

Module 103: Polycarp

The Martyrdom of Polycarp. Translated by J.B. Lightfoot. Abridged and modernized by Stephen Tomkins.

“86 years have I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?”

Module Introduction

The early church was hated by the society and government of the Roman Empire for various reasons, such as the refusal of Christians to sacrifice to the gods. The Empire went through many phases of demanding that the Christians sacrifice - which meant denying their faith - or be killed. The earliest attacks claimed the lives of many of the Apostles.

This text is the story, from around 160 AD, of the martyrdom of Polycarp, the Bishop of the church in Smyrna, a city in Asia Minor (modern Izmir in Turkey) devoted to Roman worship. The account is in the form of a letter from eye-witnesses to other churches in the area. It is the earliest chronicle of a martyrdom outside the New Testament.

Polycarp was an old man, at least 86 (see part 10), and probably the last surviving person to have known an apostle, having been a disciple of St John. This was one reason he was greatly revered as a teacher and church leader. One interesting feature of the letter is that the writer is very conscious of how Polycarp's death followed the pattern of Christ's. As you read it, look for parallels between this story and the Easter story in the gospels.

1. Introduction

We are writing to you, brothers, with an account of the martyrs, especially the blessed Polycarp, whose death brought to the persecution to a close. Almost all the events that led up to it reveal it to be another martyrdom in the divine pattern that we see in the Gospel. For he waited for his betrayal, just like the Lord did, so that we might follow

him, in looking out for the needs of others as well as ourselves. True love desires not only one's own salvation, but the salvation of all our brothers.

2. Earlier Martyrs

All the martyrdoms which God allowed to happen (remember that the devout will ascribe all things to his sovereignty) were blessed and noble. Who could not admire their honor, their patience, their love for the Lord? They were whipped to shreds till their veins and arteries were exposed, and still endured patiently, while even those that stood by cried for them. They had such courage that none of them let out a sigh or a groan, proving when they suffered such torments they were absent from their bodies - or rather that the Lord then stood by them and talked with them. By the grace of Christ they despised all the cruelties of this world, redeeming themselves from eternal punishment by the suffering of a single hour. The fire of their savage executioners appeared cool to them, because they fixed their eyes on their escape from the eternal unquenchable fire and the good things promised to those who endure - things 'which ear has not heard, nor eye seen, nor the human heart imagined' but were revealed to them by the Lord. They were no longer men, but had already become angels. In the same way, those who were condemned to the wild beasts endured dreadful torture. Some were stretched out on beds of spikes. Others were subjected to all kinds of torments, all in the Devil's attempt to make them deny Christ.

3. The Death of Germanicus

In all that the Devil attempted he failed, thanks be to God. The heroic Germanicus encouraged the weak by his own endurance, and fought bravely with the wild animals: when the Proconsul tried to persuade him to cooperate for the sake of his own youth, he drew the wild beast towards himself and provoked it, in order to escape more quickly from this wicked world. Seeing all this, the amazed crowd of

spectators cried out, "Down with the atheists! [i.e. those who do not believe in the Roman gods] Get Polycarp!"

4. Why we don't encourage voluntary martyrdom

By the way, when Quintus the Phrygian handed himself over for martyrdom with some others, the Proconsul persuaded them to take the oath and sacrifice. This is why we do not approve of voluntary martyrdom, something the Gospel does not teach us to do.

5. Polycarp's Vision

When he heard about this, the redoubtable Polycarp was not in the least upset, and was happy to stay in the city, but eventually he was persuaded to leave. He went to friends' in the nearby country, where as usual he spent the whole time, day and night, in prayer for all people and for the churches throughout the world. Three days before he was arrested, while he was praying, he had a vision of the pillow under his head in flames. He said prophetically to those who were with him, " I will be burnt alive."

6. The Betrayal

Those who were looking for him were coming near, so he left for another house. They immediately followed him, and when they could not find him, they seized two young men from his own household and tortured them into confession. The sheriff, called Herod, was impatient to bring Polycarp to the stadium, so that he might fulfill his special role, to share the sufferings of Christ, while those who betrayed him would be punished like Judas.

7. The Arrest

The police and horsemen came with the young man at suppertime on the Friday with their usual weapons, as if coming out against a robber. That evening, they found him lying down in the upper room of a cottage. He could have escaped but he refused saying, "God's will be done." When he heard that they had come, he went down and spoke with

them. They were amazed at his age and steadfastness, and some of them said. "Why did we go to so much trouble to capture a man like this?" Immediately he called for food and drink for them, and asked for an hour to pray uninterrupted. They agreed, and he stood and prayed, so full of the grace of God, that he could not stop for two hours. The men were astounded and many of them regretted coming to arrest such a godly and venerable old man.

8. Entering the City

When he finished praying... they put him on a donkey, and took him into the city....

9. Polycarp Refuses to Deny Jesus

As Polycarp was being taken into the arena, a voice came to him from heaven: "Be strong, Polycarp and play the man!" No one saw who had spoken, but our brothers who were there heard the voice. When the crowd heard that Polycarp had been captured, there was an uproar. The Proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp. On hearing that he was, he tried to persuade him to apostatize, saying, "Have respect for your old age, swear by the fortune of Caesar. Repent, and say, 'Down with the Atheists!'" Polycarp looked grimly at the wicked heathen multitude in the stadium, and gesturing towards them, he said, "Down with the Atheists!" "Swear," urged the Proconsul, "reproach Christ, and I will set you free." "86 years have I have served him," Polycarp declared, "and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?"

11. More Attempts to Make Him Submit

"I have wild animals here," the Proconsul said. "I will throw you to them if you do not repent." "Call them," Polycarp replied. "It is unthinkable for me to repent from what is good to turn to what is evil. I will be glad though to be changed from evil to righteousness." "If you despise the animals, I will have you burned." "You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and is then extinguished, but you

know nothing of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. Why are you waiting? Bring on whatever you want.”

13. The Fire is Prepared

It was all done in the time it takes to tell. The crowd collected wood and bundles of sticks from the shops and public baths. The Jews, as usual, were keen to help. When the pile was ready, Polycarp took off his outer clothes, undid his belt, and tried to take off his sandals - something he was not used to, as the faithful always raced to do it for him, each wanting to be the one to touch his skin - this is how good his life was. But when they went to fix him with nails, he said, “Leave me as I am, for he that gives me strength to endure the fire, will enable me not to struggle, without the help of your nails.”

14. Polycarp Prays

So they simply bound him with his hands behind him like a distinguished ram chosen from a great flock for sacrifice. Ready to be an acceptable burnt-offering to God, he looked up to heaven, and said, “O Lord God Almighty, the Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, by whom we have received the knowledge of you, the God of angels, powers and every creature, and of all the righteous who live before you, I give you thanks that you count me worthy to be numbered among your martyrs, sharing the cup of Christ and the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and body, through the immortality of the Holy Spirit. May I be received this day as an acceptable sacrifice, as you, the true God, have predestined, revealed to me, and now fulfilled. I praise you for all these things, I bless you and glorify you, along with the everlasting Jesus Christ, your beloved Son. To you, with him, through the Holy Ghost, be glory both now and forever. Amen.”

15. A Miracle

Then the fire was lit, and the flame blazed furiously. We who

were privileged to witness it saw a great miracle, and this is why we have been preserved, to tell the story. The fire shaped itself into the form of an arch, like the sail of a ship when filled with the wind, and formed a circle around the body of the martyr. Inside it, he looked not like flesh that is burnt, but like bread that is baked, or gold and silver glowing in a furnace. And we smelt a sweet scent, like frankincense or some such precious spices.

16. The Death of Polycarp

Eventually, when those wicked men saw that his body could not be consumed by the fire, they commanded an executioner to pierce him with a dagger. When he did this [a dove flew out and] [*this may well be a later interpolation or transcription error] such a great quantity of blood flowed that the fire was extinguished. The crowd were amazed at the difference between the unbelievers and the elect - of whom the great Polycarp was surely one, having in our own times been an apostolic and prophetic teacher, and bishop of the Catholic Church in Smyrna. For every word he spoke either has been or shall be accomplished.

17. The Body

When the Enemy saw the wonder of his martyrdom, his blameless life and now his crowning with immortality, he did his utmost to stop us keeping any memorial of him or taking possession of his holy body. He inspired Nicetes, the father of Herod, along with the Jews to ask the governor not to hand over his body for burial. "They might turn from worshipping the crucified one," he said, "only to start worshipping this one." They did not realize that it is impossible for us to abandon Christ who suffered for the salvation of the world, or to worship any other....

18. Celebrations

The centurion then, seeing the disturbance caused by the Jews, took the body and publicly burnt it. Later, we collected up his bones, more precious than jewels and better purified

than gold, and put them in an appropriate place where, the Lord willing, we shall celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom each year with joy and rejoicing, both to remember those who have run their race and to prepare those yet to walk in their steps.

19. Polycarp's Reward

This is the story of the blessed Polycarp, the twelfth martyr in Smyrna, though he has a unique place memory of all people, being remembered even by all the heathen. He was not merely an illustrious teacher, but also a pre-eminent martyr, whose death all desire to imitate, being altogether consistent with the Gospel of Christ. Having overcome the unjust governor with patience and acquired the crown of immortality, he now, with the apostles and all the righteous, glorifies God the Father with joy, and blesses our Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of our souls, the Ruler of our bodies, and the Shepherd of the Catholic Church throughout the world.

Discussion Starters:

1. "Almost all the events that led up to it reveal it to be another martyrdom in the divine pattern that we see in the Gospel." What are the parallels this story and the gospel accounts of the Passion? How much do you think this can be put down to the creativity of the writer?
2. "By the grace of Christ they despised all the cruelties of this world, redeeming themselves from eternal punishment by the suffering of a single hour." The martyrologies of the Early Church often stress how the martyr saves his or her soul by this suffering. Is it true that a special reward is promised to those who make this sacrifice? Is theirs a surer salvation?
3. The writer disapproves of Quintus handing himself over for voluntary martyrdom. Polycarp actively runs from the soldiers - though only after persuasion (5). Many in the early church disapproved of such self-preservation. What do you

think the Christian attitude should be to death in such circumstances?

4. "Have respect for your old age, swear by the fortune of Caesar. Repent, and say, 'Down with the Atheists!'" By "Atheists," the Proconsul means those who don't believe in gods. Imagine being one of the pagans who witnessed Polycarp's suffering - all because he wouldn't give a sacrifice. What kind impression do you think it would make on you?

5. There are a number of miraculous elements in the account. Do you think it is a case of the story growing in the telling, or do you think the writer is reliable in such details? What affects your opinion?

6. "We collected up his bones, more precious than jewels and better purified than gold, and put them in an appropriate place where, the Lord willing, we shall celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom each year with joy and rejoicing." This is the first record of such practices, and the annual "graveside birthday" services soon developed into saints' days, the veneration of relics and prayers to the saints. Do you think this was a beneficial development in the spirituality of the church?

7. What can Christians learn today from the example of Polycarp?

Bible verses:

Daniel 3:8-30

Matthew 10:16-39

Acts 7:54-8:4

Romans 8:18-25

Hebrews 12:1-3