

CHAPTER 7

THE CHRISTIAN MARTYRS

A **MARTYR** is a person who is made to suffer greatly and who is put to death because of his faith. Even on the pages of the New Testament we learn about some of the early Christian martyrs. As you consider the following passages, ask yourself these questions: How was this person put to death? Why was this person put to death? What crime had this person committed? Did this person die bravely? Was this person afraid to die?

- 1) **Stephen**, the first Christian martyr

Acts 7:51-60

- 2) **James**, the first of the 12 Apostles to be a martyr

Acts 12:1-2

- 3) **Peter**

John 21:18-19 and 2 Peter 1:13-14

Note: Historical tradition tells us that Peter was executed under the reign of Nero. He was crucified upside down, apparently at his own request because he did not consider himself worthy to be crucified in the same manner that the Lord was.

- 4) **Paul**

2 Timothy 4:6-8

Note: Historical tradition tells us that Paul was beheaded with the sword by the Romans about the same time that Peter was killed.

Were there any Old Testament believers who were murdered because of their faith in the only true God (see Matthew 23:35 and Hebrews 11:35-37)? _____

The Age of the Heroes

The first 300 years of the church is known as the **HEROIC AGE OF THE CHURCH**. This is the time when the Church went through the great fires of persecution.

At first it was the Jewish people who were the great persecutors. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was put to death at the hand of the Jews. A group of Jews almost put Paul to death as we read

in Acts 14:19-20. In later years it was the Romans who became the great persecutors. Beginning with Emperor Nero in 54 A.D. and ending with Emperor Diocletian in 323 A.D. there were 10 Roman Emperors who greatly persecuted the Christians. The early Christians refused to bow their knee to Caesar [the name for the Roman Emperor] as the greatest LORD of all. Every Christian knew that the supreme **LORD** was not Caesar but the **LORD Jesus Christ!** (Rom. 10:9)

The first Emperor to persecute the Christians was Nero. “In the year 64 A.D. during the reign of Nero, fire broke out in Rome. For six days and nights the fire burned. The greater part of the city was laid in ashes. The rumor got around that Nero himself had caused the city to be set on fire. This aroused great hatred in the people of Rome against the emperor. To turn this hatred away from himself, Nero accused the Christians of having set fire to Rome. The accusation certainly was not true, but large numbers of Christians were arrested and a terrible persecution followed. Many Christians were even crucified. Some were sewn up in the skins of wild beasts; then big dogs were let loose upon them, and they were torn to pieces. Women were tied to mad bulls and dragged to death. After nightfall Christians were burned at the stake in Nero’s garden (human lampstands!). The Roman people who hated the Christians were free to come into the garden, and Nero drove around in his chariot wickedly enjoying the horrible scene” (*The Church in History*, by B.K. Kuiper, p.8).

It was during this reign of Nero that the Apostle Paul and the Apostle Peter were put to death. Later, under another emperor by the name of Marcus Aurelius, many believers were thrown to wild beasts in the amphitheater as thousands of people watched.

How did the Christians deal with this persecution? Did they band together to form an army so that they could fight against the Romans? Did they turn away from the Christian faith because it cost too much to be a believer? No, the early Christians met cruelty with courage and they met hatred with heroism and they met fierceness with faith.

One example of such courage and bravery is seen in the life and death of Polycarp, a man who lived in the second century A.D. He was arrested and brought into the great amphitheater in Smyrna (in Asia Minor). Thousands of people were there to watch what would take place. The ruler reminded Polycarp of his great age and he urged him to deny his Christian faith: “Revile Christ, and I will release you.” But Polycarp answered, “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He has never done me wrong; How can I blaspheme Him, my King, who has saved me? I am a Christian.” The ruler then cried out to the crowd, “Polycarp has confessed himself to be a Christian.” The crowds yelled, “Let him be burned!” Wood was collected and made into a pile. Polycarp asked not to be fastened to the stake.

“Leave me thus,” he said, “He who strengthens me to endure the flames will also enable me to stand firm at the stake without being fastened with nails.” As the woodpile was lighted Polycarp bravely lifted up a final prayer to his God and finally the flames consumed him. He died in 156 A.D.

Before we start feeling too sorry for people such as Polycarp we need to remember that the fires that this man went through only lasted for a brief moment. When the people threatened to burn Polycarp at the stake unless he would deny Christ, one of his enemies said, “I will have you consumed with fire unless you change your mind.” Polycarp replied, “You threaten fire which burns for an hour and is soon quenched; for you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment reserved for the wicked” (see Matthew 25:41-46). Do these words of Polycarp help us to see who we should really feel sorry for?

Another man who died in these early years of the church was named JUSTIN. He was scourged (whipped) and beheaded in Rome about 165 A.D. His last words were these: “we desire nothing more than to suffer for our Lord Jesus Christ.” Because he was so willing to die the death of a Christian martyr he has been known as JUSTIN MARTYR ever since.

In Later Years

After the first 300 years of Church History a change took place. “Christianity” became the official religion of the Roman empire. Christianity became the “popular” religion and Christians were no longer persecuted. It was also during this “easy” time that the Church became more and more worldly and corrupt.

In later centuries true Christians were again persecuted and put to death in different countries and at different times. Often it was “religious” people who became the greatest persecutors of Christians. For many years the Roman Catholic church would put to death hundreds of true believers whom they considered “heretics.” The “heretic” was often tortured and burned at the stake. At other times “heathen” people would be the great persecutors. The true Christians met many enemies wherever they went.

There is a book which has been written that gives the historical accounts of many of the believers who gave their life for Christ. It is called *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*. This book shows the tragedy and brutality of persecution as well as the amazing courage of men and women of God who were forced to face torture and martyrdom. [The teacher could even read some of the accounts that are found in this book]

What about today? Certainly believers are not being put to death today, are they? Are there persecutions against Christians going on today? Because believers are not presently being put to death in our country, we tend to forget the very real fact that **even today** Christians are still being persecuted and even murdered in different parts of the world.

What did the Lord Jesus say to those who are persecuted (Matthew 5:10-12)? _____

Did the early Christians have this kind of “rejoicing” attitude (Acts 5:40-41)? _____

The Survival of the Church

How could the Church survive under such intense persecution? The amazing fact is that the Church not only survived, but it actually prospered and grew! The Church actually came forth purer and stronger from every persecution. It was only when the persecutions stopped (after the first 300 years of Church history) that the Church fast became weak and corrupt.

It is an interesting fact of history that “**the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.**” Tertullian (a man who lived during the days of the early persecution) said it this way: *Go on (he said to his enemies), rack, torture, grind us to powder: our numbers increase in proportion as ye mow us down. The blood of Christians is their harvest seed.*

History has proved this statement to be true. There have been many enemies of the church who have been converted to Christianity simply by watching and witnessing the bravery of true believers as they faced death. Who watched and witnessed the courageous death of Stephen (Acts 7:58 and 22:20)? _____ A seed was planted in the heart of Saul of Tarsus on that day!

The enemies of Christianity thought that they could wipe out Christianity by means of persecution. **HOW WRONG THEY WERE!** As the fires of persecution grew hotter the church continued to grow and develop and prosper!

The Four Groups

How did the early Christians handle the persecution? Many handled it well and were faithful even unto death (compare Revelation 2:10). There were some who did not stand up well under the test of persecution. In the days of the early church the believers were grouped as follows:

1) **CONFESSORS**--these are those Christians who cheerfully confessed Christ as their Lord, but were not executed. They held true even though in many cases they were severely persecuted and in some cases tortured. Compare Matthew 10:32 and Romans 1:16.

2) **LAPSED**--these were people who fell away from the faith and were not willing to suffer or die for the Lord. When the pressure became great they denied the Lord (compare Matthew 10:33). They feared death more than God. Although the early church is known for its heroes and brave believers, there were some who did lapse and deny the Lord. [Consider the time when Peter denied his Lord, even though later he boldly confessed Christ and even lay down his life for Christ's sake]

3) **MARTYR**--a martyr was a person who sealed his testimony (WITNESS) with his own blood. The word "MARTYR" is the Greek word which means "WITNESS." Those who were willing to DIE for their faith were called MARTYRS or BLOOD-WITNESSES. See Acts 22:20 and Revelation 17:6 where this word "martyr" is used.

4) There was another group who actually carried the idea of martyrdom TOO FAR. These people actually **WANTED TO BE MARTYRED!** They would even deliver themselves to the heathen officers, hoping that they might be put to death. There was once a group of Christians in Ephesus who begged martyrdom from the heathen governor, but after a few had been executed, the rest were sent away by him with these words: *"Miserable creatures, if you really wish to die, you have precipices and halts enough"* [in other words, if you want to die that much, why don't you just go and commit suicide by jumping off a cliff or hanging yourselves!] We need to remember that a person can give up his life for a cause and God might not be pleased by this at all (see 1 Corinthians 13:3). Paul was **willing** to die, but he knew that staying on the earth was more **needful** (Philippians 1:21-23)! It is wonderful that believers are willing to die for the Lord Jesus Christ, but it is also wonderful when believers are **WILLING TO LIVE FOR THE LORD!**

It is not God's plan for everyone to be a MARTYR! For example, God had one plan for Peter which involved martyrdom but God had another plan for John which did not involve being killed for his faith (see John 21:18-23). Peter died as a MARTYR. John lived to be an old man and was not martyred. God is the One who must decide when and how a person should die, **NOT US!** Are you thankful that God is in charge of living and dying and not someone else?

What should our attitude be towards death? Is it something to fear if we are really saved (see Philippians 1:21-23; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Revelation 21:3-4)? _____

Lessons We Can Learn From the Martyrs

1) We learn what it means to be COMMITTED to the Lord! It is easy to be a Christian if it does not cost anything, but what if your very life were on the line? Would you still be proud to be a

Christian then? If attending church might cost you your life, would you still attend? The Lord Jesus Christ was willing to suffer and die for us, and down through the centuries there have been thousands of believers who have been willing to suffer and die for their Saviour!

2) These persecutions prove the truthfulness of the Bible. Again and again Jesus told His disciples that the world would _____ them (John 15:18 and see also John 15:19-21; John 16:1-3; 16:33; 17:14; 1 John 3:13). The Lord's words were absolutely true! The world hated Christ and crucified Him. In the same way the world has hated Christ's true followers.

3) The great persecutions against the church show us the awful picture of human depravity (how wicked and sinful men really are). The cruelty and brutality and wickedness of men is not seen any more clearly than in the persecution against Christians. Men have dreamed up the most cruel and unusual forms of torture and punishment possible and used them against believers. Those who do not believe in the terrible sinfulness of men have apparently never studied the Christian martyrs and how they were treated.

4) The persecutions demonstrated that God is faithful in giving His believers all that they need in the moment of need. Many believers have perished in the hot flames with a hymn on their lips, singing praise to God. How could they do this? How could they have such courage? How could they suffer such pain so bravely? The answer is found in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10. God's grace is sufficient! God's grace is all that a believer needs! God's strength is enough! God can supply the amount of "dying grace" that the believer needs.

5) The persecutions teach us that prosperity produces spiritual decline. When the persecutions stopped the church became corrupt and weak. When things were rough and tough the church was strong. When things got easy the church declined rapidly!

6) The persecutions proved the indestructible nature of the church. How could the Church ever survive and even prosper during such persecutions? The answer is found in Matthew 16:18. God is building His CHURCH and even the most fierce fires of persecution cannot bring to a halt God's building program!

7) The accounts of the Christian martyrs is a great encouragement to believers living today. By learning of their example we find ourselves strengthened in the trials that we face. It also helps us to search our own hearts: How would I do if some Christ-hating people were to overtake our nation and say to me, "*If you deny the Christian faith you will live but if you confess that Jesus Christ is your Lord and that you are a Christian, then you will die!*"? By God's grace may each of us hold fast to Christ unto the very END (see Hebrews 3:6,14)!