

THE STONES OF GOD'S WITNESS: SMYRNA— LESSONS IN LIVING AT THE END OF DAYS

SUFFERING THROUGH MANY TRIBULATIONS

A TRUE TEST

"A person¹ who claims to be a Christian and who does not give up his faith in the midst of trials and difficulties is a true Christian. His very perseverance proves the reality of his relationship with Jesus Christ. Pliny, Roman governor in Asia Minor in the early second century, was so puzzled about the Christians who were brought before him for trial that he wrote his famous letter to the Emperor Trajan asking for his advice. This was the kind of thing he found himself up against: A certain unknown Christian was brought before him, and Pliny, finding little fault in him, proceeded to threaten him.

"I will banish thee," he said.

"Thou canst not," was the reply. "For all the world is my Father's house."

"Then I will slay thee," said the governor.

"Thou canst not," answered the Christian, "for my life is hid with Christ in God."

"I will take away thy possessions," continued Pliny.

"Thou canst not, for my treasure is in Heaven."

"I will drive thee away from man and thou shalt have no friend left," was the final threat.

¹ Gene Getz, *Believing God when you are tempted to doubt*, p. 58-59.

And the calm reply once more was, "Thou canst not, for I have an unseen Friend, from whom thou art not able to separate me." What was a poor, harassed Roman governor, with all the powers of life and death, torture and the stake at his disposal, to do with people like that?

SMYRNA: LEARNING HOW TO DIE

The most important decision you will ever make in life is how you want to die! The saints at Smyrna wanted to die in Jesus.

Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, was martyred² on Saturday, 23rd February, A.D. 155. It was the time of the public games; the city was crowded; and the crowds were excited. Suddenly the shout went up: "Away with the atheists; let Polycarp be searched for." No doubt Polycarp could have escaped; but already he had had a dream vision in which he saw the pillow under his head burning with fire and he had awakened to tell his disciples: "I must be burnt alive."

His whereabouts was betrayed by a slave who collapsed under torture. They came to arrest him. He ordered that they should be given a meal and provided with all they wished, while he asked for himself the privilege of one last hour in prayer. Not even the police captain wished to see Polycarp die. On the brief journey to the city, he pled with the old man: "What harm is it to say, 'Caesar is Lord' and to offer sacrifice and be saved?" But Polycarp was adamant that for him only Jesus Christ was Lord.

When he entered the arena there came a voice from heaven saying: "Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man." The proconsul gave him the choice of cursing the name of Christ and making sacrifice to Caesar or death. "Eighty and six years have I served him," said Polycarp, "and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" The proconsul threatened him with burning, and Polycarp replied: "You threaten me with the fire that burns for a time, and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment. Why are you waiting? Come, do what you will."

So the crowds came flocking with faggots from the workshops and from the baths, and the Jews, even although they were breaking the Sabbath law by carrying such burdens, were foremost in bringing wood for the fire. They were going to bind him to the stake. "Leave me as I am," he said, "for he

² Barclay, William, Daily Study Bible Series: The Revelation of John - Volume 1 Chapters 1-5 (Revised Edition), (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) 2000, c1976, pp. 76-77.

who gives me power to endure the fire, will grant me to remain in the flames unmoved even without the security you will give by the nails." So they left him loosely bound in the flames, and Polycarp prayed his great prayer:

Lord God Almighty, Father of thy beloved and blessed Child, Jesus Christ, through whom we have received full knowledge of thee, God of angels and powers, and of all creation, and of the whole family of the righteous, who live before thee, I bless thee that thou hast granted unto me this day and hour, that I may share, among the number of the martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ, for the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and body in the immortality of the Holy Spirit. And may I today be received among them before thee, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as thou, the God without falsehood and of truth, hast prepared beforehand and shown forth and fulfilled. For this reason I also praise thee for all things. I bless thee, I glorify thee through the eternal and heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ, thy beloved Child, through whom be glory to thee with him and the Holy Spirit, both now and for the ages that are to come. Amen.

And there he stayed until the fires had consumed his life, and his spirit rose safe in the arms of Jesus. Polycarp died, a martyr for the faith.

It was not easy to be a Christian at Smyrna, and yet the letter to Smyrna is one of the two in which there is undiluted praise.

Martyrdom³

1. First of all, our lives do not belong to us anyway.
2. Secondly, we are all going to die anyway if the Lord does not come in the meantime.
3. Thirdly, the least we could do would be to die for Him.
4. Finally, it is criminal to hug our lives when through their reckless abandonment eternal blessing might flow to our fellow men.

The pathway to true discipleship begins when a person is born again. It begins when the following events take place:

1. When a person realizes that he is sinful, lost, blind, and naked before God.
2. When he acknowledges that he cannot save himself by good character or good works.
3. When he believes that the Lord Jesus Christ died as his Substitute on the Cross.
4. When by a definite decision of faith, he acknowledges Jesus Christ as his only Lord and Savior.

³ William MacDonald, (1975) True Discipleship, Kansas City, Kansas, Walterick Publishers, p. 4, and p. 72.

LISTEN TO THE ADMONITION v. 10a

10 "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life

Look out trouble is coming!

The early Church did indeed have just ten great persecutions under the Roman emperors, beginning with Nero and ending the Diocletian, whose last persecution and probably the most terrible of all, was just ten years long! Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, Severus, Maximum, Decius, Valerian, Aurelian and Diocletian, were the ten principal pagan persecutors. However, there was constant, though not always general trouble until Constantine's edict of toleration.

THE APPEAL v. 10b "Be Faithful Unto Death"

10 "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life

G.C. Morgan notes that "Faithful" means be convinced.

- ✓ Revelation 1:5 is the faithful witness.
- ✓ Christ is faithful so faithful saints are convinced they must rest on Him depending on what he says.
- ✓ Be convinced of Him, He will be your strength and courage.

And unless Christ returns soon all of us face the inevitability of death. Are you ready? Have you planned for the spiritual aspects of your death? So many only get the funeral arrangements and life insurance in order. There is so much more to plan and prepare for as a Christian. The Bible teaches us much about Dying Right! In the Scriptures we find seven good ways to die:

- I. JACOB'S 'S LIFE ENDS WITH HIM TRUSTING THE PROMISES OF GOD.
 - A. HE LOOKED FOR THE LAND OF PROMISE TO THE END! Genesis 47:29 And the time drew nigh that Israel must die: and he called his son Joseph, and said unto him, If now I have found grace in thy sight, put, I pray thee, thy hand under my thigh, and deal kindly and truly with me; bury me not, I pray thee, in Egypt: (KJV)

- B. HE FOLLOWED HIS SHEPHERD ALL THE WAY! Genesis 48: 15
Then he blessed Joseph and said, "May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day,
- C. HE TRUSTED HIS REDEEMER TO CARE FOR HIS SIN! Genesis 48: 16 the Angel who has delivered me from all harm -- may he bless these boys. May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac, and may they increase greatly upon the earth." (NIV)
- II. JOSEPH'S LIFE ENDS WITH HIM POINTING TO THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD. Genesis 50:24 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." (NIV)
- III. DAVID'S LIFE ENDS WITH HIM EXHORTING HIS FAMILY TO FOLLOW GOD. 1 Kings 2:1-4 When the time drew near for David to die, he gave a charge to Solomon his son. "I am about to go the way of all the earth," he said. "So be strong, show yourself a man, and observe what the LORD your God requires: Walk in his ways, and keep his decrees and commands, his laws and requirements, as written in the Law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all you do and wherever you go, and that the LORD may keep his promise to me: `If your descendants watch how they live, and if they walk faithfully before me with all their heart and soul, you will never fail to have a man on the throne of Israel.'" (NIV)
- IV. STEPHEN'S LIFE ENDS WITH HIM PRAISING GOD. Acts 7:59-60 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. (NIV)
- V. PAUL'S LIFE ENDS WITH HIM FINISHING THE PLAN LAID OUT FOR HIM BY GOD. 2 Timothy 4:6-8 for I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day -- and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (NIV)
- VI. PETER'S LIFE ENDS WITH HIM REMINDING THE SAINTS ABOUT THE WORD OF GOD. 2 Peter 1:12-15 So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things. (NIV)

VII. CHRIST'S LIFE ENDS WITH HIM POINTING THE WAY FOR ANOTHER TO GOD. Luke 23:43 And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." (NKJV)

Hymn # 321 "Living for Jesus"

THIS MORNING WILL YOU RISE AND AFFIRM WITH ME, LIKE -

1. Like JACOB I WILL SEEK TO LIVE TRUSTING THE PROMISES OF GOD.
 - a. He Looked for the Land of Promise to the end! Genesis 47:29
 - b. He Followed his Shepherd all the way! Genesis 48:15
 - c. He trusted his Redeemer to care for his sin! Genesis 48:16
2. Like JOSEPH I WILL SEEK TO LIVE POINTING TO THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD. Genesis 50:24
3. Like DAVID I WILL SEEK TO LIVE EXHORTING HIS FAMILY TO FOLLOW GOD. 1 Kings 2:1-4
4. Like STEPHEN I WILL SEEK TO LIVE PRAISING GOD. Acts 7:59-60
5. Like PAUL I WILL SEEK TO LIVE FINISHING THE PLAN LAID OUT FOR HIM BY GOD. 2 Timothy 4:6-8
6. Like PETER I WILL SEEK TO LIVE REMINDING THE SAINTS ABOUT THE WORD OF GOD. 2 Peter 1:12-15
7. Like CHRIST I WILL SEEK TO LIVE POINTING THE WAY FOR ANOTHER TO GOD. Luke 23:43