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*Stories
of
Martyrdom
and
Costly
Discipleship*

BEARING
WITNESS

Edited by Charles E. Moore
and Timothy Keiderling

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*Stories of Martyrdom and
Costly Discipleship*

Edited by Charles E. Moore and Timothy Keiderling
Introduction by John D. Roth and Elizabeth Miller



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If any want to become my followers,
let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

For those who want to save their life will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Jesus of Nazareth

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Introduction

John D. Roth and Elizabeth Miller

FOLLOWING JESUS CAN BE DANGEROUS. On April 14, 2014, members of Boko Haram, a radicalized Islamic group in Nigeria, attacked a girls' school in Chibok and kidnapped most of the students. Of the nearly three hundred young girls abducted, at least 178 were members of Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria (EYN), a Church of the Brethren group whose commitment to adult baptism and biblical nonresistance anchors them within the Anabaptist tradition. Since 2013, some ten thousand EYN members have been killed and many more have been forced to flee their homes.

For two millennia, Christians in every tradition have honored the memory of individuals and communities who have suffered, and often died, for reasons of faith. Anabaptist groups, for example, have long been inspired by *Martyrs Mirror*, a collection of stories and documents that begins with the crucifixion of Christ and concludes with detailed accounts of some fifteen hundred Anabaptists who were imprisoned, tortured, and killed for their faith during the sixteenth century.

The stories of costly discipleship recounted in this new collection – spanning the centuries from the early Christian church to the Radical Reformation to the contemporary global church – offer a fresh reminder that the decision to follow Christ can sometimes come at a price. Those of us involved with the Bearing Witness

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Stories Project think that these stories need to be told, and retold, for each generation, especially in light of the fact that for many in the global church today persecution is still a lived reality.

Since the stoning of Stephen, recorded in Acts 2, the Christian church has always honored those who have suffered or died in the name of Christ. Church fathers like Cyprian and Eusebius recognized the importance of gathering the stories of the apostles and other early Christians who suffered or died as *martyres* (witnesses) to their faith, trusting that these testimonies of faithfulness to Christ would inspire later generations. The template for early Christian martyrdom, of course, was Jesus. Though unjustly accused, he did not resort to violence to defend his cause, but bore his suffering with steadfastness and dignity. Yielding himself fully to God, Jesus forgave his accusers and accepted the humiliation of crucifixion in the knowledge that ultimately the resurrection would triumph over death.

On the surface, the qualifications for Christian martyrdom seem straightforward. Yet as the early church struggled to define orthodox belief, definitions of martyrdom became increasingly problematic. What, exactly, did a persecuted person need to believe in order to be accounted a Christian martyr? And who had the authority to make such a judgment? In the early fifth century, when the Donatists proclaimed as martyrs those members who were killed by Constantine for their alleged heresy, Augustine pushed back. It was “not the punishment,” he declared, “but the cause that makes the martyr.”

Augustine’s statement became a standard point of reference for the Catholic Church in later centuries in its denial that dissenters such as John Wycliffe, Peter Waldo, or Jan Hus, who were all executed on charges of heresy, could rightfully be considered martyrs. The problem of definition became even more acute in the sixteenth

century as the various religious traditions emerging out of the Reformation began to develop competing lists of martyrs, often commemorating as heroes individuals whom another tradition had pronounced heretical or seditious.

An additional challenge is the difficulty of separating the factual details surrounding an event from the simpler heroic narratives that emerged later. At their best, martyr stories help communities validate their own cultural identity. At their worst, these memories can serve to justify the resentment of one group against another and even lead to retribution.

In the Anabaptist tradition the martyrs have played a central role in the formation and sustaining of a collective identity – especially for groups such as the Amish, Mennonites, and Hutterites that immigrated to the United States and Canada in part to escape religious opposition in Europe and Russia. First emerging as a series of underground pamphlets, the Dutch accounts of Anabaptist martyrs eventually coalesced in the collection *Het Offer des Herren* (Sacrifice unto the Lord). Between 1562 and 1599, at least eleven editions appeared, often adding new martyr narratives, prison letters, or hymns.

With the publication of *Martyrs Mirror* in 1660, this dynamic tradition of martyr books came to an end and the canon of Anabaptist martyrs was virtually closed. Thieleman van Braght, a Dutch Mennonite minister from Haarlem and the compiler and author of *Martyrs Mirror*, opted for an inclusive definition of orthodoxy that could find support among all Anabaptist groups – namely, a commitment to believer’s baptism and to defenselessness (or nonresistance) in the manner of Christ. (In selecting stories, the editors of this book have used similar criteria.) Van Braght hoped that *Martyrs Mirror* could serve as a shared point of reference and a source of unity within a fractious church. Thus, he devoted nearly

half of the massive volume to a detailed argument tracing a line of Christians from the time of Christ to the present who had held to the principles of believer's baptism and nonresistance.

Ironically, by 1660 Anabaptists in the Netherlands were living in relative religious freedom and were participating fully in the artistic, economic, and cultural renaissance of the "Dutch Golden Age." Thus, instead of urging readers to hold firm in the face of persecution, van Braght warned of the seductions of wealth, social respectability, and political authority. For him, the martyr stories served as cautionary tales against the threat of acculturation.

So why do we in North America still need to tell martyr stories today? First, in the context of the extensive religious freedoms that North American believers now enjoy, the witness of the martyrs provides a useful reminder that following Jesus can still exact a cost. Their stories caution us, as citizens of a powerful "Christian" empire, against the temptation to justify violence in the name of Christ. They witness to the possibility of nonviolence and love of enemy even in the most extreme circumstances. And they call us to a life of compassion and humility, while reminding us that non-resistant love is not likely to be rewarded here on earth.

Furthermore, we should continue to tell stories of courageous witness because persecution is not just an ancient story but a contemporary reality. In most of the world outside of North America – specifically in Asia, Africa, and Latin America – Christianity is growing rapidly despite the fact that Christians in many countries are facing the painful reality of persecution and suffering. In fact, many of the contemporary stories in this collection come from churches and communities in these regions of the world.

A report issued in 2012 by the Center for the Study of Global Christianity estimates that in the twentieth century alone, around forty-five million Christians "lost their lives prematurely, in a

situation of witness, as a result of human hostility.” In addition, the report estimates that at least one hundred thousand Christians have been martyred each year since 2000. Clearly, bearing witness to Christ in the face of adversity, persecution, and suffering is not only an ancient memory in the Christian tradition – it is also an ongoing reality. Since Christians are called to bear one another’s burdens (Gal. 6:2), wherever a part of the body is suffering because of its witness to Christ, the rest of the body must take heed. North American Christians need to tell stories of persecution and martyrdom because remaining silent, or willfully forgetting, or averting our attention from the reality of suffering, is simply unchristian.

Martyr stories prompt us to reexamine our own faith. If Christians in the West have tended to domesticate the faith – turning it into something safe or regarding it as an extension of our consumer tastes and preferences – encountering these stories should unsettle us and remind us that something of ultimate significance is at stake in the claim to be a follower of Jesus. Like the martyrs, we need to face life – and death – with the confidence that life is ultimately stronger than death and that history is always moving in the direction of the kingdom of God.

Martyr stories unite the church. Contemporary Christians should tell stories of faithfulness amid adversity – and especially the stories of brothers and sisters from the Global South – because doing so strengthens our sense of a shared identity. Christian communities come to know who they are by telling stories of God’s faithfulness in the past and by locating themselves in continuity with a long narrative arc that goes all the way back to the story of the early church, the revelation of God in Christ, God’s covenant with the children of Israel, and the account of creation itself. Remembering the martyrs is a way of extending the community of faith backward in time, reminding each congregation that it is not

alone in its journey, but is joined in fellowship with faithful Christians throughout the history of the church.

Yet we also recognize that telling stories of suffering and death calls for a great deal of sensitivity. It is very important *how* such stories are told. Telling stories of contemporary Christian martyrs, for example, could harden existing stereotypes and prejudices against Muslims. Moreover, martyr stories can inadvertently glorify suffering, promote simplistic victim-offender dichotomies, encourage religious arrogance, or blind Christians to the power they wield within society. There is the danger, some have warned, that by focusing on a martyr tradition we encourage those who have suffered physical abuse to bear that pain in silence, or that we perpetuate pathologies that can result from an identity rooted in stories of suffering, trauma, and victimhood. Then there is the temptation that by focusing on martyr stories we ignore the many occasions in our own history where we Christians have been the perpetrators of injustice – for example, the Christian settlers who displaced indigenous peoples in the Americas.

These concerns must be taken seriously. But the solution to these dangers is not to reject history, or to stop telling martyr stories, or to think that we can escape from the burden of memory. Instead, the challenge, as theologian Miroslav Volf has argued, is to “remember rightly.” In its most basic form, “right remembering” implies a conscious effort to acknowledge the complexity of every story, to gather as many sources as possible, to make those sources available to others, and to resist the temptation to invest the protagonists in the stories with more saintliness (or the antagonists with more evil) than the information at hand can reasonably support. Even martyrs whose actions at the time of their death we regard as exemplary are, on closer examination, deeply flawed people.

Right remembering also includes a commitment to tell the stories with an *empathetic* spirit – that is, a conversational posture

committed to rethinking our history and theological commitments from the perspective of the other. Such a commitment is not easy. It requires an active engagement of the will, the intellect, and the imagination. And ultimately, truly empathetic understanding comes as a gift of the Holy Spirit. An empathetic understanding of the context does not justify the violence of those in power, nor does it exonerate historical actors from the moral consequences of their decisions. But right remembering does suggest that the way we tell the stories of those who suffered for their faith must be consistent with the compassion and love of enemy that we claim to uphold, even if doing so complicates the narrative.

Finally, right remembering means that we tell the martyr stories as a confession of faith. Christians who suffer and die for their faith bear witness to the lordship of Christ. Through their lives, their verbal witness, their perseverance, and their courage, martyrs point us to Christ – not just to the suffering that Christ endured, but also to the resurrection and the fundamental truth that life is more powerful than death. When Christians remember rightly, they confess their own desire to live in ways that are consistent with these truths. Thinking of the martyr stories as confession means that we will resist using them to explain or defend or argue for anything else.

With the hope of fostering a spirit of confession and connection among Anabaptists globally, the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism launched the Bearing Witness Stories Project in 2012. A dynamic and growing collection of stories of costly discipleship, the Bearing Witness Stories Project serves as a collection point for well-known martyr narratives as well as stories that may be beloved in a particular church conference but little known in the global church. Like van Braght's collection, *Bearing Witness* highlights stories that illustrate Christlike nonviolence in the face of opposition. We hope that these stories can both honor and serve

the global church, connecting believers in prayer and thanksgiving across vast cultural, linguistic, and geographic distance. Rightly remembered, these stories can challenge Christians everywhere to a deeper understanding of discipleship, to closer relationships with congregations experiencing persecution today, and to greater courage in their own public witness.

Keeping these stories alive, and continuing to tell new stories, is an affirmation that those who relinquished their lives did not do so in vain. By recalling their deaths and the testimony of their lives, we affirm that history is meaningful, that our Christian faith has a purpose beyond mere self-preservation, that truth cannot be killed, and that the resurrection will ultimately triumph over the cross.

PART I

Early Christians

Stephen

died ca. AD 34, in Jerusalem



AFTER JESUS ROSE FROM THE DEAD and ascended into heaven, his disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and went out into the street boldly proclaiming the resurrection. People came running from all over to see what was happening. One of the disciples, Peter, told them, “You, with the help of wicked men, put Jesus to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.” His listeners were “cut to the heart” with remorse for having joined the mob that called for Jesus’ crucifixion. That very day three thousand of them were baptized and joined the disciples. The church was born.

When Peter healed a crippled man in the name of Jesus, news spread fast. The common people were thrilled that Jesus’ miraculous powers were still at work in the world. Soon the sick and

tormented were flocking to the apostles just as they had to Jesus, and many found healing. The religious leaders were jealous. They had the apostles thrown in jail. That night an angel appeared and led them right out without the guards noticing anything. “Go, stand in the temple courts,” the angel said, “and tell the people all about this new life.” The Book of Acts describes what happened next:

When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin – the full assembly of the elders of Israel – and sent to the jail for the apostles. But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, “We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside.” On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were at a loss, wondering what this might lead to.

Then someone came and said, “Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people.” At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them.

The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.”

Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than men! The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead – whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. Then he addressed the Sanhedrin: “Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”

His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

The number of followers of Jesus continued to grow. They gathered daily, bringing their food, money, and belongings for the apostles to distribute to the poor and sick among them. The apostles soon found that this administrative task was taking up too much of their time. They called everyone together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

One of the seven men the group chose was Stephen, “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.” The Bible says that Stephen, “full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among

the people.” His popularity soon won him enemies, but those who tried to argue with him proved no match against the wisdom he received from the Holy Spirit. His critics turned to treachery:

They secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.” So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”

“Are these charges true?” the high priest demanded. Instead of giving a straightforward answer, Stephen responded by passionately recounting the whole story of God’s plan to save his people, from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob through Moses and David. We don’t know if his listeners were captivated or if they were growing increasingly impatient. Stephen ended with these words:

You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him – you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.

The Book of Acts reports what happened next:

When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. . . .

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

To this day, Stephen is remembered as the first disciple of Jesus to follow in his master’s footsteps by laying down his life for the sake of truth. Many more martyrs would soon follow. But new seeds had been planted that day. Those who stoned Stephen asked Saul, a young man standing by, to hold their coats for them. Before long Saul would himself become a great witness to Jesus, carrying the good news to new lands and peoples.

Polycarp

*died ca. AD 155, in Smyrna
(Izmir in modern Turkey)*



WHEN A YOUNG CHRISTIAN named Irenaeus first encountered the elderly Polycarp teaching in the metropolis of Smyrna, he was captivated.

It's not hard to understand why. According to Irenaeus, Bishop Polycarp was one of the few living disciples of the apostle John, who was the "beloved disciple" of Jesus himself. Polycarp preached what he had learned directly from eyewitnesses of Jesus. His connection with Christ's first apostles served as a bridge between the first generation of believers and those who followed, including influential thinkers and theologians such as Irenaeus, who would live to be a prominent church father in his own right.

Polycarp led the church in Smyrna with wisdom and authority, having been appointed to leadership by men who had seen and

heard the Lord. He was frequently called on to settle disputes or correct false teaching. Even the other leaders of the early church valued his insight. When Polycarp visited Rome, the bishop there deferred to him regarding when to celebrate the Lord's Supper, as a sign of honor and respect.

Heeding John's warnings against false teachers, Polycarp faithfully defended the apostles' teaching against early heretics, including one Marcion, who held that the God of the Old Testament and the Father of Jesus were separate entities. Polycarp could be fiery, particularly when faced with such dangerous errors. In their only face-to-face meeting, Marcion asked, "Do you know me?"

"I know you, you firstborn of Satan!" Polycarp replied.

He was able to turn many away from such heresies, and thus strengthen the church's witness.

But Polycarp's work as a pastor and leader would not continue freely. When persecution broke out in Smyrna, some Christians were rounded up for interrogation, and required to renounce Christ and bow before the Roman emperor as a condition of release. When they refused, they were tortured and executed.

Eyewitness accounts from this time highlight the public brutality of the persecution. Believers were lashed until their muscles were laid bare, forced to lie down on shards of shells, and thrown into arenas to be devoured by wild animals in front of the townspeople. There are striking examples of early martyrs welcoming these sufferings in the name of Christ. One Germanicus even embraced the wild beast and pulled it toward himself to meet death as quickly as possible. But not all withstood the brutal torture. A man named Quintus, who had come forward of his own free will rather than wait to be arrested, when confronted with the beasts of prey, renounced Jesus and took the oath of fidelity to the emperor.

Though some bystanders wept with pity for the persecuted Christians, these spectacles of death and drama in the arena also served to sharpen the people's taste for Christian blood. Eventually

the crowd took up the refrain, “Away with the atheists! Go find Polycarp!” (“Atheist” was a popular term for Christians, who in denying the Roman divinities in favor of a God who could not be seen, were thought of as atheists.)

Polycarp was undismayed by the growing public demand for his death. Rather than flee, the old bishop even resolved to remain in the city, where they could easily find him. His companions eventually convinced him to retreat to a farm outside of town, where the threat to his life was less immediate. There he spent his time in prayer, interceding for members of the church throughout the world.

Three days before his arrest, Polycarp fell into a deep trance. On regaining consciousness, he declared that he had received a vision. He had seen his pillow bursting into flame around his head. Polycarp had no question what the vision meant. Turning to his companions, he said, “I am going to be burned alive.”

Not long after, the Roman authorities captured two slaves. One of them broke down under torture and revealed the location of the farm where Polycarp was staying. When soldiers arrived on horseback to seize him, Polycarp refused to run. Instead, he offered his captors hospitality and food, requesting only that he be allowed an hour for prayer. When they agreed, Polycarp prayed so earnestly that one hour became two, and several of the soldiers regretted their role in the arrest of such a venerable old man.

They then put Polycarp on a donkey and led him back into the city. Upon arrival, his captors ushered him into the carriage of a man named Herod, the captain of the local troops. Herod tried to convince Polycarp to save himself. “Why, what harm is there in saying, ‘Caesar is Lord,’ and offering incense?” When Polycarp refused the very suggestion of renouncing Christ, the official grew threatening and forced him out of the carriage so roughly that he injured his shin.

Without even turning, Polycarp marched on quickly as they escorted him to the stadium, where a deafening roar arose from the throngs of spectators. As he entered, his Christian companions heard a voice from above say, “Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man.” He was brought before the proconsul, who urged him to deny his faith and bow before the emperor: “Swear by the spirit of Caesar! Repent, and say, ‘Away with the atheists!’”

Turning with a grim look toward the crowd calling for his death, Polycarp gestured at them. “Away with the atheists,” he said dryly.

Undeterred, the proconsul pressed him further to deny Christ. Polycarp declared, “Eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who saved me?”

Once more the proconsul urged Polycarp to swear by Caesar. This time Polycarp replied, “Since you pretend not to know who and what I am, hear me declare with boldness: I am a Christian. And if you wish to learn more about Christianity, I will be happy to make an appointment.”

Furious, the proconsul said, “Don’t you know I have wild beasts waiting? I’ll throw you to them unless you repent.”

Polycarp answered, “Bring them on, then, for we are not accustomed to repent of what is good in order to adopt that which is evil.”

Next the proconsul threatened to burn him alive. To this Polycarp replied, “You threaten me with fire which burns for a little while and is soon extinguished. You do not know the coming fire of judgment and eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly. What are you waiting for? Do what you wish.”

The proconsul sent his herald out into the arena to announce that Polycarp had confessed to being a Christian. At this, the assembled crowd seethed with uncontrolled fury and called for Polycarp to be burned alive. Quickly, they assembled a pyre, gathering wood from workshops and the public baths. Polycarp removed his clothes and tried to take off his shoes, though his advanced age made it

difficult. His guards prepared to nail him to the stake, but he told them calmly, “Leave me as I am, for the one who gives me strength to endure the fire will also give me strength to remain at the stake unmoved without being secured by nails.” They bound his hands behind him. Polycarp offered a psalm of praise and thanksgiving to God. His captors ignited the wood.

According to observers, as the flames grew, they did not consume Polycarp as expected. The fire formed a circle around him, but his body did not burn. Since the fire did not have its intended effect on Polycarp’s body, an executioner was ordered to stab him to death with a dagger. His blood extinguished the flames.

Observers that day were shocked by the contrast between Polycarp’s martyrdom and the deaths of non-Christians they had witnessed. They beheld the same faithful discipleship in Polycarp’s death that had characterized his life: a humble acceptance of God’s will; praise of God in the most extreme trial; and a joyful, unwavering commitment to Christ even when faced with death.

Polycarp’s was among the first recorded Christian martyrdoms. His steadfast obedience to Christ was a powerful testimony, an inspiration not only to the church he pastored so faithfully in Smyrna, but to Christians throughout the centuries.

Justin Martyr

died ca. 165, in Rome



AFTER THE DEATH of the last of Christ's apostles, a new era for Christianity began. As the faith spread across the Roman world, it met many challenges to its claims and practices.

Internally, heresies and cultic expressions began to confuse and divide the church, demanding response from its theologians. Externally, persecution – never far away for the early Christians – grew, the Roman Empire having outlawed the Christian religion. A key reason that the Roman government – typically tolerant of the diverse beliefs of its many conquered peoples – so despised Christians was the exclusive devotion of these men and women to the rustic Hebrew figure of Christ, whom they worshiped as the Son of God. Accustomed to pantheons of lesser and greater divinities, Rome might have better tolerated Christians if they had not refused to participate in the obligatory emperor worship – a required show of loyalty not just to a god but to the empire itself. Refusal to profess

Caesar as lord was seen as treason and prosecuted with torture and summary execution.

It was into this world that Justin was born, to a pagan, gentile family living in Flavia Neapolis (the biblical town of Shechem). His education left him unsatisfied, as his teachers failed to engage the bright boy's mind. Always curious about God, Justin bounced from one school to another, seeking answers to his questions with teachers from the refined Stoic, Aristotelian, Pythagorean, and Platonic philosophical traditions.

While Plato's ideas very much appealed to him, it was not until Justin met an old Christian man while walking near the beach (possibly at Ephesus) that he found the truth he was looking for. Their conversation convinced Justin that the ancient prophets were a more reliable source of truth than the philosophers. He changed the course of his life and study, giving his heart and well-trained mind to God. Traveling and teaching, he began to speak of Christianity as the "true philosophy." He adopted the traditional gown of a philosopher, eventually traveling to Rome, where he founded a small school after the custom of the classic philosophers.

This began a period of public work and teaching. Justin was an outspoken apologist for the faith, addressing his *First Apology* directly to the emperor in response to persecution of Christians. Well-versed in philosophy and comparative religions, he sparred with opponents both inside and outside the faith, refuting heresies and advocating for Christians in the wider public sphere. His position that "seeds of Christianity" predated Christ's incarnation allowed him to look favorably on elements of pagan thought that corresponded with or supported the tenets of Christianity, and thus he could refute the accusations of even the most educated of his pagan neighbors.

But his combative defense of the faith eventually made him enemies in the city. One of the philosophers he had argued with,

a Cynic named Crescens, became a bitter enemy. According to Tatian, one of Justin's students, Crescens plotted against Justin and likely betrayed him to the authorities.

Whatever prompted their arrest, Justin and a group of his fellow Christians (likely his students) were captured and brought before the Roman prefect, Junius Rusticus. He addressed Justin, the obvious spokesman of the group. "Obey the gods at once," he demanded, "and submit to the emperors."

Justin, accustomed to defending his faith, replied immediately, "To obey the commands of our savior Jesus Christ is not worthy of blame or condemnation."

"What kinds of doctrines do you believe?" Rusticus asked.

"I have studied all faiths," Justin returned, "but I have believed in the true doctrines, those of the Christians – even though they do not please those who hold false opinions."

Rusticus felt the barb. "Are those the doctrines that please you, you utterly wretched man?"

"Yes," Justin replied.

"What do you believe?" the prefect asked again.

Justin answered, "We worship the God of the Christians, whom we believe to be one from the beginning, the maker and fashioner of the whole creation, visible and invisible, and the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who has been preached beforehand by the prophets as the herald of salvation. Since I am only a man, anything I can say is insignificant compared to his boundless divinity as the Son of God."

Rusticus questioned him further. "Where do you Christians meet?"

"Where each one chooses and can," Justin said, "Do you imagine we all meet in the same place? Not so – the God of the Christians is not limited by place, but being invisible, fills heaven and earth. He is worshiped and glorified everywhere by the faithful."

“Tell me where you assemble,” Rusticus pressed, “or into what place you collect your followers.”

“I live above a man named Martinus at the Timiotinian Bath,” said Justin. “I don’t know of any meeting in Rome other than this. If any wish to join me, I teach them the doctrines of truth.”

“Are you not, then, a Christian?” Rusticus demanded.

“Yes,” Justin said. “I am a Christian.”

Justin’s companions were also questioned, and gave steadfast witness to Christ. With their loyalties established, the prefect addressed Justin once again. “Listen, you who are called learned, you who think you know the truth. If you are scourged and beheaded, do you believe you will go up to heaven?”

Justin replied, “I hope that, if I endure those things, I shall have God’s gifts. For I know that all who have lived faithfully will abide in his favor until the end of the world.”

“You think you will ascend to receive some reward then?” Rusticus asked.

“I do not ‘think’ it, but I know and am fully persuaded of it,” Justin declared.

“Then let us come to the point of the matter,” the prefect continued. “You have come here together. Now sacrifice, with one accord, to the gods.”

“No right-thinking person falls away from piety to impiety,” Justin said.

“Unless you all obey, you will be mercilessly punished,” Rusticus threatened.

“Through prayer,” Justin replied, “we can be saved on account of our Lord Jesus Christ, even when we have been punished. This shall become salvation and confidence for us at another judgment seat – the more fearful and universal one of our Lord and Savior.” The other Christians agreed with Justin’s witness. “Do what you will,” they said. “We are Christians and do not sacrifice to idols.”

With this, the trial was concluded. Rusticus pronounced their sentence. “Let those who have refused to sacrifice to the gods and yield to the command of the emperor be scourged and led away to suffer the punishment of decapitation, according to the laws.”

Justin and his companions were taken to the customary place of execution. In accordance with their sentence, they were beaten and then beheaded. Their fellow Christians secretly retrieved their bodies and gave them an honored burial as martyrs, rejoicing that their companions had remained faithful and inherited eternal life.

Agathonica, Papyrus, and Carpus

*died AD 165, in Pergamum
(Bergama in modern Turkey)*



STANDING IN THE CROWDED STADIUM of Pergamum, a young woman named Agathonica watched as two of her fellow Christians, Papyrus and Carpus, were dragged out for questioning.

The Roman proconsul in charge of the proceedings asked for Carpus's name. "My first and chosen name is Christian," Carpus replied. Flustered, the proconsul demanded that Carpus follow the orders of Caesar and sacrifice to the Roman gods. Carpus responded that the Roman gods were nothing more than "phantoms" and "demons," warning his interrogator that "they who sacrifice to them become like them."

"You must sacrifice," the proconsul continued. "The Caesar has commanded it."

Carpus replied that there was no reason to sacrifice to something dead: “They were never even men, nor did they ever live that they could die. Believe me, you are caught up in a grave delusion.”

Turning to Papyrus, the proconsul tried a different tactic. “Do you have any children?”

Papyrus answered without hesitation, “Oh yes, many of them, through God.”

An observer in the crowd called out: “He means he has children by his Christian faith.”

Furious, the proconsul said, “You will sacrifice . . . or else! What do you say?” Like Carpus, Papyrus refused.

Carpus and Papyrus were hung up and flayed with instruments of torture. In spite of the torture, both held firmly to their faith. Seeing that they would never turn from Christ to worship the Roman deities, the proconsul decided to do away with them and ordered that they be burned at the stake. At this the guards nailed first Papyrus and then Carpus to stakes, and burned them alive.

Agathonica was moved by the devotion of the two martyrs. She recognized God’s glory in their actions and, though she was the mother of a young child, she felt called to step forward and join them. From the midst of the crowd she shouted, “This meal has been prepared for me. I must partake in it. I must receive the meal of glory.”

Those around her begged her to remain silent, so as not to abandon her son. She replied, “My son has God who can care for him, for He is the provider for all. But I, why do I stand here?” She tore off her clothes and stepped forward to join the others in martyrdom.

As they had done with Papyrus and Carpus, the Romans nailed Agathonica to a stake. Many in the crowd wept at the scene, and some began to cry out against the cruelty. But as her executioners set the wood ablaze, Agathonica shouted three times, “Lord, Lord, Lord, help me, for I fly to you.” These were her last words.

Perpetua

*died AD 203, in Carthage
(modern Tunisia)*



PERPETUA, A YOUNG CHRISTIAN in the African city of Carthage, was nearing the end of the time of training that every new believer received. She and several other new believers – Saturninus, Secundulus, Revocatus, and Felicitas – were preparing for baptism. Their little group of disciples typified the diversity found within the growing body of Christ. Perpetua was twenty-two, born to a wealthy family, and the mother of an infant son. Revocatus and Felicitas, who was pregnant, were both slaves.

But the group's Christian training was cut short when the Roman authorities of the province arrested them for refusing to worship the empire's deities. Though the current emperor was more tolerant of Christians than many of his predecessors, there was still widespread local persecution. Perpetua and her new friends were

imprisoned to await trial. She kept her baby with her. In solidarity, Saturus, another member of the group who had not been arrested with the others, turned himself in.

Soon after their arrest, Perpetua's father visited her. Knowing the danger to his daughter, he tried to convince her to turn away from her faith. She responded by pointing to some pottery in her cell. "Father, do you see this container lying here? Is it a little pitcher, or is it something else?"

"It's a pitcher," he replied.

Perpetua continued, "Can it be called by any name other than what it is?"

"No," he said.

Perpetua replied, "Neither can I call myself anything else than what I am – a Christian." Her father flew into a rage and attacked her physically. When he finally left, Perpetua gave thanks to God.

At this time, the prisoners were baptized in the prison and welcomed into the full community of the Christians. Perpetua's baptism was a deep source of encouragement for her.

Soon after, however, prison officials transferred the group to a worse section of the dungeon. Fearing for her baby in the dark, unhealthy environment, Perpetua asked her mother and brother to take him. Fortunately, it was soon arranged for the prisoners to be moved to a better part of the prison, where Perpetua could once again nurse and care for her child.

Perpetua's brother suggested that she ask God for a vision to discover the divine purpose of her captivity. Confident that she would receive one, she told him, "Tomorrow I will tell you." That night Perpetua saw an incredibly tall, narrow ladder made of gold and stretching to heaven. The ladder was beautiful except for one thing: all sorts of cruel weapons – swords, lances, hooks, and daggers – were attached to the sides of it, endangering reckless climbers. The weapons weren't the only danger; below the ladder

