

LEGENDS  FAITH



*Early Church*  
**FATHERS**

*Marilyn Boyer*

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# Introduction: Jesus, Paul, and John

Just before Jesus **ascended** to heaven, He explained to His disciples what He expected them to do. We now call His instruction “the Great Commission.” Jesus said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19–20). He

**ascended:** To rise up through the air

wanted them to take the gospel message to all people everywhere.

What is this precious gospel message? John 3:16 tells us, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”



Jesus never sinned, but God treated Him as if He were guilty of every sin committed by any person who would ever believe in His name. He died in our place, paying for our sin by His death on the Cross. Anyone who believes in His name is credited with His righteousness. Jesus bore our sins so we could bear His righteousness and be allowed to enter His holy heaven. We have the privilege to serve Him with our lives. As 2 Corinthians 5:21 tells us, “For He [God] made Him [Jesus] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” This was the message of life-giving good news that must be spread around the world to all people.

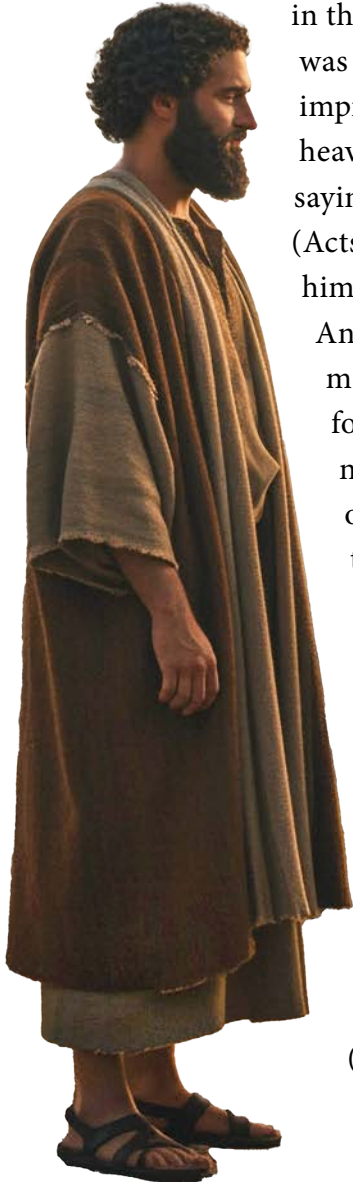
However, before He left them, Jesus also prepared the disciples for the reality that some people in the world would not want to hear the message. Jesus’ disciples should expect **persecution**. “If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20b). “The

**persecution: ill-treatment**

time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me. But these things I have told you, that when the time comes, you may remember that I told you of them” (John 16:2b–4). Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to help His disciples. Not everyone would face persecution, but some would, and Jesus wanted to prepare His followers for whatever they might face. Jesus promised that He would build His Church (a group of people who are saved, not a building), and nothing could prevent it (Matthew 16:18), despite times of great opposition.

## Paul

Saul of Tarsus was a man who was persecuting believers and putting them into prison just because they believed in the gospel. God had other plans for him. Saul was on his way to the city of Damascus to imprison more believers when a light from heaven surrounded him. He heard a voice saying, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” (Acts 9:4b). He was blinded, and his friends led him to the nearby city. God told a man named Ananias to go to him and tell him the gospel message. The Lord explained to Ananias, “Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before **Gentiles**, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake” (Acts 9:15b–16). Saul was specially chosen by the Lord to carry the gospel message to people who lived beyond Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. As the Lord **commissioned** him, He told him, “I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, That you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth” (Acts 13:47b).



**Gentiles:** People who are not Jewish

**commissioned:** Set apart for special service



His name was changed to Paul. He became the great Apostle who wrote many letters that became part of our Bible.

Paul did indeed have to suffer much for the sake of the gospel. He tells us in 2 Corinthians 11 that, among other dangers, he was beaten with rods, stoned, shipwrecked three times, suffered hardships from travel, experienced dangers from robbers, and spent time in prison, often being hungry and cold — all for the sake of carrying the gospel to others. He tells us in Philippians 3 that though he had suffered the loss of all things, he counted that but **rubbish** so that he might gain Christ and be graciously given Christ's righteousness through faith. In this way, we see how Paul

**rubbish:** Garbage

was a faithful servant entrusted with preserving and spreading the gospel.





## John

Paul was acquainted with the disciples of Jesus Christ. One of those faithful disciples was the Apostle John, who loyally served by Jesus' side while He lived on earth. John recorded much truth for us in the Gospel of John; the epistles of 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John; and the Book of Revelation. John was one of Jesus' first disciples. He was a son of Zebedee, a Galilean fisherman. He was present for most of the events of Jesus' earthly ministry. He was there when Jesus spoke the Sermon on the Mount. He witnessed many instances of healing and many miracles, such as the feeding of the five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish. He was also present at the Last Supper, in the Garden of Gethsemane, and at Jesus' crucifixion. It was John that Jesus asked to care for His mother after He died.

He was known as "the disciple whom Jesus loved," as he tells us in John 21:20. John recorded many of the events in the Bible which give us so much insight about Jesus' life and character. John 20:30–31 tells us his purpose for writing this book: "And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name."



John, too, had to face persecution because he believed in the gospel. He was exiled to the island of Patmos, a remote Roman colony in the Aegean Sea where prisoners were sent for punishment. Revelation 1:9 states, “I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation ... was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.” Historians think he was there a little over a year during Domitian’s reign as emperor of Rome. We don’t know how the Apostle John died, but it was of natural causes. It is thought that he died around A.D. 98 or 99 in Ephesus. John, the youngest of the disciples, outlived them all. We do know that during his life, he discipled a man named Polycarp, and this will be the first story in our book.

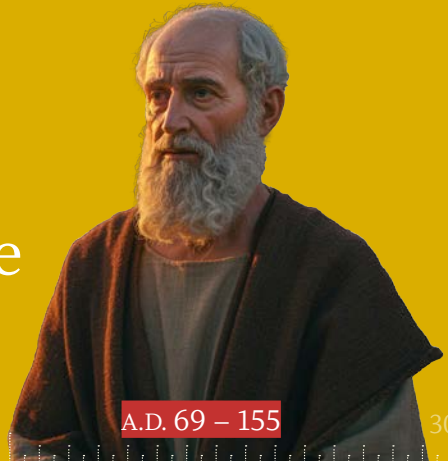


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# Polycarp

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## Disciple of the Apostle John



150 100 50 B.C. 0 A.D. 50 A.D. 69 - 155 300

“Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and He never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”

**Smyrna** (Modern İzmir, Turkey) – Polycarp was born in Smyrna, an important ancient city in Asia Minor.

**Rome** – He traveled to meet with Pope Anicetus around A.D. 155 to discuss differences in the date of Easter.

**Ephesus** – Tradition holds that Polycarp was a disciple of the Apostle John, who ministered here. This city was a major center of early Christianity and may have influenced Polycarp’s theological training.

**Philippi** – Polycarp wrote a letter to the church here, encouraging them to remain steadfast in their faith. This epistle remains one of the most important writings from early church fathers.

**Smyrna Stadium** (İzmir, Turkey) – Polycarp was martyred in the stadium of Smyrna around A.D. 155. His martyrdom is one of the earliest recorded accounts of Christian faithfulness under persecution.



## Who Was Polycarp?

Can you imagine what it would be like to learn about Jesus while sitting at the feet of the Apostle John? Well, that is exactly what happened to a man named Polycarp when he was young. When he was older, Polycarp became a **bishop** of Smyrna, in present-

**bishop:** An elder in charge of a local church or churches

**martyr:** One who dies for the sake of the gospel

**blaspheme:** Deny

day Turkey. Polycarp became a **martyr**. He lived a long life. Roman authorities offered him the chance to save his life if he would deny Christ. He bravely responded, “Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and He never did me any wrong. How can I **blaspheme** my King who saved me?”<sup>1</sup>

## Born to Christian Parents

Polycarp grew up in Smyrna, a large Roman province in Asia. His parents were Christians and taught him about Jesus. His grandfather had been a young man when Jesus died on the Cross and rose on the third day. One of Jesus’ disciples, the Apostle John, had come to Smyrna. He told Polycarp’s mother and father that Jesus had died to take the punishment





for their sins. He told them how Jesus had risen from the dead to offer them eternal life. Polycarp had opportunities to sit and listen as John related stories of how Jesus had healed the sick and made the blind see. John used to say, “All the libraries in the world could not hold the books I could write about Jesus.”<sup>2</sup> Influenced greatly by John’s teachings, Polycarp became a Christian at a young age.

## History of Smyrna

Citizens of Smyrna were very loyal to the Roman government. The Romans worshiped many “gods” instead of the One true God. They became very concerned when Christians refused to worship other “gods.” Often when a disaster happened, the Roman people blamed Christians for angering the “gods.” When the Christians refused to call the Roman emperor “Lord,” Rome felt it was **justified** in persecuting the Christians.

**“gods”:** Statues, images, or even ideas worshiped instead of the One true God

**justified:** Right

## The Death of John

When Polycarp was about 30 years old, his friend Papias came with the news that the Apostle John was dying. Polycarp hurried to **Ephesus** to see his teacher one more time. However, because travel took so long, John passed away before Polycarp arrived. Polycarp

**Ephesus:** A large city in Asia Minor

remembered the words Paul had written in a letter to believers in Thessalonica: “But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13–14). His friend reminded him that the Apostles had spread light to the world, but it was Jesus Christ who was the Light. It was up to Polycarp, Papias, and the Christians remaining on earth to pick up the torch of truth and pass it on to others.

## Bishop of Smyrna

Within a year of John’s death, Polycarp was appointed bishop of the church at Smyrna. When the Apostle John was **exiled** to the island of Patmos, one of his letters was addressed to the church at Smyrna. It told the believers there they would be called to suffer.

At the end of the letter, he told them to be faithful unto death. He promised them a crown of

**exiled:** Forced to leave his country





life if they remained unwavering to the end. Polycarp taught this to believers and encouraged others to persevere no matter what might happen to them.

Christians not only had to deal with Rome's injustices, but some men began to spread false teachings. One group of these false teachers was called Nicolaitans. They were mentioned by the Apostle John in Revelation, where he condemned their practices. They were compromising God's truth and leading other Christians to take part in **pagan** religious **rituals**. Polycarp worked to teach Christians to stand steadfast, holding on to the truths of Scripture. He taught his congregation to "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8). He also taught his congregation to put off lying, anger, and bad language, and to put on love, kindness, forgiveness, and humility, as Paul wrote to members of the Galatian church.



**pagan:** Ungodly

**rituals:** Practices or ceremonies

## Polycarp Is Hunted

In 155, several Christians were to be tried before the Roman **proconsul** in Smyrna during a pagan festival. A crowd of onlookers gathered to watch the proceedings. Three of the Christians gave in to the pressure to **renounce** Christ

**proconsul:** Governor of a province in ancient Rome

**renounce:** Formally abandon





when their lives were threatened by a tortuous death. One of the Christians, however, chose to cling to Christ and was martyred in a gruesome way. The crowd was wild and began hollering that they wanted to see Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, put to death. They reasoned that if the leader were killed, perhaps the Christians would just give up and worship the emperor.

Members of Polycarp's congregation helped him take refuge in an old, abandoned farmhouse. They were determined to protect their leader. They fixed him a nice breakfast, and after eating, Polycarp went to his room to read the Scriptures and pray for his people and for peace in Smyrna.

Sometime later, Polycarp joined his friends. They could tell something had upset him. He recalled being deep in prayer when he felt that he was about to be called to suffer a martyr's death. He was now 86 years old but still a very able man. His friends felt that they needed his guidance and leadership. He had been their beloved pastor for many years. They were shocked at his words but saw his deep resolve to be faithful to his Lord until the end.

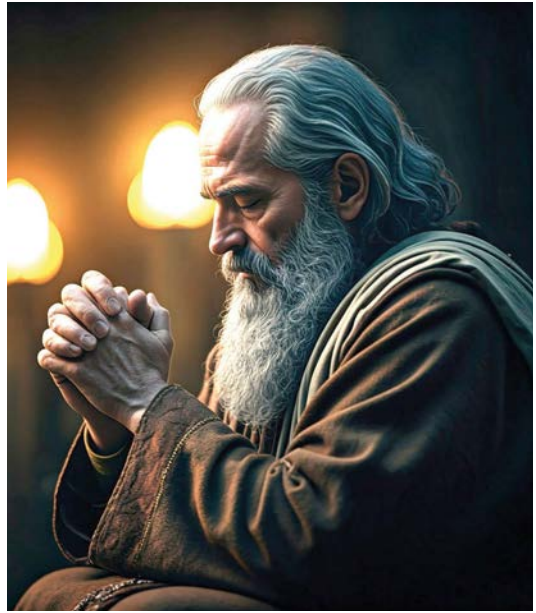
Polycarp went to his room to reread a letter that Ignatius, an older fellow believer, had sent him many years ago, just before Ignatius had been martyred. It said, “Polycarp, a Christian is not lord of his own life, but he has time only for God. This is the work of God—and it will be yours too, when you fulfill your destiny. By grace, I trust that you are ready to do a good work for God. . . . Farewell in the Lord.”<sup>3</sup> He held the letter to his chest while praying for strength and courage to meet his end. He also prayed that he would get an opportunity to share the glorious gospel with those who wanted to kill him.

### **Polycarp Returns Good for Evil**

Search parties were looking all over for Polycarp. Suddenly, they burst into the farmhouse where he was staying. They demanded that Polycarp be turned over to them. Polycarp calmly greeted them, remarking that they looked tired and hungry. He invited them to sit and rest while his men prepared a fine supper for them. When the meal was ready, Polycarp asked for time to pray, and they permitted him. The Roman soldiers were amazed by his attention



to their needs. Polycarp sat in a corner of the room and, within their hearing, began to pray. The men heard every word as he prayed for them. No one had ever prayed for them before. He also prayed for the church at Smyrna, that his people would be faithful to offer the good news of the gospel to all men. After an hour, he joined the



others for something to eat. It was late by then, and the **centurion** decided to wait until morning to transport him back to the city. The soldiers took turns watching Polycarp during the night, although Polycarp had no intention of escaping. He was ready to give his life for Jesus.

**centurion:** Roman commander

## A Martyr's Death

It was February, A.D. 156, when the party reached the city gates of Smyrna. They were met by Herod, the commander of the Roman army, and Herod's father Nicetes. Herod asked Polycarp to climb into his carriage. He and his father questioned him as they entered the city. Polycarp answered them, pleading for Herod and his father to repent of their sins and call upon the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. This

angered Herod. He pressured Polycarp to say simply, “Caesar is Lord.” As the carriage rode into the arena, Polycarp saw crowds of spectators waiting to see him put to death. In front of the crowds, he was told to proclaim allegiance to Emperor Antony. Calmly but boldly, Polycarp called out so all could hear, “Eighty-six years have I served Him [Jesus Christ] and He never did me any injury or proved Himself faithless. How then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?”<sup>4</sup> Loudly, Polycarp proclaimed, “I am a Christian. I am a Christian.” He was tied with ropes and burned at the stake while lifting his voice in prayer.

The Romans believed the way to defeat an enemy was to target and destroy its leadership. They had hoped to snuff out Christianity with this wicked act, but as Jesus promised, nothing could prevent Him from building His Church. Some of Polycarp’s friends watched as he died. Later they wrote, “We will never be able to deny Jesus Christ. We will never be able to worship anyone else. We loved Polycarp and others like him. We will be disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ just like them.”<sup>5</sup>





Shortly after Polycarp's death, the Smyrnaean church wrote a detailed account of his last days, as well as the words he spoke before he died. It was put into a letter and sent to the churches all over Asia Minor. What was meant to defeat the spread of God's glorious gospel was actually the fuel that lit a fire of inspiration and resolve in many believers. The Church of Jesus Christ grew more and more as a direct result of Polycarp's life and death.