
THE MARTYRDOM OF POLYCARP

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The Bible records the martyrdom of godly men in Old and New Testament times. "Martyr" is a word that means one who bears witness by his death. It comes from the Greek word *martur* which has the basic meaning of a "witness." Paul spoke about one of the first martyrs when he told the Lord, "When the blood of Your *martyr* Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him" (Acts 22:20; cf. 7:54-60). The apostle James was an early victim of the sword (Acts 12:2). The Lord took note of Antipas, "my faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells" (Revelation 2:13). The book of Revelation speaks of those who had been "slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held" (6:9; 20:4).

This continued into the years after the first century. Among the writings called "The Apostolic Fathers," there is a letter known as "*The Martyrdom of Polycarp.*" It is the oldest written account of martyrdom outside the New Testament. "Apparently written by eyewitnesses not long after the event, it records, in sometimes gruesome detail, the pursuit, arrest, trial, and execution of Polycarp, the beloved 86-year-old bishop of the church of Smyrna" (*The Apostolic Fathers*, second edition, ed. and rev. by Michael W. Holmes, 1989, p. 131). The date of Polycarp's martyrdom is around AD 156. His life and work spanned the years following the apostolic period. The following is a portion of the account of the events leading up to Polycarp's martyrdom:

And then, as he was brought forward, there was a great tumult when they heard that Polycarp had been arrested. Therefore, when he was brought before him, the proconsul asked if he were Polycarp. And when he confessed that he was, the proconsul tried to persuade him to recant, saying, "Have respect for your age," and other such things as they are accustomed to say: "Swear by the Genius of Caesar; repent; say, 'Away with the atheists!'" So Polycarp solemnly looked at the whole crowd of lawless heathen who were in the stadium, motioned toward them with his hand, and then (groaning as he looked up to heaven) said, "Away with the atheists!" But when the magistrate persisted and said, "Swear the oath, and I will release you; revile Christ," Polycarp replied, "For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" (Ibid. pp.138-139).

Polycarp steadfastly refused to deny the name of Jesus and was murdered. This account, though not inspired Scripture, is a good example of how true faith confronts the challenge of evil, even unto death. Faith in God and hope in His promises is what provides strength to overcome the threats of this world. When push comes to shove, we must always remember the truth of Jesus' words: "Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 10:32-33). After what Jesus did for each one of us through His death, how could any Christian deny and blaspheme the name of our Savior and King, even in the face of death itself?