

Trial and Triumph

Trial and
TRIUMPH

STORIES FROM CHURCH HISTORY

RICHARD M. HANNULA

illustrated by MARCUS MASHBURN

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With love to my children—
Teri, Kelly, John, Kimberly, and Marie

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INTRODUCTION

For Christians, this book is a family history. Our sister, Blandina, faced the snapping jaws of wild beasts rather than renouncing Christ. Our brother, Ambrose, gave away his vast wealth to the poor and proclaimed the gospel to emperors and paupers. William Tyndale, our father in the faith, lived on the run and died at the stake to give us the Bible in English that we might read it for ourselves. If we do not know about our Christian forebearers, we cannot draw inspiration and encouragement from their lives nor praise God for His grace and power at work in them.

The Psalmist calls us to praise the Lord and “tell of His works with songs of joy.” God’s greatest works are not the creation of the mountains and seas but His acts of saving love, which transform sinners into children of God. These stories were not written to exalt great Christian men and women. They were written to exalt the Lord who made them great.

The book of Acts tells the story of the growth of the church under the leadership of the apostles. Through great trials they spread the good news of Jesus throughout the Roman world. The stories found in this book are drawn from the lives of those who served God in the years after the apostles rested in the grave. Within these pages, you will encounter Christians from widely different places, times, and stations—from slaves laboring in chains to regal monarchs reigning over vast empires. The stories are not fiction but

historically accurate, biographical sketches. The background events and actions of the subjects were drawn from the most reliable sources, and all quotations were taken directly from the subjects' own speeches and writings.

I wrote the sketches originally for my own children, but if other readers may, in some small way, find inspiration in these stories from church history, I will be pleased and grateful.

EARLY CHURCH

Facing Persecution, Fighting Heresy

The early church endured persecution from without and false teachers from within, but through every trial God proved faithful to bless and preserve His church. The first two stories portray the martyrdom of an old minister and a Christian slave girl, and it may seem odd to begin a book written to encourage young Christians with stories of believers suffering cruel deaths. The pagans hoped through brutal killings to wipe out Christianity, but God strengthened His children to stand firm in the face of death. The martyrs' faith and courage inspired many to follow Christ—"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints" (Ps. 116:15).

- Polycarp
Witness in the Arena
- Blandina
Martyr of Lyons
- Constantine
Defender of the Church
- Athanasius
Against the World
- Ambrose
Bishop of Milan
- Monica and Augustine
Christian Mother and Son
- Patrick
Missionary to the Irish

POLYCARP

Witness in the Arena

Polycarp, c. A.D. 69–155

“I will build my church,” Jesus said. “And the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” And He built it with shocking and glorious power. Christ burst from the tomb, showed Himself alive, and sent the Spirit in tongues of fire. This transformed the cowardly and confused disciples into valiant soldiers of the cross. They healed the sick, raised the dead, and boldly proclaimed the gospel. Thousands streamed into the Kingdom of God. Nothing like it had ever been seen before.

The Jewish religious leaders flogged the disciples and warned them to stop speaking about Christ. “Judge for yourselves,” the disciples answered, “whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God, for we cannot help speaking about all we have seen and heard.”

Fearing the growing number of Christians and hating their refusal to bow down to the pagan gods, the Roman emperors declared that following Christ was a crime punishable by death. They began blaming Christians for every calamity. One early Christian sighed, “If the rivers flood, or if there is drought or famine or plague, the pagans cry: ‘Throw the Christians to the lions!’”

The Romans put to death many of the first disciples of Christ, beheading Paul, crucifying Peter, and killing others by fire, sword, and beasts. They died with the words of Jesus ringing in their ears: “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.”

In the face of terrible persecution, the church grew stronger, expanding to the four corners of the Roman Empire and beyond. A new generation of Christian leaders arose to take

the place of the apostles and disciples. One of the foremost of these was a man named Polycarp. Here is part of his story.

Crouching low, hugging the sand, a lion circled the young man standing in the center of the arena. The crowd watched without making a sound. From the imperial box in the grandstands, the Roman governor looked on with a grin. The rulers of the Roman Empire called Christians “godless” because they refused to bow down to Roman gods or offer incense to the emperor. Here in Smyrna, the governor had ordered that any Christians unwilling to renounce their faith would be executed. So now this young man stood still, circled by the lion.

“Come now,” the governor shouted to the man. “You are young. A lifetime awaits you. It’s not too late. Some of your friends have just sworn the oath to Caesar. I will remove the beast, if you will do it. Swear the oath and you will live.”

The young man shook his head and stood his ground as the lion crept nearer. The lion paused and then pounced. In an instant the two were intertwined, with the animal tearing at the man with powerful swipes. The lion closed his massive jaws, and the young man went limp. The crowd cheered. “Death to the godless!” some shouted.

One of the Roman leaders spoke up. “He was just a follower.” Another shouted, “We want Polycarp, their leader! Death to the godless! Death to Polycarp!” Soon the chant sounded throughout the arena, “Death to the godless! Death to Polycarp!” The order was given, and a small troop left to arrest Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna.

Polycarp had been taught in his youth by the Apostle John, and he had led many people to faith in Jesus Christ. When the soldiers found Polycarp, they rushed him to the arena and hauled him before the Roman governor of the province. Upon seeing Polycarp, the crowd erupted with a roar, “Death to the godless! Death to Polycarp!”

Dressed in an embroidered robe of purple and gold, the governor stood in the imperial box, glaring down at Polycarp in his dusty tunic. He waved his hand and quieted the crowd. "Are you Polycarp, the teacher of the Christians?" the governor asked.

"I am," Polycarp answered.

"Have respect for the honor of your old age," the governor said. "Swear by Caesar and save yourself. Point to the Christian prisoners there and say 'Away with the godless.'"

Polycarp turned from the Christian prisoners, pointed to the pagan crowds, lifted his voice to heaven, and said, "Away with the godless."

The people gnashed their teeth at the insult. "How dare he call us godless!"

The governor tempted Polycarp a second time, "Swear the oath to Caesar and I will release you. Deny Christ!"

Polycarp stood straight and answered in a clear voice, "For eighty-six years I have been His servant, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

"Swear by Caesar!" the governor shouted.

"You try in vain to get me to swear by Caesar. Hear me plainly, I am a Christian!"

"I have wild beasts here," the governor said. "I will throw you to them unless you change your mind."

"Call for them," Polycarp answered.

"If you are not afraid of the beasts, I will have you burned alive."

"You threaten me with fire that burns for a little while and goes out," Polycarp said. "But you are ignorant of the fire of eternal punishment which is prepared for the ungodly. Why do you wait? Come and do what you want with me."

"This is the teacher of Asia," someone cried, "the father of the Christians, who teaches many not to worship our gods. Burn him!"

Soldiers tied Polycarp to a post and surrounded him with straw, oil-soaked kindling, and timber. Polycarp prayed aloud, “O Lord God Almighty, the Father of your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, through Whom we have received the knowledge of you: I bless You for granting me the honor of this day and hour that I might be numbered among the martyrs. You are the faithful and true God. To You be glory both now and for the ages to come. Amen.”

A long torch ignited the bonfire and a mighty flame leapt upward.

Polycarp’s courage in the face of death emboldened persecuted Christians throughout the empire to remain faithful to Christ.