

Wil Owens

Heroes of the Faith; Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna: Revelation 2:8-11

GPBC

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Introduction – October 31 is the calendar date for Halloween, and Halloween is mainly about costumes and candy. But October 31 is also a date on the church history calendar that marks a profound moment that continues to have ramifications even to our day. The year was 1517, the day was October 31, and the event was Martin Luther nailing his 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg. And thus began the Protestant Reformation.

So since October 31 represents such a significant moment in church history, I thought it would be good for us to pause each year around this date and reflect on the heroes of our faith. I've always heard if you don't study history you are destined to repeat the same mistakes. The same and more could be said of church history. As believers, there is much strength to draw from our rich heritage of so many who have gone before us. Their lives, their writings, their accomplishments, their failures are all part of that great cloud of witnesses that Hebrews speaks of. Studying church history we discover that the questions we have are not new questions and the fruit of much debate and wrestling with texts produced many of the answers for which we seek today.

One of the greatest blessings I have discovered in getting to know the heroes of faith is realizing the trials, hardships, and suffering they endured for the faith and how God faithfully sustained and carried each one. My faith is strengthened when I learn how their faith was strengthened, how the things I face have been faced before and much, much more, and how God's grace always proved sufficient.

So this morning I want you to time travel with me way back to the 2nd C and get acquainted with Polycarp, Bishop (pastor) of Smyrna. To introduce you to Polycarp, let's begin by telling the remarkable story of his death.

Imagine with me, the year is 156 AD and Christians are reported to commit treason for their refusal to conform to the worship of the Roman Emperor. In fact, Christians were called atheists for their denial that the emperor was God. Refusal to confess would be met with various forms of torture in an attempt to make the Christian deny his faith in the Crucified One and openly confess the emperor with

the words “Lord Caesar!” Under the brutal treatment, some would renounce their faith, but far more clung to their hope in Christ and were placed in the stadium to either be attacked by wild beasts or burned alive all to the throng of a cheering crowd of spectators. This was the highlight of the emperor’s entertainment.

When believers began to be arrested in Smyrna, Polycarp was in his late eighties and still serving as pastor. He wanted to stay but his followers urged him into hiding. One day while in prayer, hiding on a farm, he had a vision of his pillow on fire and he told those watching over him that God had revealed he would soon testify to his faith by being torched.

3 days later, Sunday, February 22, his friends rushed him to another location to avoid his apprehenders. On hearing that they were torturing others to learn of his location, he presented himself to them saying, “The will of the Lord be done.” He then provided his captors with a meal, and requested of them one hour to pray. They agreed and sat in wonder as he prayed for every believer he knew. They marveled that such a godly, old, and feeble man was being sought so furiously for execution.

The commander, whose name happened to be Herod, urged him the entire journey to his death, “Just say Lord Caesar, and you will be fine. What harm could that do? Just say Lord Caesar!”

When they finally arrived at the stadium, the crowds erupted in a roaring cheer that was deafening, but Polycarp and those traveling with him, heard as it were a voice from heaven saying, “Be strong, Polycarp. Play the man!”

When brought before the tribunal, the proconsul urged him, “Consider your age and those that love you. Swear by Caesar. Reproach Christ, and I will release you!” Polycarp replied, “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, who has saved me?”

The bitter proconsul retorted, “Swear by Caesar or I will have the wild beasts tear you apart.” The old man said, “Call them.”

In anger the proconsul responded, “If you do not fear the beasts, I will throw you to the fire!” He answered with confident and bold faith, “You threaten me with

fire, which burns for an hour and is soon extinguished; but the fire of the future judgment and eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly, you are ignorant of. Do to me what you please.”

When it was announced that he was to burn at the stake, the crowds roared with their approval. The wood was quickly assembled and he was brought to the stake. Usually the condemned would be nailed to the stake to prevent their escaping the fire, but Polycarp told the guards, “No need to fasten me to this stake. He who gives me strength to sustain this fire will enable me also to remain unflinching on this pile.” So in an unusual act of compliance, he was tied with ropes instead.

The fire was lit. But strangely the flames would not touch his body but formed a wall around him as if he were in an oven. Eventually one of the guards pierced him with a spear and as he died his body fell into the flames. His followers, most likely his church members, who gave the eyewitness account of his death, gathered up his bones and ashes as if they were gold and silver, buried them in a private location and would gather there every year to mark his death.

Such was the martyrdom of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, the oldest account of a Christian martyr outside of the pages of the NT. He lived well in the faith and he died well in the faith, refusing to deny his King who had saved him.

- I. Polycarp’s Life and Legacy
 - a. For Polycarp’s life – let’s go back to our text.
 - b. Polycarp came to faith at an early age and either at his conversion or soon after he came under the tutelage of the disciple John. The Disciple John disciplined Polycarp. Several historical accounts speak of their relation.
 - c. John wrote Revelation probably around 95 AD before the end of Domitian’s reign in 96 AD. Ignatius, who was the bishop of Antioch, and a contemporary of Polycarp, was martyred in Rome sometime before the end of Trajan’s reign in 117 AD. On his way to Rome, he wrote a letter to Polycarp.
 - d. Polycarp was already Bishop of Smyrna when he received Ignatius’ letter and somewhere in his mid 40s. Which means when the church at Smyrna read John’s Revelation and these messages to the churches, Polycarp was either already their pastor or soon would be.

Imagine reading these words from your spiritual mentor and being the pastor. The words “you are about to suffer” must have been felt with tremendous depth and would come true in Polycarp’s lifetime.

- e. He was said to be humble, modest, simple, direct, and without much learning. His style of writing bears witness to his description. Although he was said to have written many letters to churches and believers, we only have one of his letter today.
- f. He wrote a letter to the Philippians, same church and people that bear the same name in our NT. In his letter he speaks often of their founder, the Apostle Paul, and he quotes scripture often. One of his favorite NT authors of course is John. There are numerous references to I and II John.
- g. He was absolutely unyielding and uncompromising in his strong opposition against any deviation from “the faith once delivered.” Polycarp confronted 2 heresies in his lifetime. Which means the first generation of Christians were already facing false teachers who would twist or reject the Scripture. In fact, both of these heresies were beginning to form while the NT was being written. Paul’s writings refer to one and John’s refers to the other.
 - i. Gnosticism – a special group of super spiritual people had an inside secret knowledge about God and the Bible that most people didn’t have. You could have this knowledge too if you joined with them. That’s how all cults get started by the way.
 - ii. Docetism, which rose out of Gnosticism, was a denial of the literal human body of Christ. The Son of God didn’t have an actual body, it just appeared to be a body. 1 John
 - iii. Polycarp traveled to Rome to confront the perpetrators of these two heresies and their followers. It is said when he met Marcion, the founder of Docetism, Marcion greeted him something like, “Do you know who I am old man?” and Polycarp replied, “I recognize the firstborn of Satan.”
 - iv. While in Rome, standing and speaking for the truth, Polycarp won many followers to the truth of Christ.
- h. While he strongly opposed heresy, he dealt gently with those in the church who fell into sin. He confronted their error, but did so in love in the hopes of restoring them.

- i. Valens was one of the elders in the church at Phillipi and he and his wife were caught mishandling the money in the church and they were excommunicated. Polycarp, who was pastor of Smyrna, stepped into that situation and encouraged the church to not look upon Valens as an enemy but rather seek to restore him through repentance to the church that he and the church might be whole.
 - ii. Polycarp had such a reputation of handling matters with such grace and pastoral sensitivity that even the unbelievers in Smyrna respected him.
 - i. Just as he was disciplined by John, he too disciplined others. Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp. Irenaeus would become a great apologist of the Christian faith.
 - j. Unyielding in face of untruth, dealt with struggling believers with grace and truth, and invested and disciplined others.
- II. Polycarp's Death and Legacy
- a. Just two things I'll say briefly about Polycarp's death. How could an old man face such a brutal martyrdom with such heroic faith and courage. Many tried to convince him to just say the words and avoid all the pain. The proconsul tried to cause him to utter the words out of fear. Where did he find the strength to maintain the faith in the face of death? Two things are evident from his replies.
 - i. He feared the judgment of God more than the judgment of man. He knew the flame of hell was eternal but the fire of man was temporary. As Paul said, "These momentary trials are working for us a greater glory!" That's why Polycarp said to the proconsul, "The fire you threaten burns but an hour."
 - ii. Polycarp looked to Jesus and not to the persecution. 86 years have I served Him and He never did my wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me? Before the fire was lit, Polycarp, tied to the stake, prayed to the Lord, and some of his last words were these – I praise thee, I bless thee, I glorify thee.

Conclusion – that's the legacy of faith Polycarp leaves to us, that's the rich heritage of our history – whether in life or in death – that we might glorify our Savior because He's been so loving and so faithful to His own.