-two years later. The persecution it was founded to expose has not ended. Open Doors’ 2026 World Watch List counts

more than 388 million Christians facing high levels of persecution and discrimination, and 4,849 Christians killed for their faith in the twelve months ending September 30, 2025. Nigeria alone accounts for 3,490 of those deaths.

“I don’t wish to have a coward as a husband.”

Sabina Wurmbbrand, at the communist Congress of Cults, as Richard tells it · *Tortured for Christ* (1967; Living Sacrifice Book Company edition), p. 16

“It was a deal; we preached and they beat us. We were happy preaching. They were happy beating us, so everyone was happy.”

Richard Wurmbbrand · *Tortured for Christ* (1967; Living Sacrifice Book Company edition), p. 43

“God will judge us not according to how much we endured, but how much we could love.”

Richard Wurmbbrand · *Tortured for Christ* (1967; Living Sacrifice Book Company edition), p. 41

“A lark threatened with death for singing would still continue to sing. She cannot renounce her nature. Neither can we Christians.”

Ivan Moiseyev, a young Soviet soldier pressured to renounce his faith, one of the stories in *Jesus Freaks* · as quoted in *Christianity Today*, December 6, 1999

The persecuted church, by the numbers

Open Doors, *World Watch List 2026* (reporting period ending September 30, 2025): more than 388 million Christians face high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith. 4,849 were killed for their faith, up from 4,476 the year before. 3,490 of them were in Nigeria.

These are counts of documented cases under Open Doors’ own definitions and research. Session 6 and Listening with Discernment say more about how martyr statistics are counted.

HEBREWS 13:3

³ Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.

This is not a suggestion to feel sad. It is a command to remember as though you were in the cell. The reason is simple: “you also are in the body.” You have a body that can be hurt. And you belong to one body, the church, whose members are in prison right now.

Wurmbrand’s whole ministry after 1965 was an answer to this verse. He spent the rest of his life asking the free church to remember the imprisoned one.

WORD STUDY: “THOSE WHO ARE IN PRISON”

The Greek is *desmioi*, “the bound ones,” people in chains. Paul uses the singular for himself: “I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 3:1). “As though in prison with them” is one word, *syndedemenoi*, “bound together with.” The writer asks you to put on their chains in your imagination until you pray like someone who is wearing them.

2 CORINTHIANS 4:7-11

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our bodies. ¹¹ For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

Clay jars were the cheap containers of the ancient world. Paul says God puts his treasure in them on purpose, so no one confuses the jar with the treasure. The eighteen scars Wurmbrand showed the Senate were a cracked jar. What people saw through the cracks was the life of Jesus.

Read verses 8 and 9 as four pairs. Every first half is real. Every second half is stronger.

WORD STUDY: "PERPLEXED, BUT NOT DRIVEN TO DESPAIR"

Paul makes a pun: *aporoumenoi all' ouk exaporoumenoi*, "at a loss, but not utterly at a loss." He admits he does not always know what God is doing. He denies that not knowing has the last word. That is a very different faith from one that never has questions.

ACTS 16:22-25

²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. ²³ And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. ²⁴ Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. ²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them,

Beaten, bleeding, feet locked in stocks in the inner cell. At midnight, they sing. Luke adds a detail that is easy to miss: "the prisoners were listening to them." The worship of persecuted believers is always evangelism. Someone in the next cell is listening.

Wurmbrand and his fellow prisoners made the same discovery. Preaching to other prisoners was forbidden. They preached anyway, took the beatings, and came back to preach again. The jailer in Philippi was baptized that same night (16:33).

GO DEEPER

CROSS-REFERENCES

1 Corinthians 12:26 ("If one member suffers, all suffer together"); Matthew 25:36; Philippians 1:12-14 (Paul's chains embolden others); 2 Timothy 3:12; Colossians 4:18 ("Remember my chains").

A BIBLE STORY

Daniel 3. Three young men refuse to bow to a golden image, and the king heats the furnace seven times hotter. Their answer is the martyr's creed: "our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace... But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." Read the whole chapter.

FROM CHURCH HISTORY

Richard Wurmbrand was born into a Jewish family in Bucharest in 1909. He and Sabina came to Christ in 1938 through the witness of a Christian carpenter named Christian Wolfkes and his wife. During the Second World War, when Romania was allied with Nazi Germany, Richard preached in bomb shelters and helped rescue Jews. VOM tells Sabina's story from those years in its film *Sabina: The Nazi Years*.

TODAY

Open Doors publishes its World Watch List every January, ranking the countries where following Jesus is most dangerous. The Voice of the Martyrs runs Prisoner Alert (prisoneralert.com), where anyone can write a letter to a Christian imprisoned for their faith. Both are free to read.

HOLD IT CAREFULLY

I Persecuted is not the same as disagreed with

In the West, it is easy to borrow the language of persecution for being criticized, unfollowed or outvoted. Keep the words honest. Wurmbrand was beaten for preaching. Believers in Nigeria are killed in their villages. A bad day at work because you are a Christian is real, and Jesus cares about it (Matthew 5:11). It is not the same thing. A persecution complex dishonors the persecuted and makes us harder to love.

2 Love the enemy, not the ideology

Wurmbrand wrote, "Communism is the greatest menace to mankind. I am utterly opposed to it," and in the same breath, "Christ, who is my Lord, loves the communists" (*Tortured for Christ*, p. 56). Of his torturers he wrote, "As they allowed no place for Jesus in their hearts, I decided I would leave not the smallest place for Satan in mine" (p. 38). His aim was to bring them the gospel. It is possible to expose evil without being consumed by hatred. It is also possible to lose your soul trying.

3 A ministry with a point of view

The Voice of the Martyrs began in the Cold War as Jesus to the Communist World, and its early work was aimed at communist countries. Its stories are gathered to move you to prayer and giving. That is a good purpose, and it is still a purpose. Read its reports alongside other sources, such as Open Doors and news reporting, and pay attention to the numbers each one uses and how they define them.

REFLECT

Write, don't just think. A sentence is enough.

- 01 Sabina saw shame on the face of Christ and could not sit still. Where do you see the church flattering power today? What would standing up look like for you?

- 02 Wurmbrand describes preaching as a "deal": they preached, and they paid for it. What price have you been unwilling to pay to speak about Jesus?

- 03 Read 2 Corinthians 4:8-9. Write your own four pairs: where you are afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, and what God has not let happen.

- 04 Who is your enemy right now? Write their name. Then write one sentence Wurmbrand might have prayed for them.

-
- 05 Hebrews 13:3 says remember them as though you were with them. Close your eyes for two minutes and imagine a cell. What do you want to pray now?
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PRACTICE THIS WEEK

Go to prisoneralert.com, choose one Christian imprisoned for their faith, and write them a letter this week using the site's instructions. Follow its safety rules, and do not mention VOM or Prisoner Alert in the letter. Write the prisoner's name on an index card and pray for them by name every morning for a month.

PRAY IT

Lord Jesus, you were bound, beaten and mocked, and you did not revile. Remember my brothers and sisters in prison tonight. Be with them in the dark cell, and let them sing. Make me brave enough to stand up when silence would be easier, and keep hatred out of my heart even toward those who do evil. Teach me to love the way they loved. Amen.

God will judge us not by how much we endured, but by how much we could love.

She Said Yes

Columbine, the most famous martyr story of 1999, what the witnesses said, and why Christians must tell martyr stories truthfully.

FROM THE BOOK Cassie Bernall (1999 edition pages 17 to 19)	START HERE Read this part	MEMORY VERSE Job 13:7
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A CARE NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

This session is about the Columbine High School shooting of April 20, 1999, in which thirteen people were killed. It does not describe the violence in detail, but it may still be heavy, especially if you have lived through something like it. Read slowly, and stop when you need to. Tell one person you trust how it landed. If you are thinking about suicide, call or text 988 (the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline in the U.S.) at any hour, or chat at 988lifeline.org. If you are in immediate danger, call 911.

WHAT WAS SAID

On April 20, 1999, two students attacked Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. They killed twelve students and a teacher. One of the students was Cassie Bernall, seventeen, shot in the school library. A year and a half earlier, after a troubled season with drugs and suicidal thoughts, she had gone on a weekend church retreat and come back to faith.

Within days a story spread across the country. A gunman had asked Cassie whether she believed in God. She said yes, and he killed her. It came from a student, Craig Scott, who was hiding in the library and heard a girl's voice answer the question. Her mother, Misty Bernall, wrote *She Said Yes: The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall*, released on September 1, 1999. It became a bestseller and has sold more than a million copies. *Jesus Freaks* tells it on pages 17 to 19, as it was first reported.

The evidence points elsewhere. Emily Wyant was under the same table as Cassie, looking at her. She said the gunman slammed the table, said "Peekaboo," and shot Cassie without a word exchanged. Emily told the Bernalls before the book came out. A second eyewitness, Bree Pasquale, agreed. When investigators took Craig Scott back to the library, he pointed not to Cassie's table but to where Valeen Schnurr had been. Val had already been shot many times when one of the gunmen asked her if she believed in God. She said yes. He asked why. He reloaded and did not shoot her again. She lived. The sheriff's final report, released in May 2000, recorded no profession of faith at the moment of Cassie's death.

What we know: Cassie died. According to Emily, she died praying. A young woman did confess Christ at gunpoint in that library, and her name is Val. What we do not know is whether any other word passed between Cassie and her killer. The honest answer is that the witnesses closest to her say no.

“Dear God. Dear God. Why is this happening? I just want to go home.”

Cassie Bernall, praying under the library table · as reported by Emily Wyant, Salon, September 30, 1999

“Because I believe and my parents brought me up that way.”

Valeen Schnurr, when a gunman asked her why she believed in God · Salon, September 30, 1999

“A young girl did profess her faith in God at gunpoint, but she lived to tell about it. Her name is Valeen Schnurr.”

Dave Cullen, author of *Columbine* (2009) · The New Republic, September 17, 2015

INTO THE TEXT

MATTHEW 10:32-33

³² So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, ³³ but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

This is the promise behind every martyr story, and it holds whether or not the confession costs a life. Val Schnurr acknowledged Christ, and she survived. Her yes counts before the Father exactly as much as it would have if she had died.

That frees us from needing a death to make a testimony matter. Most confessions of Christ happen at lunch tables, not under them.

WORD STUDY: “ACKNOWLEDGES”

Homologeō means literally “to say the same thing”: to agree out loud, to confess. To acknowledge Jesus before people is to say about him what the Father says about him. The same verb describes our confession of sin in 1 John 1:9. Both confessions are simply telling the truth out loud.

EXODUS 20:16

¹⁶ “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

A martyr is a witness. The ninth commandment is about witnesses. God cares whether testimony is true, and that includes testimony we give about his people.

An embellished martyr story is a kind of false witness. It usually is not malicious. It usually starts with grief, hope and a hunger for meaning. It still puts words in a dead girl’s mouth, and it asks the world to believe something the witnesses say did not happen. When the truth comes out, unbelievers conclude that Christians make things up. The cause of Christ is never helped by that.

LUKE 1:1-4

¹ Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ² just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, ³ it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

Luke was writing about the most important events in history, and he did it like a careful reporter. He went to eyewitnesses. He followed everything closely. He wrote it in order. The Christian faith rests on things that actually happened, and it has always cared about getting the story right.

That is the standard for how we tell every other story, including the stories of our heroes.

WORD STUDY: “CLOSELY” AND “CERTAINTY”

Akribōs means accurately, with precision. *Asphaleia* means security, firm footing. Luke’s logic is simple: accuracy gives certainty. Faith that needs the story embellished is standing on sand. Faith that can hear the correction and still believe is standing on rock.

PSALM 34:18

¹⁸ The LORD is near to the brokenhearted
and saves the crushed in spirit.

Behind every martyr story is a family. Misty and Brad Bernall lost their daughter. Parents all over Littleton lost children. Whatever we conclude about a quotation, we speak about grieving people with gentleness. The Lord is near to them. We must not be careless with them.

GO DEEPER

CROSS-REFERENCES

Job 13:7-8; Proverbs 12:22; 2 Peter 1:16 (“we did not follow cleverly devised myths”); 2 Corinthians 4:2; Ephesians 4:15; 1 Corinthians 13:6.

A BIBLE STORY

John 21:20-23. After the resurrection a saying spread among the believers that John would not die. John himself corrects it in his Gospel: “yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die.” The apostle cared enough about accuracy to correct a rumor that flattered him.

THE OTHER COLUMBINE STORY

Rachel Scott, killed outside the school that day, is also widely remembered as a martyr who was asked about her faith. Her friend Richard Castaldo, wounded beside her, later said, “People tell me I said she said she believed in God, and I can’t remember it.” Her life is worth remembering. It does not need an unverified last line.

A BOOK

Dave Cullen, *Columbine* (2009). A journalist’s account of the shooting and of how its myths formed, including the story of Cassie and Val. It contains detailed descriptions of violence; read it with care.

I Why the story spread

No one set out to lie. A frightened teenager, hiding under a table, heard a girl say yes and believed it was Cassie. Grieving parents and churches heard a story that made sense of senseless evil. Cullen calls it “a simple mistake” that spread like fire. Understanding how it happened should make us humble, not smug. Any of us could have repeated it.

2 A testimony’s power does not depend on our certainty about every detail

Cassie’s story is still a testimony. She turned from a dark season back to Christ, and, by her friend’s account, she died praying. Val’s yes was real, and she lived to tell it. And the gospel does not stand or fall on either of them. It stands on the empty tomb, which is why Christians can afford to be scrupulously honest about everything else.

We lose nothing by telling the true story. We lose a great deal by clinging to a false one after the truth is known.

3 Christians must not embellish martyr stories

The early church kept martyr accounts because they were eyewitness testimony, and it was wary of legend even then. Many later stories grew with every retelling. Some of the most beloved lines in Christian history have turned out to be later additions, as Latimer’s candle line was added to Foxe after the first edition. When a story is too good, check it. When it turns out to be wrong, say so, gently and plainly. That is not cynicism. It is the ninth commandment.

4 Grace for the Bernalls

Brad and Misty Bernall wrote in grief, from what they had been told, and they stood by their account. This session is not a verdict on them. Speak of their daughter with honor. She was a real sister in Christ who died too young, and the Lord is near to her family.

REFLECT

Write, don’t just think. A sentence is enough.

01 How did you feel when you read what the witnesses said? Disappointed, defensive, relieved? Write down the feeling and ask where it comes from.

02 Why might you want a martyr story to be true even if it is not? What would you be protecting?

03 Val said yes and lived. Where have you been asked, in some smaller way, whether you believe? What did you say?

04 Read Job 13:7. Have you ever “spoken falsely for God,” even with good intentions, to make a story better or a point stronger? Write it down and confess it.

05 If you have been touched by a school shooting or any violence like it, write what you need God to be for you today. Psalm 34:18 is for you.

PRACTICE THIS WEEK

Choose one Christian story you love to tell: a testimony, a quote, a statistic. Check it this week against the best source you can find. If it holds up, tell it to someone. If it does not, stop telling it, and write down the true version.

PRAY IT

Lord Jesus, you are the truth, and you do not need me to embellish you. Forgive me for the times I have made a story better than it was. Comfort every family who lost a child that April, and every student who has hidden under a desk since. Thank you for Val's yes and for Cassie's prayer. Make my yes plain, true and ready. Amen.

The gospel does not need our embellishments. It needs our witness.

Would You?

Counting the cost, the “living martyr” life, and loving the people who hate you.

FROM THE BOOK The book’s closing challenge and its call to help the persecuted (1999 edition pages 358 to 361)	START HERE Read this part	MEMORY VERSE Revelation 12:11
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A CARE NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

This session reads verses like “to die is gain” and talks about being ready to die for Christ. The Bible means faithfulness under pressure, not a wish to die. If you have any thoughts of ending your life, those lines can land differently. Please call or text 988 (the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline in the U.S.) at any hour, or chat at 988lifeline.org, and tell someone you trust today.

WHAT WAS SAID

Every story in *Jesus Freaks* presses the same question on the reader: would you? Would you say yes with a gun to your head? Would you go back into the arena? The Voice of the Martyrs’ study guide to the book turns the question around in its very first session: “You may never have to face the decision of whether or not to die for Jesus, but every day you face the decision of whether or not you will live for Him.”

That is the heart of the living martyr. Paul calls it offering your body as “a living sacrifice.” Jesus calls it taking up your cross “daily.” The witnesses in this study did not become faithful on their last day. Polycarp had served Christ eighty-six years. Perpetua had refused her weeping father again and again. Wurmbrand preached in a cell long before he preached to a Senate committee. Their deaths revealed lives that had already been given away.

And the witnesses died loving. Stephen prayed, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Wurmbrand says God will judge us by how much we could love. Perpetua’s last recorded words, spoken to her brother and a catechumen at the arena, were not about her enemies at all: “Stand fast in the faith, and love one another.”

“You may never have to face the decision of whether or not to die for Jesus, but every day you face the decision of whether or not you will live for Him.”

The Voice of the Martyrs study guide to *Jesus Freaks* · Session 1, “Freaks!”

“When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, hanged by the Nazis at Flossenbürg on April 9, 1945 · The Cost of Discipleship, ch. 4, “Discipleship and the Cross,” trans. R. H. Fuller

“I give You thanks that You have counted me, worthy of this day and this hour, that I should have a part in the number of Your martyrs”

Polycarp of Smyrna, his prayer at the stake · Martyrdom of Polycarp 14, ANF translation

“Stand fast in the faith, and love one another, all of you, and be not offended at my sufferings.”

Vivia Perpetua · Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas 6.3, trans. R. E. Wallis

INTO THE TEXT

LUKE 9:23-25

²³ And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. ²⁵ For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?

“He said to all.” This is not a special calling for martyrs and missionaries. It is the basic shape of following Jesus for everyone.

Luke alone adds one word to the saying: “daily.” A cross in the first century meant one thing, and it was not a bad mood. Jesus asks for the death of self-rule every morning. That is the martyr life without the martyr’s death, and it is harder in some ways because it never ends.

WORD STUDY: “DAILY”

Kath’ hēmeran, “day by day.” Matthew and Mark record the same saying without it (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34). Luke, writing for a church that had already buried Stephen and James, makes sure no one mistakes the cross for a one-time event. The question is not only “Would you die?” It is “Will you die to yourself today?”

ROMANS 12:1

¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

“By the mercies of God.” Paul has just spent eleven chapters on what God has done. Only now does he ask for anything. The living sacrifice is a response to mercy, not a way to earn it.

A sacrifice in the temple was killed once. A living sacrifice keeps climbing back onto the altar. That is the living martyr: a whole body, with its Tuesday schedule and its phone and its appetites, handed over to God.

WORD STUDY: “SPIRITUAL WORSHIP”

Logikē latreia can be translated “reasonable service” (KJV) or “rational worship.” *Logikē* means fitting, what makes sense. Given who God is and what he has done, handing him your body is the most reasonable thing in the world. The martyrs were not irrational. They had done the math.

PHILIPPIANS 1:20-21

²⁰ as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹ For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

Paul writes from prison, not knowing whether he will be executed. His goal is not to die. His goal is that Christ be honored “whether by life or by death.” In the next verses he says he expects to stay alive, because the Philippians need him (1:22-25). A martyr’s heart wants Christ honored, and is at peace with either outcome.

“To live is Christ” comes first. If that is not true, “to die is gain” is only escape.

WORD STUDY: “FULL COURAGE”

The word is *parrēsia* again, the same boldness the council saw in Peter and John in Session 1 (Acts 4:13). The fishermen and the prisoner share one gift: plain, unashamed speech about Jesus, whatever the room.

MATTHEW 5:43-45

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

Every martyr in this study had an enemy. The ones the church remembers best prayed for theirs. Stephen did it under the stones (Acts 7:60), and a persecutor named Saul became Paul. Jesus did it on the cross (Luke 23:34).

The last test of a Jesus freak is not whether you will die for him. It is whether you will pray for the person who wants you dead, and mean it.

GO DEEPER

CROSS-REFERENCES

Matthew 10:28; Matthew 10:19-20 (“what you are to say will be given to you in that hour”); Acts 5:41; Hebrews 11:35-40; Revelation 6:9-11; Revelation 12:11.

A BIBLE STORY

Acts 5:17-42. The apostles are arrested, freed by an angel, rearrested, flogged and ordered to stop preaching. They leave “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name,” and the next verse says they did not stop for a single day. That is where this study got its name.

FROM CHURCH HISTORY

Dietrich Bonhoeffer published *Nachfolge* (*The Cost of Discipleship*) in 1937, in the Germany of the Nazis. He warned against “cheap grace,” which he called “grace without discipleship, grace without the cross.” He was hanged at Flossenbürg concentration camp on April 9, 1945. He wrote about the cost of following Jesus years before he paid it.

A BOOK

Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ* (1967). Short, blunt and unforgettable. The Voice of the Martyrs has long offered it free. Read it beside *Jesus Freaks* and ask of every story: what did faithfulness look like the day before?

HOLD IT CAREFULLY

I “Would you?” is the wrong first question

No one knows in advance what they would do under torture, and Jesus does not ask you to know. He says, “do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour” (Matthew 10:19). Grace for dying comes on the day it is needed. Grace for living is offered this morning. Answer the question you have been given: will you follow him today?

2 Not a death wish

The church in Smyrna refused to praise the man who volunteered to die (Session 2). Paul expected to live and was glad to (Philippians 1:25). Christianity honors martyrs because they loved life and loved Christ more, not because they despised life. If “to die is gain” sounds like relief to you right now, that is not a spiritual feeling to follow. It is a reason to reach out for help today.

3 No triumphalism

Tertullian was right that the blood of Christians is seed. But Hebrews 11 ends with people who “did not receive what was promised” (11:39) in their lifetime. Not every martyr sees revival. Not every persecuted church grows. We do not honor the persecuted by turning their suffering into a success story. We honor them by praying, giving, writing and standing with them, and by leaving the outcome with God.

4 Numbers and the 20th century

You may hear that more Christians were martyred in the twentieth century than in all previous centuries combined. The Center for the Study of Global Christianity estimates about 70 million Christian martyrs in history, over half of them in the twentieth century. Those figures depend on a broad definition, and other researchers count far fewer. The suffering is real either way. Quote the numbers with their sources, or do not quote them at all.

REFLECT

Write, don't just think. A sentence is enough.

- 01 After six sessions, answer honestly: would you? Then answer the better question: will you, today? Write both answers.

- 02 Where does Jesus ask you to "deny yourself" this week? Name one specific thing.

- 03 Romans 12:1 asks for your body. Write a list of what that includes for you: hands, eyes, mouth, calendar, phone. Offer each one to God in a sentence.

- 04 Write the name of someone who has hurt you or opposes you. Pray Stephen's prayer for them here: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

-
- 05 Write your testimony in two or three sentences, the “word of your testimony” (Revelation 12:11). Who needs to hear it this month?
-
-

PRACTICE THIS WEEK

Choose one daily practice of dying to self for the next thirty days: rising early to pray, fasting one meal a week, giving away something you would rather keep, or speaking of Jesus once a day. Write it on the card with your prisoner’s name from Session 4, and pray for them each time you do it.

PRAY IT

Lord Jesus, you called me to come and die, and you died first. I do not know what I would do in the arena. I know what you are asking of me today. Take my body as a living sacrifice. Teach me to love my enemies and pray for those who hurt me. Count me worthy to suffer for your name, and keep me faithful unto death. Amen.

Faithful unto death begins with faithful today.

Listening with Discernment

How to receive a sermon, a podcast, or this study without swallowing it whole or spitting it out.

PHILIPPIANS 4:8

⁸ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Paul lists “whatever is true” first. Martyr stories are honorable, lovely and worthy of praise. They are only worth dwelling on if they are also true. This study asks you to love the witnesses enough to check what is said about them.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:6

⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.

Love rejoices with the truth, even when the truth is less dramatic than the story we were told. Correcting a legend about a sister in Christ is not a failure of love. It is one of its forms.

ACTS 17:11

¹¹ Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

The Bereans received Paul eagerly and still checked him. Do the same with *Jesus Freaks*, with Foxe, with every inspiring story on your feed, and with this guide.

SEVEN HABITS FOR LISTENING WELL

I Go to the oldest source

Jesus Freaks retells. Foxe abridges and comments. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* and Perpetua's own diary are the testimony itself. Each step away from the witnesses adds room for error. When you can, read the oldest account, and notice what later retellings add or change.

2 Ask who was there

Every martyr story rests on someone who saw or heard it. Who was it? How close were they? When did they tell it? At Columbine, the two people nearest Cassie gave one account and a boy hiding at another table gave another. Nearness matters.

3 Separate testimony, tradition and legend

Testimony is what eyewitnesses report. Tradition is what the church has long believed, often reliably, sometimes not. Legend is what grew later. The deaths of most of the apostles, for example, are known only from later tradition. Honor all three, and do not present the second or third as the first.

4 Check dates, numbers and definitions

Martyr statistics vary by a factor of ten depending on who is counted as a martyr. A number without a source and a definition is not a fact. Quote the source, the year and what was counted, or leave the number out.

5 Keep every tradition's martyrs in view

Catholics burned Protestants. Protestants drowned Anabaptists and executed Catholics. Communists, Nazis and Islamist militants have all killed Christians, and Christians have killed others. A story told to make your side look clean is not being told truthfully.

6 Retell, do not embellish

When you tell a martyr's story, tell it the way the witnesses did, and say where a detail comes from. Do not add last words, miracles or motives for effect. The real stories are strong enough.

7 Watch the fruit

Do these stories make you love Jesus more, love your enemies more and pray more for the persecuted? Or do they make you proud, fearful or quick to call yourself persecuted? The fruit of the Spirit is the test (Galatians 5:22-23).

THE HISTORY, CHECKED

HOLDS UP

matches primary sources

NEEDS NUANCE

partly true, or true in a narrower sense

NOT SUPPORTED no good evidence, or it points the other way

“Jesus freak” began as a label for converts in the Jesus movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s

HOLDS UP

The term came out of the counterculture and was often used as a pejorative; many in the movement embraced it. Toby McKeehan: “It was a negative phrase back in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s.”

“Jesus Freak” was the title track of dc Talk’s 1995 album, which won a Grammy

HOLDS UP

Single released August 1, 1995; album November 21, 1995, ForeFront Records. 1997 Grammy, Best Rock Gospel Album (GRAMMY.com).

Many of the book’s older stories come from Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* VOM study guide, contents page

HOLDS UP

The guide says material for the book “came from Foxe’s Book of Martyrs and from The Voice of the Martyrs, Inc.”

Stephen was martyred in Jerusalem in A.D. 34 VOM study guide, Session 3

NEEDS NUANCE

Acts gives no year. Foxe places it at the Passover after the crucifixion. Any year is an estimate.

Polycarp was martyred in A.D. 168 pages 136 to 138

NEEDS NUANCE

Disputed. A note attached to the *Martyrdom* points to about 155 or 156; Eusebius to about 166 or 167.

Polycarp said he had served Christ eighty-six years and could not blaspheme his King pages 136 to 138

HOLDS UP

Martyrdom of Polycarp 9: "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury."

The fire did not burn Polycarp, and his blood put the fire out pages 136 to 138

NEEDS NUANCE

That is what his church reports as eyewitnesses (*Martyrdom* 15 to 16). Historians cannot test it. Receive it as their testimony, not as a detail to build faith on.

Perpetua and her companions died at Carthage in A.D. 202 pages 298 to 302

NEEDS NUANCE

Usually dated about 203. The *Passion* itself gives no year; it names games for the birthday of Geta Caesar.

Perpetua wrote final words to her family: "Do not be ashamed by my death..." VOM study guide, Session 9 (pages 298 to 302)

NOT SUPPORTED

Not in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* (Wallis translation). Her last recorded words, to her brother and a catechumen: "Stand fast in the faith, and love one another."

Tyndale vowed to make a plowboy know more Scripture than a learned opponent

NEEDS NUANCE

Foxe reports it in the third person: "If God spared him life... he would cause a boy that driveth the plough..." The popular first-person wording is later.

Tyndale's last words were "Lord, open the king of England's eyes"

HOLDS UP

As Foxe reports them (ch. XII). He was strangled and burned at Vilvoorde in 1536.

Latimer told Ridley, "play the man... we shall this day light such a candle"

NEEDS NUANCE

In Foxe from the 1570 edition on (1583, p. 1794). Not in the 1563 first edition, which says Foxe could learn from no one what the two said.

Joan Waste, blind from birth, paid others to read her the New Testament and learned chapters by heart pages 248 to 249

HOLDS UP

Foxe, "The martyrdom of Joan Waste." Burned at Derby, August 1, 1556.

Under Mary, laws made it illegal to own a Bible VOM study guide, Session 9 (pages 248 to 249)

NEEDS NUANCE

Parliament reinstated the heresy laws (in force from January 20, 1555). The charges against Joan Waste concerned the sacrament, not Bible ownership.

Sabina Wurmbrand told Richard she did not want a coward for a husband pages 63 to 68

HOLDS UP

Tortured for Christ, p. 16: "I don't wish to have a coward as a husband."

Richard Wurmbrand spent fourteen years in prison and was ransomed for \$10,000 pages 63 to 68

HOLDS UP

VOM founders page. Arrested 1948 and 1959; released 1964; the family left Romania in December 1965.

The Voice of the Martyrs was founded in 1967

HOLDS UP

Founded in April 1967 as Jesus to the Communist World, later renamed. *Tortured for Christ* was published the same year.

About 150,000 Christians are martyred every year 2014 edition back cover; VOM study guide, Session 1

NEEDS NUANCE

The 2014 edition credits the Center for the Study of Global Christianity (CSGC). CSGC later gave about 100,000 a year for 2000 to 2010 and 90,000 for 2005 to 2015, counting civil-war deaths. Critics count far fewer. Open Doors documented 4,849 killings in 2024 to 2025.

More Christians were martyred in the 20th century than in all previous centuries combined

NEEDS NUANCE

Not found in the book. CSGC: about 45.4 million of 69.4 million martyrs since A.D. 33, under a broad definition.

Open Doors: 388 million Christians face high persecution; 4,849 killed; 3,490 in Nigeria

HOLDS UP

World Watch List 2026, twelve months ending September 30, 2025.

A Columbine gunman asked Cassie Bernall if she believed in God, she said yes, and he shot her pages 17 to 19

NOT SUPPORTED

Emily Wyant, under the same table, and Bree Pasquale saw no exchange. Craig Scott pointed to Valeen Schnurr's spot. The sheriff's report records none.

A Columbine student was asked if she believed in God and said yes

HOLDS UP

Valeen Schnurr, already wounded, said yes and survived (*Salon*, September 30, 1999).

Jim Elliot wrote “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose”

HOLDS UP

His journal, October 28, 1949. Killed in Ecuador on January 8, 1956.

Turn the same tools on this guide. If you find an error, tell the person who gave it to you. Page numbers for *Jesus Freaks* are from the 1999 Albury edition, as listed in *The Voice of the Martyrs’* study guide.

APPENDIX B

Memory Verses

One for each session. Write it on a card, put it where you will see it, and say it until it says itself.

SESSION 1 • ROMANS 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.	SESSION 2 • REVELATION 2:10 Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.
SESSION 3 • PSALM 119:130 The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple.	SESSION 4 • HEBREWS 13:3 Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.
SESSION 5 • JOB 13:7 Will you speak falsely for God and speak deceitfully for him?	SESSION 6 • REVELATION 12:11 And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.

A PRAYER TO CLOSE

Lord Jesus, your own family said you were out of your mind. Make me unashamed of you, and let my ordinary life show that I have been with you.

You stood to receive Stephen. Thank you for every witness who went before me: Polycarp and his eighty-six years, Perpetua and her pitcher, Tyndale and his plowboy, Joan Waste and her borrowed eyes, Richard and Sabina in the dark. Make me faithful in small things now.

Thank you for the Bible in my own language. Open the door of your words in me, and give light to my simple heart.

Remember my brothers and sisters in prison tonight, and help me remember them as though I were bound with them. Give me courage to write, to give and to pray by name.

You are the truth. Keep me from speaking falsely for you. Let me love the true story more than the better one.

Teach me to pray for the people who hurt me, the way Stephen did. Take my body as a living sacrifice today. By the blood of the Lamb and the word of my testimony, keep me faithful unto death. Amen.

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HELP

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (U.S.): call or text 988, or chat at 988lifeline.org.

RECOMMENDED READING FROM THIS STUDY

John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (1563), known as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*; the abridged edition by William Byron Forbush is free at ccel.org

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dc Talk and The Voice of the Martyrs and their ministries did not produce this study and have not reviewed it. It is written by Cross + Covenant for personal and small-group study.

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