

Heroes of the Faith

*Inspiring Stories of
Courage and Perseverance*

Volume I

The Bible Sabbath Association

Heroes of the Faith

Volume I

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Introduction

There are some people who make such a tremendous impact with their example that their story is told throughout the epochs of history. In this work, you will learn about seven stories of heroism in the face of hardship. Their courage provides invaluable lessons for us today.

Chapter 1

The Innocent Christians of Rome

Nero was Roman Emperor from 54-68 AD. In the mid-60s, he sought to build a new city called Neronia. Part of the problem is that it required tearing down part of the city of Rome. Perhaps not coincidentally, a fire broke out in the city. It was among the worst in Roman history!

The people demanded answers. Nero tried making sacrifices to the gods and giving out gifts to the people to satisfy any suspicion that he caused the fire. None of these actions worked! It seemed very suspicious that his plan and the fire took place so close together.

To divert the people's suspicion away from the emperor, Nero blamed Christians for the event. Believers were tortured and put to death. Tacitus, a Roman historian who lived near this time, wrote about these events:

“A disaster followed, whether accidental or treacherously contrived by the emperor, is uncertain, as authors have given both accounts, worse, however, and more dreadful than any which have ever happened to this city by the violence of fire...a rumor had gone forth everywhere that, at the very time when the city was in flames, the emperor appeared on a private stage and sang of the destruction of Troy, comparing present misfortunes with the calamities of antiquity...”

“...And to this conflagration there attached the greater infamy because it broke out on the Aemilian property of Tigellinus [Nero's Chief Advisor], and it seemed that Nero was aiming at the glory of founding a new city and calling it by his name. Rome, indeed, is divided into fourteen districts, four of which remained uninjured, three were levelled to the ground, while in the other seven were left only a few shattered, half-burnt relics of houses...”

“...But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiation of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the fire was the result of an order. Consequently, to get rid of the

report [that Nero started the fire], Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular...”

“...Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed by the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man’s cruelty, that they were being destroyed...” (Tacitus, *The Annals*, 15.39-40, 44).

Tacitus recorded that “an immense multitude” was found guilty of being a Christian. There were many Christians in the city of Rome. In the last chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans, he left words of appreciation to nearly thirty people among the local believers who served to spread the gospel message in that city. It does not include those who heard and received the message but did not assist in spreading it. Some or many of these were likely among those put to death during Nero’s violent rampage. Second century tradition upholds that the Apostle Paul was also martyred during this time. Like our Lord and Savior, these innocent Christians of Rome gave their lives in the midst of false accusations.

To learn more about persecution in early Christianity, be sure to look for our new book *Persecution in Early Christianity* which we hope will be released sometime in 2022. Check for updates on www.sabbath.blog.

Chapter 2

Polycarp

Imagine for a moment if you could meet the earliest disciples of Jesus. What questions might you ask them? What details about Jesus' life and the first disciples might you learn?

Polycarp was an early Christian who knew the first disciples of Jesus. He was a student of the Apostle John and knew other disciples who walked with the Lord. We learn about Polycarp chiefly through those who knew him, one of his writings, and an account of the end of his life.

Irenaeus was an early Christian bishop who personally knew Polycarp. He said the following about him:

“For, while I was yet a boy, I saw you in Lower Asia with Polycarp, distinguishing yourself in the royal court, and endeavoring to gain his acceptance. For I have a more vivid recollection of what occurred at that time than of recent events (inasmuch as the experiences of childhood, keeping pace with the growth of the soul, become incorporated with it); so that I can even describe the place where the blessed Polycarp used to sit and discourse — his going out, too, and his coming in — his general mode of life and personal appearance, together with the discourses which he delivered to the people; also how he would speak of his familiar intercourse with John, and with the rest of those who had seen the Lord; and how he would call their words to remembrance. **Whatsoever things he had heard from them respecting the Lord, both with regard to His miracles and His teaching, Polycarp having thus received [information] from the eye-witnesses of the Word of life, would recount them all in harmony with the Scriptures...**” (*Fragments of Irenaeus*; emphasis mine)

“But Polycarp also was not only instructed by apostles, and conversed with many who had seen Christ, but was also, by apostles in Asia, appointed bishop of the Church in Smyrna, whom I also saw in my early youth, for he tarried [on earth] a very long time... having always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, and which the Church has handed

down, and which alone are true” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresy*, 3.3.4; emphasis mine).

From the testimony of Irenaeus, we learn that Polycarp often recalled his instruction by John and others who knew the Lord. Whenever Polycarp spoke about these things, Irenaeus remarked that his words were in harmony with the Scriptures (to Irenaeus, this included the writings of early Christians, like the gospels). He was also ordained by multiple Apostles as the Bishop of the city of Smyrna.

He wrote a letter to believers in Philippi which has survived the centuries. It contains dozens of quotes from letters we call the New Testament today. Altogether, he quoted at least three gospels, Acts, ten of Paul’s Letters, I and II Peter, I John, and Jude. Some have said that he quoted every book in the present New Testament. In it, Polycarp expressed incredible knowledge of what we call the New Testament. He either knew it by heart, he had copies of the documents, or both. His letter also contains references to the Old Testament. The letter was considered so weighty that it was routinely read in Christian congregations over 250 years after the time of Polycarp (Jerome, *On Illustrious Men*, 17).

In about 155, Polycarp made one of the greatest stands for truth in Church history. It was among the most important events for Christian history in that century. The second century was a time of confusion and chaos for Christians. False teachers arose in various places and seduced believers into error. Even though he was a little over 80 years old, he went to Rome for two reasons.

First, he went to Rome to address an issue concerning Passover. At that time, Polycarp and most Christians celebrated Passover on the 14th day of the Hebrew month called Aviv or Nisan. This is also the same day that the early disciples and many Jewish people observed it.

Anicetus was the bishop of Rome. He deviated or abandoned the original Passover practice. Eusebius, who quotes Irenaeus, relates:

“At this time, while Anicetus was at the head of the church of

Rome, Irenaeus relates that Polycarp, who was still alive, was at Rome, and that he had a conference with Anicetus on a question concerning the day of the paschal feast..." (*Church History*, 4.14.1-7).

"And when the blessed Polycarp was at Rome in the time of Anicetus, and they disagreed a little about certain other things, they immediately made peace with one another, not caring to quarrel over the matter. **For neither could Anicetus persuade Polycarp not to observe what he had always observed with John the disciple of our Lord, and the other apostles with whom he had associated...**" (ibid, 5.24.16-17; emphasis mine).

Essentially, the issue between Polycarp and Anicetus came to a standstill. Polycarp observed what he learned from John and the early disciples; they in turn learned it from the Lord Jesus. Anicetus decided to stay with the traditions of man rather than the example of Christ and the Apostles. While the two parties disagreed, they still maintained communication.

At some point in the mid-second century, the Roman Church adopted a Sunday celebration in the place of the Biblical Passover. The issue about when to keep Passover became known as the Quartodeciman Controversy. About forty years later, another hero of the faith took a similar stand for truth on this subject (see chapter five).

The second reason for Polycarp's visit to Rome was to correct false teachers who led many believers astray. During Anicetus' tenure as bishop of Rome, certain false teachers became very popular. Most of them were very anti-Semitic. We will briefly review some of their heretical doctrine below, much of which has been categorized under the title of "Gnostic."

Marcion was among the infamous leaders of heresy in the mid-second century. He taught that a separate God authored the Old Testament than the God who inspired the New Testament. Therefore, he believed that the Law of God was no longer relevant for Christians. He taught against observance of the Sabbath and other appointed times of God. This infamous person also tried to edit the original writings of the New Testament to remove references to the Ten Commandments and Jesus being Jewish.

Valentinus was another well-known false teacher. He took Bible verses and mixed them with common sayings of his day. He wrote a new gospel which contained some truth mixed with myths. Other false teachers denied Jesus' physical birth, suffering, and death.

For whatever reason, Anicetus could not or did not stop these teachers. Was this because he may have agreed with them on some points?

Polycarp remained a witness of truth in that turbulent time. Irenaeus testified that, while in Rome, Polycarp witnessed to the people in Rome. He turned many believers back to the faith once delivered to the saints. He also rebuked Marcion to his face!

“...To these things all the Asiatic Churches testify, as do also those men who have succeeded Polycarp down to the present time-- a man who was of much greater weight, and a more stedfast witness of truth, than Valentinus, and Marcion, and the rest of the heretics. He it was who, coming to Rome in the time of Anicetus caused many to turn away from the afore-said heretics to the Church of God, proclaiming that he had received this one and sole truth from the apostles -- that, namely, which is handed down by the Church...”

“And Polycarp himself replied to Marcion, who met him on one occasion, and said, ‘Do you know me?’ [Polycarp replied] ‘I do know thee, the first-born of Satan’” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.3.4; emphasis mine throughout).

Polycarp was the only one equipped for the task of combating these various difficulties. As reviewed earlier, Polycarp quoted much of the New Testament in his *Letter to the Philippians*. When the heretics sought to cut out portions of the New Testament, mix the text with outside sources or add to it, he easily refuted them. The mantle of Apostolic authority fell on him, not the wavering bishops of Rome.

About two years or so after this great stand for the faith, Polycarp took his last stand for the faith. Irenaeus briefly mentions this event. “...and, when a very old man, gloriously and most nobly

suffering martyrdom, departed this life, having always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles..." (ibid, 3.3.4).

A work called the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* describes the end of his life. In it, we learn that Polycarp was betrayed by one of his own disciples. He was then put to death in front of a stadium full of people on the Sabbath. We have an excerpt from it below:

"...the day being that of the great Sabbath. And the Irenarch Herod, accompanied by his father Nicetes (both riding in a chariot), met him, and taking him up into the chariot, they seated themselves beside him, and tried to persuade him, saying, 'What harm is there in saying, Lord Caesar, and in sacrificing, with the other ceremonies observed on such occasions, and so make sure of safety?' ...

...But he [Polycarp] at first gave them no answer; and when they continued to urge him, he said, 'I shall not do as you advise me.'

So they, having no hope of persuading him, began to speak bitter words unto him, and cast him with violence out of the chariot, insomuch that, in getting down from the carriage, he dislocated his leg [by the fall]. But without being disturbed, and as if suffering nothing, he went eagerly forward with all haste, and was conducted to the stadium, where the noise of the crowd was so great, that there was no possibility of being heard...

And when the proconsul yet again pressed him, and said: 'Swear by the fortune of Caesar,'

He [Polycarp] answered: 'Since you are vainly urgent that, as you say, I should swear by the fortune of Caesar, and pretend not to know who and what I am, hear me declare with boldness, I am a Christian. And if you wish to learn what the doctrines of Christianity are, appoint me a day, and you shall hear them...'

The proconsul replied: 'Persuade the people.'

But Polycarp said: 'To you I have thought it right to offer an account [of my faith]; for we are taught to give all due honor (which entails no injury upon ourselves) to the powers and authorities which are ordained of God. (Romans 13:1-7; Titus 3:1) But as for

these, I do not deem them worthy of receiving any account from me.’

Then the proconsul urging him, and saying, ‘Swear, and I will set thee at liberty, reproach Christ.’

Polycarp declared: ‘Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury; how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?’

The proconsul then said to him: ‘I have wild beasts at hand; to these will I cast thee, except you repent.’

But he [Polycarp] answered: ‘Call them then, for we are not accustomed to repent of what is good in order to adopt that which is evil; and it is well for me to be changed from what is evil to what is righteous.’

But again the proconsul said to him: ‘I will cause you to be consumed by fire, since you despise the wild beasts, if you will not repent.’

But Polycarp said: ‘You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and after a little is extinguished, but are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. But why delay? Bring forth what you will...’” (*The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 8-11).

Polycarp was burned to death. He refused to call Caesar his lord. This incident echoes Paul’s words in Romans 10:9: “...because if thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus as Lord, and shalt believe in thy heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved...” (ASV) To the early disciples, proclaiming that Jesus was your Lord did not amount to simply a phrase. It meant to declare that you had no other Lord and that you were willing to die for the faith.

In this account, Polycarp said that he had served the Lord 86 years. It is not clear if this was his age or if that many years had passed since he was baptized. One way or the other, Polycarp lived a long life. He was preserved to serve God’s great purpose for his life.

Lessons from the Life of Polycarp

In the conclusion of this chapter, we want to discuss some lessons we could learn from his life.

First, the measure of a person's life is not how much is written about them, but the gravity of the stands they make.

Second, our lives leave a testimony about ourselves and God. In the case of Polycarp, the testimony is that he always taught in accordance with the early Apostles and the testimony of Jesus – what an example to imitate!

Third, we must resist the urge to conform to those things which are novel and different but not true. Not everything that is new and trendy is right. Like a current of water, trends and fads come and go.

Fourth, our stand for what is right will inspire others to do the same. About 40 years after Polycarp, Polycrates stood against the bishop of Rome, Victor, concerning Passover.

Fifth, God preserves you until the time is right to be used by Him. He equips us to fight and overcome; we must take the time to prepare ourselves and be sensitive to His Spirit.

Sixth, God can use us at every age. I have known many people who thought that God was finished with them or that they were beyond being used simply due to age. Polycarp was at least 86, but he could have been older. You are not done setting an example until you leave this world.

Seventh, we must set ourselves apart to be used by Him. God preserves us for the right moments, but we must do our part to stay set apart and persevere for Him – even when it is inconvenient. While Polycarp was older when he made his biggest impact, he had to stay set apart before that time arrived. This is a lesson for younger people to stay focused, passionate, holy, and temperate. We do not have to or need to waste time on sin and pursuits of the flesh. We can pursue God and seek Him all the days of our lives.

Eighth, Polycarp exemplifies the importance of knowing the written Word of God. We need to know the Scriptures – they enabled Polycarp to refute the heretical teachings of his day. A person who knows the Bible well is better able to resist fads and nuances that appear in human history. It provides for us the solid foundation for a lifetime.

Over 1,800 years after Polycarp's passing, we are still talking about the work he did for God. His witness is so strong that he is considered a saint in the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran Churches, though his teachings were different than them all. He is acknowledged as orthodox by nearly every major Christian group.

Polycarp led a life of constancy and consistency – he sought the Lord, stayed pure from the fads of the time, and was preserved to make great stands for the faith. And thus, he has become for the people of that time and for the saints of all time, **a great hero of the faith.**

To learn more about Polycarp, be sure to download our free book *The Life of Polycarp* from www.sabbath.blog (Free Resources Page).

To learn more about the Quartodeciman Controversy, be sure to download our free book *The Quartodeciman Controversy* from www.sabbath.blog (Free Resources Page).

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Chapter 3

Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonica

Marcus Aurelius was Roman Emperor from 161-180 AD. During his reign, there were severe problems in the empire. Barbarian tribes invaded through the Germanic frontier. Pestilence was also rampant.

When bad events like this occurred, Roman officials often required the people to publicly honor the gods (Nero tried a similar tactic – see chapter one). This involved sacrifices to their gods and other acts of worship. They hoped that such acts of dedication would cause the gods to intervene and save them.

When this kind of rededication was evoked, there were Christians who refused to comply. When they abstained, they were viewed as offending the gods and the emperor (who was also worshiped). Christians may have been blamed for some or all these calamities.

Marcus Aurelius' co-ruled with Verus for the first eight years of his tenure (161-169 AD). A decree went forth during this time for all people to worship the traditional gods of Rome. Carpus and Papyrus were Christians who refused to obey this edict.

They were put on trial in the city of Pergamum. A woman named Agathonica joined them. Below, we have an English translation of their final days.

“While the proconsul was in residence at Pergamus there were brought to him the blessed Carpus and Papyrus, martyrs of Christ.

The proconsul having taken his seat on the tribunal said: ‘What is your name?’

The blessed one [Carpus] answered: ‘My first and chosen name is Christian, but, if you wish for my name in the world, Carpus.’

The proconsul said: ‘The commands of the Augusti are certainly known to you that you must both worship the gods who govern the world; wherefore I counsel you both to come forward and sac-

rifice.’

Carpus said: ‘I am a Christian, I worship Christ, the son of God, who came in the latter times for our salvation and delivered us from the deceit of the devil, and to such idols I sacrifice not. Do what you please, for it is impossible for me to sacrifice to counterfeit presentments of demons; for they who sacrifice to them are like them. For as the true worshippers ‘—those who, according to the divine teaching of our Lord, worship God in spirit and in truth’ (John 4:24)—are made like to the glory of God and are with Him immortal, partaking of the eternal life through the Word, so also those who serve these are made like to the vanity of the demons and perish with them in hell. For they are justly punished along with him who deceived man, the chosen creature of God, with him, I mean the Devil, who by his own wickedness provoked the demons thereto. Wherefore be assured, O proconsul, that I do not sacrifice to these.’

The proconsul said in anger: ‘Both of you sacrifice to the gods and do not play the fool.’

Carpus replied with a smile: ‘Perish the gods that have not made the heaven and the earth!’

The proconsul said: ‘You must sacrifice: for so the Emperor commanded.’

Carpus answered: ‘The living do not sacrifice to the dead.’

The proconsul said: ‘Do the gods seem to you to be dead?’

Carpus said: ‘Would you hear the answer? These were never even men, nor ever lived, that they should die. Do you wish to learn that this is true? Take away from them your homage which you suppose they receive at your hands, and you shall know they are nothing, things of the earth earthy and destroyed by time. For our God who is timeless and made the ages Himself remains indestructible and everlasting, being ever the same and admitting neither of increase nor of decrease, but these are made by men and destroyed, as I said, by time. And do not marvel that they give oracles and deceive. For the Devil, having fallen in the beginning from his place of glory, would fain by his own villainy make of

none effect the fatherly love of God for man, and being hard pressed by the Saints contends with them and prepares wars beforehand and by forecast announces them to his own. Likewise also from the things that happen to us daily he, being more ancient than the years, by his experience foretells the future evil which he himself intends to do. For by the decree of God knowledge as well as wickedness are his, and by God's permission he tempts man, seeking to turn him from holiness. Be convinced therefore, O consular, that you are living in no small folly.'

The proconsul said: 'By suffering much idle chatter from you I have led you to blaspheme the gods and the Augusti. So that it go no further with you, will you sacrifice? or what have you to say?'

Carpus answered: 'It is impossible for me to sacrifice, for I have never sacrificed to idols.'

So he at once ordered him to be hung up and scraped.

Carpus cried out: 'I am a Christian.' And after this torture had gone on for a long time, he was worn out and could speak no more.

So the proconsul, letting Carpus be, turned to Papyrus, saying to him: 'Are you a councilor?'

And he answered: 'I am a citizen.'

The proconsul said: 'A citizen of what city?'

Papyrus answered: 'Of Thyatira.'

The proconsul said: 'Have you any children?'

Papyrus answered: 'Yes, and many of them, thanks be to God!'

And one of the crowd shouted out saying: 'He means that some of the Christians are his children after his faith.'

The proconsul said: 'Why do you lie, saying that you have children?'

Papylus answered: ‘Would you learn that I do not lie, but speak the truth? In every district and city I have children in God.’

The proconsul said: ‘Will you sacrifice? or what have you to say?’

Papylus answered: ‘I have served God from my youth up, and I have never sacrificed to idols, but am a Christian, and you cannot hear more from me than this for there is nothing greater or nobler than this for me to say.’

And he also was hung up and three times scraped with two instruments of torture at once, yet uttered no sound, but as a noble athlete withstood the wrath of the Enemy.

The proconsul seeing their exceeding patience ordered them to be burned alive; and descending they both hastened to the amphitheater, that they might be rid quickly of the world. Papylus was first to be nailed to the stake and lifted up, and on the fire’s approach he prayed and gave up his soul in peace. And Carpus being nailed after him smiled on them; and the bystanders were astonished and said to him: ‘What made you laugh?’

And the blessed [Carpus] said: ‘I saw the glory of the Lord, and I was glad, and at the same time I was rid of you, and have no part in your misdeeds.’

When the soldier piled up the wood and lit it the sainted Carpus said as he hung: ‘We too were born of the same mother Eve and have the same flesh as you, but looking to the Judgement-seat of Truth let us endure all.’

When he had said this, on the fire’s approach, he prayed saying: ‘Blessed are you, Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, because you deemed me also the sinner worthy of this part in You!’ And having said this he gave up his soul.

A certain Agathonica standing and beholding the glory of the Lord, which Carpus said that he had seen, and perceiving the invitation to be from heaven, straightway lifted up her voice: ‘This dinner has been prepared for me; of this glorious dinner therefore

I must needs partake and eat.’

But the people cried out, saying: ‘Have pity on your son.’

The blessed Agathonica said: ‘He has God Who can have pity on him, for He is the Protector of all; but I wherefore I am come’....and having put off her outer garments, she cast herself upon the stake rejoicing.

But those who saw it bewailed, saying: ‘Terrible sentence, unjust orders!’

And being lifted up, when she felt the fire touch her, she cried out thrice, saying: ‘Lord, Lord, Lord help me, for I run unto you.’

And so she gave up the ghost, and was perfected with the Saints, whose remains the Christians secretly took up and carefully guarded to the glory of Christ and the praise of His Martyrs, because to Him belong glory and power, to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and always and for ever and ever. Amen” (Owen, pp 42-46).

Blessed are these martyrs. They refused to recant their faith in the midst of suffering. Among the many valuable details from this account is how Christian leaders were viewed as rearing spiritual children through their teaching. This continued the pattern established in the New Testament.

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Chapter 4

The Scillitan Saints

In 180 AD, a group of Christians were put on trial before the proconsul of Africa. They were accused of not worshiping the gods and refusing to confess Caesar as their lord. The powerful account of their trial and condemnation is located below. It is the earliest authentic Christian document from North Africa. Based upon the details in the account, they were executed on July 17th of that year.

“When Praesens, for the second time, and Claudianus were consuls, on the seventeenth day of July, and when Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Secunda, and Vestia were brought into the judgment-hall at Carthage, the proconsul Saturninus said: ‘You can win the indulgence of our lord the Emperor if you return to a sound mind.’

Speratus said: ‘We have never done harm; we have not lent ourselves to wrong; we have never spoken ill; but when we have received harm we have given thanks, because we pay heed to our Emperor.’

Saturninus, the proconsul, said: ‘We, too, are religious, and our religion is simple; and we swear by the genius of our lord the Emperor, and pray for his welfare, which you should also do.’

Speratus said: ‘If you peaceably lend your ears to me, I will tell you the mystery of simplicity.’

Saturninus said: ‘I will not lend my ears to you, when you begin to speak evil things of our sacred rites; but rather do you swear by the genius of our lord the Emperor?’

Speratus said: ‘The empire of this world I know not; but rather I serve that God whom no man hath seen nor with these eyes can see. (I Tim. 6:16) I have committed no theft; but if I have bought anything I pay the tax; because I know my Lord, the King of kings and Emperor of all nations.’

Saturninus, the proconsul, said to the rest: ‘Cease to be of this persuasion.’

Speratus said: ‘It is an evil persuasion to do murder, to bear false witness.’

Saturninus, the proconsul, said: ‘Be not partakers of this folly.’

Cittinus said: ‘We have none other to fear except only our Lord God, who is in heaven.’

Donata said: ‘Honor to Caesar as Caesar, but fear to God.’ (Rom. 13:7)

Vestia said: ‘I am a Christian.’

Secunda said: ‘What I am that I wish to be.’

Saturninus, the proconsul, said to Speratus: ‘Do you persist in being a Christian?’

Speratus said: ‘I am a Christian.’ And with him they all agreed.

Saturninus, the proconsul, said: ‘Will you take some time to reconsider?’

Speratus said: ‘In a matter such as this, there is no considering to be done.’

Saturninus, the proconsul, said: ‘What are the things in your belongings?’

Speratus said: ‘Books and epistles of Paul, a just man.’

Saturninus, the proconsul, said: ‘Have a delay of thirty days and reflect on this.’

Speratus said a second time: ‘I am a Christian.’ And with him all agreed.

Saturninus, the proconsul, read out the decree from the tablet: ‘Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Vestia, Secunda, and the

rest who have confessed that they live according to the Christian rite, because they were offered an opportunity to return to the custom of the Romans and they have obstinately persisted, it is determined that they shall be put to the sword.’

Speratus said: ‘We give thanks to God.’

Nartzalus said: ‘Today we are martyrs in heaven; thanks be to God.’

Saturninus, the proconsul, ordered it to be proclaimed by the herald: ‘Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Veturius, Felix, Aquilinus, Lætatius, Januaria, Generosa, Vestia, Donata, and Secunda I have ordered to be executed.’

They all said: ‘Thanks be to God.’

And so they all at one time were crowned with martyrdom...” (Ayer, pp 66-68).

These Christians did no harm to others, yet were harmed because they refused to recant their faith. They loved their Lord more than life itself.

To learn more about persecution in early Christianity, be sure to look for our new book *Persecution in Early Christianity* which we hope will be released sometime in 2022. Check for updates on www.sabbath.blog.

Chapter 5

Polycrates

In about the year 190, Polycrates was the Christian bishop of Ephesus. This city and the region of Asia were extremely important in early Christian history (see Acts 18:19-21, Acts 19:1-41, Acts 20:13-38, I Cor. 15:32, I Cor. 16:8, I Tim. 1:3, 2 Tim. 4:12, I Peter 1:1, Rev. 1-3). John spent his last years in the city. Polycarp was the bishop of Smyrna, which was near Ephesus.

At this time, some Christians in Rome were deviating from Biblical practices. Some abandoned the Biblical Passover and the seventh-day Sabbath. The bishop of Rome was Victor, and he pressured Asian believers to abandon the practice of Passover that they received from the first Apostles.

While we are not aware of the exact words Victor used to exert this pressure and persuasion upon them, we do possess Polycrates' response to him.

The early historian Eusebius wrote about this event and quotes the letter from Polycrates where he defends their belief:

“But the bishops of Asia, led by Polycrates, decided to hold to the old custom handed down to them. He himself, in a letter which he addressed to Victor and the church of Rome, set forth in the following words the tradition which had come down to him: **‘We observe the exact day**; neither adding, nor taking away. For in Asia also great lights have fallen asleep, which shall rise again on the day of the Lord’s coming, when he shall come with glory from heaven, and shall seek out all the saints. Among these are Philip, one of the twelve apostles, who fell asleep in Hierapolis; and his two aged virgin daughters, and another daughter, who lived in the Holy Spirit and now rests at Ephesus; and, moreover, John, who was both a witness and a teacher, who reclined upon the bosom of the Lord, and, being a priest, wore the sacerdotal plate. He fell asleep at Ephesus...

...And Polycarp in Smyrna, who was a bishop and martyr; and Thraseas, bishop and martyr from Eumenia, who fell asleep in

Smyrna. Why need I mention the bishop and martyr Sagaris who fell asleep in Laodicea, or the blessed Papirius, or Melito, the Eunuch who lived altogether in the Holy Spirit, and who lies in Sardis, awaiting the episcopate from heaven, when he shall rise from the dead?...

...All these observed the fourteenth day of the passover according to the Gospel, deviating in no respect, but following the rule of faith. And I also, Polycrates, the least of you all, do according to the tradition of my relatives, some of whom I have closely followed. For seven of my relatives were bishops; and I am the eighth. And my relatives always observed the day when the people put away the leaven. I, therefore, brethren, who have lived sixty-five years in the Lord, and have met with the brethren throughout the world, and have gone through every Holy Scripture, am not affrighted by terrifying words. For those greater than I have said 'We ought to obey God rather than man' [Acts 5:29]...

...I could mention the bishops who were present, whom I summoned at your desire; whose names, should I write them, would constitute a great multitude. And they, beholding my littleness, gave their consent to the letter, knowing that I did not bear my gray hairs in vain, but had always governed my life by the Lord Jesus...' ” (*Church History*, 5.24.1-8).

In this letter, Polycrates took an incredible stand for truth. He refused to bend in the slightest from Victor's demand that the churches of the east change their practice of Passover. He stated that they observed the 'exact day' – neither adding to nor taking away from it. This indicates that Victor and others had added to or taken away from it. Polycrates then appealed to the example of previous leaders who were well known and held to the same observance.

He started with the Apostles John and Philip and then listed bishops after them who continued the same practice from Polycarp up to his time. At least a few of these leaders were martyred. Persecution greatly impacted Quartodeciman teachers in the province of Asia.

Polycrates then mentioned that he also celebrated the feast of unleavened bread, which is a seven-day feast after Passover. More-

over, he stated that there were a great multitude of bishops who gave their agreement to his stance. Their cities and regions were not cited, but his support had to be significant considering the weight of the authorities cited in the letter.

The Bishop of Rome, Victor, did not respond kindly to Polycrates' letter. In a tantrum more resembling that of a child, Victor attempted to excommunicate the churches of Asia. This is the first time that the Bishop of Rome tried to assert such authority over another group of churches – and the first time they tried to sever ties with others. Other bishops did not respond well to this move; they rebuked Victor. In later centuries, this attempt to exert control over another region would become standard practice by Rome.

Polycrates refused to compromise and took an incredible stand for righteousness! He was not swayed by the new trends of the day, but stayed true to the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3). He leaned on the Scriptures and the example of other Christian leaders who learned from the Apostles. Victor cited no such Apostolic lineage in his practice (nor could he).

We do not possess much information on Polycrates, but his courageous letter has been remembered for over 1,800 years as one of the great stands for righteousness in Christian history. He continued the mantle of Apostolic teaching that was passed down to him through Polycarp. His bold letter left an example for us today to stand for what is right even if others try to bully us out of our own beliefs.

To read more about the Quartodeciman Controversy, download our free book *The Quartodeciman Controversy* on this subject from www.sabbath.blog (Free Resources Page).

Chapter 6

Perpetua, Felicitas, and Their Friends

In about the year 202 or 203, a group of Christians were arrested and put on trial for their faith in the city of Carthage. Some of them were simply arrested for being new converts. They also refused to sacrifice to the gods when asked to do so. Among them was a young woman named Perpetua; she was also a newer believer. She had recently given birth and was nursing her child at the time of her arrest.

This account of heroism is unique in several ways. First, Perpetua wrote a journal entry about her initial anguish and suffering. This makes it among the only first-hand accounts of persecution found in this period. A later author finished the work by describing the suffering and martyrdom of her and the other believers. Secondly, her autobiography captures some of the personal anguish experienced by both believer and unbeliever when these persecutions occurred. Her father was not a believer, and he pleaded with her to recant the Christian faith. Third, Perpetua was a new mother and the account captures the angst that women in her situation would have experienced. A pregnant woman named Felicitas is also among the detainees; she gives birth in prison.

Throughout the account, Perpetua and other believers have supernatural visions which served as a source of strength, encouragement, and direction. Some of them echo of the book of Acts. Due to the sake of space, we have had to omit these visions.

A tomb was discovered in Carthage which connects to this subject. It reads: “Here are the Martyrs Saturus, Saturninus, Revocatus, Secundulus, Felicitas, Perpetua, who suffered on the nones (7th) of March” (Owen, p 10).

The trial was conducted by Hilarianus, who was the proconsul of Africa at that time. Other inscriptions and historical finds confirm his support for the traditional Greco-Roman gods. The English translation of the account is recorded below.

“Certain young new believers were arrested, Revocatus and his fellow-slave Felicitas, Saturninus, and Secundulus. Among these also Vibia Perpetua, well-born, well educated, honorably married, having father and mother, and two brothers, one like herself a newer believer, and an infant son at the breast. She was about twenty-two years of age. The whole story of her martyrdom is from this point onwards told by herself, as she left it written, hand and conception being alike her own.

‘When I was still’, she says, ‘with my companions, and my father in his affection for me was endeavoring to upset me by arguments and overthrow my resolution,’ ‘Father,’ I said, ‘Do you see this vessel for instance lying here, waterpot or whatever it may be?’

‘I see it,’ he said.

And I said to him, ‘Can it be called by any other name than what it is?’

And he answered, ‘No.’

‘So also, I cannot call myself anything else than what I am, a Christian.’

Then my father, furious at the word ‘Christian’, threw himself upon me as though to pluck out my eyes; but he was satisfied with annoying me; he was in fact vanquished, he and his devil’s arguments. Then I thanked the Lord for being parted for a few days from my father, and was refreshed by his absence. During those few days we were baptized, and the Holy Spirit bade me make no other petition after the holy water save for bodily endurance...

...A few days after we were lodged in prison; and I was in great fear, because I had never known such darkness. What a day of horror! Terrible heat, thanks to the crowds! Rough handling by the soldiers! To crown all I was tormented there by anxiety for my baby. Then Tertius and Pomponius, those blessed deacons who were ministering to us, paid for us to be removed for a few hours to a better part of the prison and refresh ourselves. Then all went out of the prison and were left to themselves. [My baby was brought to me], and I suckled him, for he was already faint for

want of food. I spoke anxiously to my mother on his behalf, and strengthened my brother, and commended my son to their charge. I was pining because I saw them pine on my account. Such anxieties I suffered for many days; and I obtained leave for my baby to remain in the prison with me; and I at once recovered my health, and was relieved of my trouble and anxiety for my baby; and my prison suddenly became a palace to me, and I would rather have been there than anywhere else...”

Perpetua then has a vision of events that will happen soon and that they would suffer for the sake of Christ. The story continues:

“After a few days a rumor was spread that we were to be examined. Moreover, my father arrived from the city, worn with trouble, and came up the hill to see me, that he might overthrow my resolution, saying: ‘Daughter, pity my white hairs! Pity your father, if I am worthy to be called father by you; if with these hands I have brought you up to this your prime of life, if I have preferred you to all your brothers! Give me not over to the reproach of men! Look upon your brothers, look upon your mother and your mother’s sister, look upon your son who cannot live after you are gone! Lay aside your pride, do not ruin all of us, for none of us will ever speak freely again, if anything happen to you!’

So spoke my father in his love for me, kissing my hands, and casting himself at my feet; and with tears called me by the name not of daughter but of lady. And I grieved for my father’s sake, because he alone of all my kindred would not have joy in my suffering. And I comforted him, saying: ‘It shall happen on that platform as God shall choose; for know well that we stand not in our own power but in the power of God.’ And full of sorrow he left me.

On another day when we were having our midday meal, we were suddenly hurried off to be examined; and we came to the market-place. Forthwith a rumor ran through the neighboring parts of the market-place, and a vast crowd gathered. We went up on to the platform. The others on being questioned confessed their faith. So, it came to my turn. And there was my father with my child, and he drew me down from the step, pleading with me: ‘Have pity on your baby.’

And the procurator Hilarian, who had then received the power of life and death in the room of the late proconsul Minucius Timinianus, said to me: ‘Spare your father’s white hairs; spare the tender years of your child. Offer a sacrifice for the safety of the Emperors.’

And I answered: ‘No.’

Hilarian said: ‘Are you a Christian!’

And I answered: ‘I am.’

And when my father persisted in trying to overthrow my resolution, he was ordered by Hilarian to be thrown down, and the judge struck him with his rod. And I was grieved for my father’s plight, as if I had been struck myself, so did I grieve for the sorrow that had come on his old age. Then he passed sentence on the whole of us, and condemned us to the beasts; and in great joy we went down into the prison. Then because my baby was accustomed to take the breast from me, and stay with me in prison, I sent at once the deacon Pomponius to my father to ask for my baby. But my father refused to give him. And as God willed, neither had he any further wish for my breasts, nor did they become inflamed; that I might not be tortured by anxiety for the baby and pain in my breasts.”

Perpetua then has a series of visions to encourage her as to what will come in the near future.

“Then after a few days Pudens the adjutant, who was in charge of the prison, who began to show us honor perceiving that there was some great power within us, began to admit many to see us, that both we and they might be refreshed by one another’s company. Now when the day of the games approached, my father came in to me worn with trouble, and began to pluck out his beard and cast it on the ground, and to throw himself on his face, and to curse his years, and to say such words as might have turned the world upside down. I sorrowed for the unhappiness of his old age.”

Perpetua and Saturus both had visions of the battle that they would face in the amphitheater.

“Such are the famous visions of the blessed martyrs themselves, Saturus and Perpetua, which they wrote with their own hands. As for Secundulus, God called him to an earlier departure from this world while still in prison, not without grace, that he might escape the beasts. Nevertheless his body, if not his soul, made acquaintance with the sword...

As for Felicitas indeed, she also was visited by the grace of God in this wise. Being eight months gone with child (for she was pregnant at the time of her arrest), as the day for the spectacle drew near she was in great sorrow for fear lest because of her pregnancy her martyrdom should be delayed, since it is against the law for women with child to be exposed for punishment, and lest she should shed her sacred and innocent blood among others afterwards who were malefactors. Her fellow-martyrs too were deeply grieved at the thought of leaving so good a friend and fellow-traveler behind alone on the way to the same hope. So in one flood of common lamentation, they poured forth a prayer to the Lord two days before the games. Immediately after the prayer her pains came upon her. And since from the natural difficulty of an eight-months' labor she suffered much in child-birth, one of the warders [of the prison] said to her: ‘You who so suffer now, what will you do when you are flung to the beasts which, when you refused to sacrifice, you despised?’

And she answered: ‘Now I suffer what I suffer: but then another will be in me who will suffer for me, because I too am to suffer for Him.’ So she gave birth to a girl, whom one of the sisters [of the faith] brought up as her own daughter...”

The story goes on to describe their witness in prison. Many others were won to the faith through their example. They were led to the amphitheater where they were put to death. The account gives significant details from their suffering and concludes with the following exhortation:

“...O valiant and blessed martyrs! O truly called and chosen to the glory of Jesus Christ our Lord! He who magnifies, honors, and adores that glory should recite to the edification of the Church these examples also, not less precious at least than those of old; that so new instances of virtue may testify that one and the self-same Spirit is working to this day with the Father, God Al-

mighty, and with His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belong splendor and power immeasurable for ever and ever. Amen” (Owen, pp 78-92).

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Chapter 7

Martyrs of the Decian Persecution

The reign of the Roman Emperor Decius was particularly difficult for Christians. In 249 AD, the Romans were preparing to celebrate the 1,000 year anniversary of the founding of Rome. The Roman Empire was also plagued with calamities such as the invasion of foreign armies.

Decius instituted an empire-wide program to ensure that every person would honor the gods of Rome. It was part of a plan to celebrate the millennial reign of Rome and ward off the catastrophic events of that time. As discussed in previous chapters, the Romans believed that if they performed such actions, the gods might intervene and save them from their problems.

Every person was required to sign a document called a libellus. In it, a person swore allegiance to the gods of Rome. The signor attested that they had only sacrificed to the gods of Rome since their birth. Usually, a Roman official was required to co-sign. The person was usually required participate in the sacrifices, offer libations, or burn incense to the gods as part of the process.

Several of these libelli have survived the centuries. We have listed one below:

“To the commissioners of sacrifices from Aurelia Demos, who has no father, daughter of Helene and wife of Aurelius Irenaeus, of the Quarter of the Helleneum. It has ever been my habit to sacrifice to the gods, and now also I have in your presence, in accordance with the command, made sacrifice and libation and tasted the offering, and I beg you to certify my statement. Farewell.

I, Aurelia Demos, have presented this declaration.

I, Aurelius Irenaeus, wrote for her, as she is illiterate.

I, Aurelius Sabinus, prytanis, saw you sacrificing.

The 1st year of the Emperor Caesar Gaius Messius Quintus Tra-

janus Decius Pius Felix Augustus, Pauni 20” (Greek Papyri in the John Rylands Library, Manchester, I, 1911, p. 21, no. 12).

As you can see, each libellus attested that a person had always sacrificed and revered the traditional Greco-Roman gods. Many times they were required to taste the sacrifice, offer sacrifice, or offer incense to these gods.

These certificates were administered using the tax infrastructure of the empire. In this manner, they could force large numbers of people to comply in a reasonable time.

This sort of decree was not and is not acceptable to Christians. If a person signed such a document, it would constitute a denial of any conversion to Christianity! It would be denying our Lord and Savior.

Cyprian was a Christian eyewitness of these events. He also wrote about the state of Christianity before and during this persecution. Apparently, many Christians had fallen into a worldly state. He attributed the spiritual origin of the persecution to the decadent state of Christianity. He viewed it as a punishment from God for not obeying His commandments. We have several quotes from him that summarize the situation.

“...Each one was desirous of increasing his estate; and forgetful of what believers had either done before in the times of the apostles, or always ought to do, they, with the insatiable passion of covetousness, devoted themselves to the increase of their property. Among the priests there was no devotedness of religion; among the ministers there was no sound faith: in their works there was no mercy; in their manners there was no discipline...Not a few bishops who ought to furnish both exhortation and example to others, despising their divine charge, became agents in secular business, forsook their throne, deserted their people, wandered about over foreign provinces, hunted the markets for gainful merchandise, while brethren were starving in the Church. They sought to possess money in hoards, they seized estates by crafty deceits, they increased their gains by multiplying usuries. What do not such as we deserve to suffer for sins of this kind, when even already the divine rebuke has forewarned us, and said, ‘If they shall forsake my law, and walk not in my judgments; if they

shall profane my statutes, and shall not observe my precepts, I will visit their offenses with a rod, and their sins with scourges?” (Cyprian, *Treatise 3: On the Lapsed*, sec. 6).

“These things were before declared to us, and predicted. But we, forgetful of the law and obedience required of us, have so acted by our sins, that while we despise the Lord’s commandments, we have come by severer remedies to the correction of our sin and probation of our faith. Nor indeed have we at last been converted to the fear of the Lord, so as to undergo patiently and courageously this our correction and divine proof” (ibid, 7).

“...Many were conquered before the battle, prostrated before the attack. Nor did they even leave it to be said for them, that they seemed to sacrifice to idols unwillingly. They ran to the marketplace of their own accord; freely they hastened to death, as if they had formerly wished it, as if they would embrace an opportunity now given which they had always desired. How many were put off by the magistrates at that time, when evening was coming on; how many even asked that their destruction might not be delayed!...Could the servant of God stand there, and speak and renounce Christ, when he had already renounced the devil and the world? Was not that altar, whither he drew near to perish, to him a funeral pile? Ought he not to shudder at and flee from the devil’s altar, which he had seen to smoke, and to be redolent of a foul rector, as if it were the funeral and sepulchre of his life? Why bring with you, O wretched man, a sacrifice? Why immolate a victim? You yourself have come to the altar an offering; you yourself have come a victim: there you have immolated your salvation, your hope; there you have burnt up your faith in those deadly fires” (ibid, 8).

“...Elsewhere also a voice is heard from heaven, forewarning what is becoming for the servants of God to do, saying, ‘Come out of her, my people, that you be not partakers of her sins, and that you receive not of her plagues’ (Revelation 18:4). He who goes out and departs does not become a partaker of the guilt; but he will be wounded with the plagues who is found a companion in the crime” (ibid, 10).

“A blind love of one’s own property has deceived many; nor could they be prepared for, or at ease in, departing when their

wealth fettered them like a chain. Those were the chains to them that remained — those were the bonds by which both virtue was retarded, and faith burdened, and the spirit bound, and the soul hindered; so that they who were involved in earthly things might become a booty and food for the serpent, which, according to God's sentence, feeds upon earth” (ibid, 11).

According to Cyprian, many Christians fell away at this time. Many complied with the Roman decree for sacrifice rather than possibly lose their property, job, and/or life. This shocked the more devoted believers. Cyprian wrote a letter to Fortunatus, quoted below, encouraging him to give his life for the faith. In it, he compared the libelli to taking the mark of the beast. Leaders such as Cyprian thought that the world was ending and that the book of Revelation was coming to pass.

“You have desired, beloved Fortunatus that, I since the burden of persecutions and afflictions is lying heavy upon us, and in the ending and completion of the world the hateful time of Antichrist is already beginning to draw near...” (*Treatise* 11.1).

Christians who ate sacrifices, burned incense, or signed a libellus were called the lapsed (*lapsis* in Latin) because they had lapsed into worshipping other gods; they denied Jesus as their only Lord. Some Christians paid or bribed Roman officials to sign a libellus for them saying they had made sacrifice to other gods (even though they had not). Others had someone else who was a non-believer (such as a family member) make sacrifices in their place.

We do not possess the types of martyrdom literature from this persecution that is found during some other similar events. Thus, we do not possess as many names of the heroic believers who endured for the cause. The likely reason for this deficit is multi-fold.

First, the edict was implemented quickly and was short lived (Decius was killed in battle about a year after the edict started). Secondly, Cyprian hints that many Christians fell away from the faith during this time and thus conformed to the decree. Third, some of the Christians writers of this era, such as Cyprian, fled into the wilderness or were banished to desert places. Therefore, they did not witness them or lacked resources to write about them.

Eusebius recorded some details about Christians who suffered during this time. We have an excerpt below:

“1. Many others, in cities and villages, were torn asunder by the heathen, of whom I will mention one as an illustration. Ischyriion was employed as a steward by one of the rulers. His employer commanded him to sacrifice, and on his refusal insulted him, and as he remained firm, abused him. And as he still held out he seized a long staff and thrust it through his bowels and slew him.

2. Why need I speak of the multitude that wandered in the deserts and mountains, and perished by hunger, and thirst, and cold, and sickness, and robbers, and wild beasts? Those of them who survived are witnesses of their election and victory.

3. But I will relate one occurrence as an example. Chaeremon, who was very old, was bishop of the city called Nilus. He fled with his wife to the Arabian mountain and did not return. And though the brethren searched diligently they could not find either them or their bodies.

4. And many who fled to the same Arabian mountain were carried into slavery by the barbarian Saracens. Some of them were ransomed with difficulty and at a large price; others have not been to the present time. I have related these things, my brother, not without an object, but that you may understand how many and great distresses came upon us. Those indeed will understand them the best who have had the largest experience of them” (*Church History*, 6.42.1-4).

Those that refused to sign or sacrifice were imprisoned. Many of those imprisoned were tortured and killed. People may not have even been able to find employment if they refused to sign a libellus. This means that they could not buy or sell – this feature may have influenced comparisons to the mark of the beast found in writings such as Cyprian. The faithful who were not imprisoned often fled to mountains or deserts; some of them were never found.

Though many fell away, there were some who endured hardship even until death. They are reminders of courage and persever-

ance.

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Conclusion

You have read some of the great accounts of faith, courage, and perseverance from early Christian history. These heroes stood firm for truth during adversity. May their examples inspire us to hold the torch of truth against rising tide of godlessness in our own times.

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The Quartodeciman Controversy

The Quartodeciman Controversy refers to a dispute between Christians about when to keep the Passover feast, also called Pascha. Christians in the east contended that the feast as observed by Jesus and the first disciples should be retained. On the other hand, believers in Rome argued that a newer practice should become the standard. Confusion and conflict resulted as Christians in various cities calculated the timing for the new Passover in different ways. Starting in the fourth century, the Roman Church tried to force their celebration on others. Despite these efforts, Quartodeciman Christians still existed in the fifth century. In this book, you will learn about the first three hundred years of the Quartodeciman Controversy.

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Early Christians endured serious persecution. Why did this persecution occur? In this work, we will look at the first few centuries of early Christian history and answer this question. We will look at specific persecutions and the historical documentation that supports these events. Furthermore, we will examine specific people who were martyred for the faith.

In this work, you will take a journey back in time to re-live some of the great stories of courage and perseverance from early Church history. Their lives and sacrifice are inspiring and timeless. They provide invaluable lessons for people throughout time.

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