

POLYCARP – FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH

The Biblical city of Smyrna is now called Izmir and is one of Turkey's largest cities. Smyrna was 35 miles north of Ephesus. Lysimachus, one of Alexander's generals, rebuilt Smyrna in the 3rd century BC. The city was later established as a Roman commercial center with a port on the Aegean Sea. Scholars believe the city's population may have been about 100,000 in the early 1st century. When he addressed the seven assemblies of Asia in the Book of Revelation, the Apostle John warned them of the fierce persecution the Christians would face. Of all the believers martyred in Smyrna, the one whose name has become synonymous with courage and dogged loyalty is Polycarp. His name means "rich in fruit" or, more commonly, "fruitful."



The attitude toward Christians in the early Roman Empire can be gauged from the well-known letter of Pliny the Younger to the Emperor Trajan: *"Here is what I have done to date: I have asked them if they were Christians. If they have confessed, I have asked them a second and third time, threatening them with punishment. If they have persisted, I have commanded them to be led away to punishment. There really wasn't any doubt that pertinacious and inflexible obstinacy ought to be punished no matter what they might have confessed. There have been others afflicted with a similar insanity who – since they were Roman citizens – I have decided should be sent to Rome."*

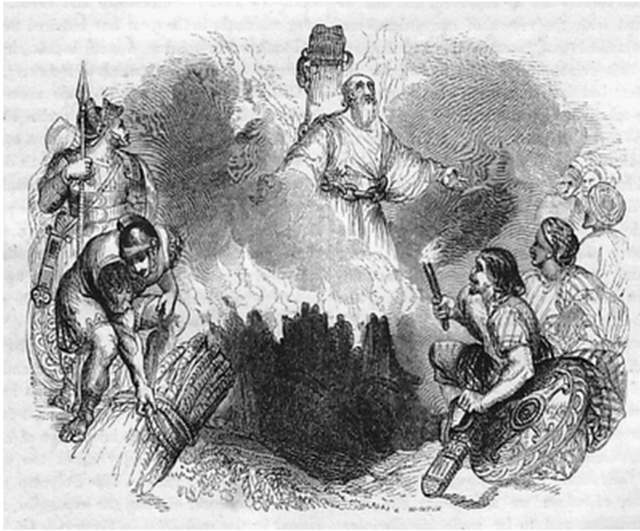
The "insanity" to which Pliny referred was the willingness to die rather than worship the emperor or his gods. The insistence of Christians that there was only one true God led to their being called "atheists" by the polytheistic Romans."



When Roman soldiers burst into the home where Polycarp was being sheltered, he called for them to be given refreshment and asked for an hour to pray. That hour stretched into two, and his prayers were so fervent and unselfish that the guards commented to each other that they were sorry to have to arrest such a man.

"I AM A CHRISTIAN"

Nevertheless, he was brought before the local proconsul, Statius Quadratus, who interrogated him in front of a hostile crowd. The proconsul urged him, "Swear, and I will release thee; -- reproach Christ." Polycarp answered, ***"Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, Who hath saved me?"*** The proconsul said: "I have wild beasts; I will throw you to them, unless you change your mind." Polycarp responded: *"Call for them! For the repentance from better to worse is a change impossible for us; but it is a noble thing to change from that which is evil to righteousness."* Then he said to him again: "I will have you consumed by fire, since you despise the wild beasts, unless you change your mind." But Polycarp said: *"You threaten with a fire that burns only briefly and after just a little while is extinguished, for you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. But why do you delay? Come, do what you wish."* The proconsul commanded him to say "Away with atheists," (meaning the Christians who refused to worship the Roman gods). With a sublime sense of humor and truth, Polycarp pointed at the jeering mob of unbelievers and cried out as instructed *"Away with the atheists!"* Unmoved by threats, his noble confession, was, *"I am a Christian."*



Enraged by his fearlessness, the crowds yelled, "Let him be burned!" Wood was collected and made into a pile. Polycarp asked not to be fastened to the stake. "*Leave me thus,*" he said, "*He who strengthens me to endure the flames will also enable me to stand firm at the stake without being fastened with nails.*"

As the woodpile was lighted Polycarp bravely lifted up a final prayer to God. The proconsul, fearing Polycarp's brave example would give fresh courage to other Christians, ordered a soldier to kill him. Polycarp's body was then destroyed by fire. Christians were able to collect his bones and as much of his remains as possible, to be decently interred.

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AN EXCERPT FROM SHELLEY: THE DEATH OF ST. POLYCARP

Now take the oath deny this Christ and free
 Art thou forever. But with unfaltering voice
 And words of calm severity the saint:
 "For six and eighty years Him have I served;
 For six and eighty years has He been pleased
 To bless that service, doing me no wrong.
 Shall I speak evil of my Lord and King?"

AN ANCIENT DESCRIPTION OF POLYCARP'S MARTYRDOM WHICH CIRCULATED AMONG THE BELIEVERS

"So it befell the blessed Polycarp who having with those from Philadelphia suffered martyrdom in Smyrna twelve in all is especially remembered more than the others by all men so that he is talked of even by the heathen in every place for he showed himself not only a notable teacher but also a distinguished martyr whose martyrdom all desire to imitate seeing that it was after the pattern of the Gospel of Christ. Having by his endurance overcome the unrighteous ruler in the conflict and so received the crown of immortality he rejoices in company with the Apostles and all righteous men and glorifies the Almighty God and Father and blesses our Lord Jesus Christ the Savior of our souls and Helmsman of our bodies and Shepherd of the universal Church which is throughout the world."

AN EXCERPT FROM POLYCARP'S LETTER TO THE ASSEMBLY AT PHILIPPI

"Polycarp and the presbyters that are with him unto the Church of God which sojourneth at Philippi; mercy unto you and peace from God Almighty and Jesus Christ our Savior be multiplied ... Let us therefore without ceasing hold fast by our hope and by the earnest of our righteousness, which is Jesus Christ Who took up our sins in His own body upon the tree, Who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth, but for our sakes He endured all things, that we might live in Him ... Let us therefore become imitators of His endurance; and if we should suffer for His name's sake, let us glorify Him. For He gave this example to us in His own person, and we believed this."