

## 12. Perpetua and Felicitas ± 200 AD

**E**mperor Marcus Aurelius, that fierce persecutor of the Christians, had died, to appear before the throne of the living God. He must give an account of much innocent blood, shed at his command. For the next twenty years, the Christians enjoyed some peace from the terrible and bloody persecutions.

### EMPEROR SEVERUS

Another emperor ascends the throne of the Roman empire. His name is Severus. This time the new ruler is not a Roman citizen but a man from Africa, an Ethiopian. For many years he had commanded part of the Roman army.



*Emperor Severus 145-211 AD*

After the death of Marcus Aurelius his soldiers proclaimed him emperor.

The first ten years of his reign he did not allow the persecution of Christians. On the contrary! He treated them kindly.

There were even Christians in his service! Some were even his personal attendants!

Some historians tell us that once Severus was dangerously ill. He sought help and recovery from the pagan doctors, but they could not cure him. Severus became so sick that everybody thought he would die. At their wit's end, they called on a

Christian doctor to see him and, beyond all expectation, he recovered. This possibly made him favourably inclined towards the Christians.

Unfortunately, it did not stay that way, because one day Severus went on a journey. He paid a visit to all the countries in the eastern part of his vast empire. During that trip, he noticed that in many places pagan temples were empty and deserted. The priests had very little to do because almost no one went to their temples anymore to bring offerings to the gods. On the other hand, the churches of the Christians were overflowing!

This discovery shocked Severus. He had not realised that Christianity had spread so widely. After he returned to Rome and his beautiful palace, he thought about what he had seen and decided that this had to change; paganism was not allowed to disappear! He decided that whoever *was* a Christian, could *remain* so, but commanded that no one was permitted to change from paganism to Christianity anymore.

We understand that this new law could not possibly stop the gospel. God continued to convert pagans, who then had no choice but to defy this command of the emperor.

They turned their back on paganism and became Christians.

This caused terrible persecution to erupt again.

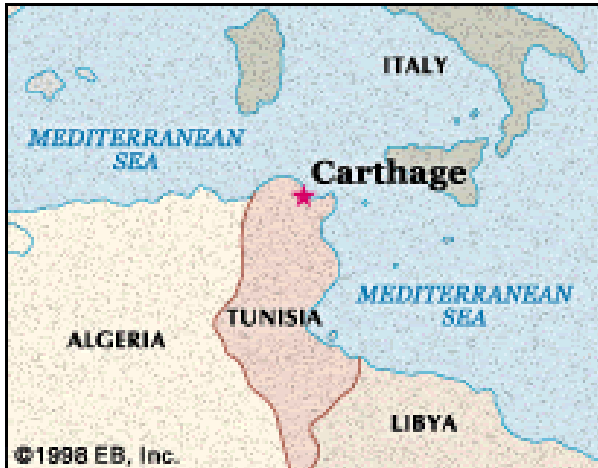
New Christians in the far East and North Africa especially, suffered severe persecutions. The number of martyrs who lost their lives through this persecution is only known to God. Who can comprehend the suffering they endured? Only God can!

In this chapter, I will tell you something about a few martyrs of this persecution.

Just pay attention.

## CATHARGE

On the north coast of Africa, lies the city of Tunis. Many years ago this was the location of the great and prosperous city of Carthage. In that city is a flourishing Christian Church; regularly, new members are baptised and join the congregation.



*Carthage was a prosperous city during the second century.*

Many young and old pagans express their desire to serve the one true God. Before baptism, they receive instruction in the Christian doctrine. That still happens today, when you attend catechism classes, doesn't it? There was also a catechism class for beginners in Carthage. Then, suddenly, emperor Severus commands that nobody may turn to Christianity anymore. They are not permitted to teach the gospel, and he strictly forbids the administration of baptism to new converts. These new laws should stop the church from growing. But instead of obeying this imperial command, they continue with catechism lessons as usual.

Why?

Because they have to obey God rather than the emperor!

And so, terrible persecution erupts in Carthage. The pagan officials watch carefully to make sure that the new imperial laws are obeyed. The new converts are the main focus of this persecution.

## PERPETUA

Perpetua, a young 22-year-old lady, is one of the first prisoners taken. Perpetua belongs to one of

the most distinguished and prominent families of Carthage.

She is wealthy.

She lives in a beautiful house.

She is married to a distinguished young man, and she has a child who is only a few months old.

Perpetua's father is still an outright pagan, but her mother secretly belongs to the Christians, while two of her brothers are already members of the Christian congregation. In this way, Perpetua hears much about the gospel, and it makes a deep impression on her, and she can no longer remain a pagan.

God works this change in her heart, and she can no longer continue to serve idols. Believing, she learns to love the Lord Jesus as her Saviour.

She cannot and will not deny Christ; she boldly speaks of her faith. She cannot and will not obey the command of the emperor.

Because of that, the pagan officials soon take her prisoner.

They lock her up in a gloomy prison, separated from her husband and baby. What a turn her life has taken:

not a beautiful home, but a dark, musty prison cell;

not a soft bed, but a hard, cold floor.

There sits the young mother. With all her heart, she longs for her little son. She has tears in her eyes; she is a true mother who dearly loves her little son.

And yet...? Say farewell to her new Master and return to paganism?

That is impossible!

She cannot deny the Lord Jesus Who delivered her from her guilt. Suddenly she gets a fright as she hears footsteps coming closer and stopping at her cell door. The door is unlocked and ... her father enters the dark, stuffy hole.

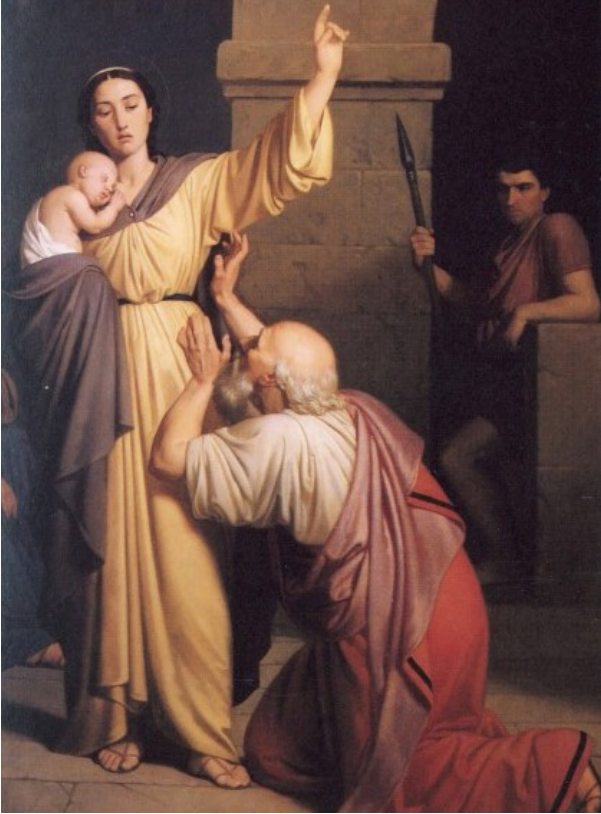
Perpetua loves her father very much, yet she is frightened because she immediately realises why her father has come to visit her: he will try to make his daughter renounce her faith. Sure enough, she is not wrong. Her father begs her to turn her back to the gospel.

"Think of your child! Think of your mother! Pity me!" he implores with tears in his eyes.

Perpetua also cries, but she cannot and may not obey her beloved father, and so she steadfastly

refuses. She loves the Lord Jesus more than her earthly father.

When her dad notices that she ignores all his pleas, he gets angry with his daughter. He orders



*"Think of your child! Think of your mother! Pity me!"*

her to obey him. He threatens, yes, he even hits her. This made Perpetua suffer even more, but she does not give in. What a severe struggle this must have been! Finally, desperate with grief, her father leaves. A few days later, they transfer Perpetua to the general prison where other Christians are locked up. There her brother and mother visit her, together with her little son. Sadly, she may not keep her baby with her. This is so difficult for Perpetua that she loses weight because of her intense suffering.

One day she is locked up in another cell, and this time her child may stay with her. Oh, why now, and not before? Well, her wealthy family had arranged this. The pagan officials allowed it, hoping that the love for her child is greater than her love for Christ and that it will prompt her to renounce her faith. Shall they succeed?

## THE PUBLIC TRIBUNAL

The large market square in Carthage is packed full of people. It looks as if the whole city has come to the market square.

Why?

What is there to see? ... Just look! There stands a group of Christian prisoners. They are on show. The foolish crowd shouts and screams, ridicules, and insults. They boo the Christians.

The governor of the Roman empire is present too. He will ask each of them if they are Christians, and they must answer clearly for all to hear. Perhaps the pagans hoped that the Christians would be too scared and ashamed to confess their faith publicly, and renounce it instead. When it is time for the examination to begin, the noise stops, and it becomes breathlessly quiet. They all listen intently. One by one the governor asks each of the Christians:

"Are you a Christian?"

Without hesitating, they all answer that question with a clear:

"Yes."

Perpetua is also part of that group of Christians. Finally, it is her turn. It becomes even quieter. What will this wealthy, prominent and well-known Perpetua do? But before the governor can ask her the deciding question, a grey-haired man steps forward. He carries a child in his arms. Who is that?

That man is Perpetua's father. He has come to make a final attempt to get her to renounce her faith and return to paganism. Look, he holds that little child out to Perpetua and cries:

"Take pity on your child!"

The governor is moved deeply by this gesture. He says:

"Have compassion on your loving father; have compassion on your beautiful child; just make an offering to the emperor."

It is perfectly quiet in the marketplace. The crowd waits in breathless suspense.

What will Perpetua say?

Doesn't she love her father?

Doesn't she love her child?

Yes, she loves both dearly, and yet ... and yet...?

Look, she turns her head away and ... refuses!  
No, she cannot acknowledge the emperor as her god. She cannot bring an offering to the emperor because the Lord Jesus is her King, her Saviour. Just as once, ages ago, Abraham gave up his beloved son Isaac and offered him at God's command, so here, Perpetua gives up her child and father. She refuses to deny her Saviour for the sake of her father and her child.

The governor asks her, "Are you a Christian?"  
Boldly and clearly, she answers: "Yes."

Now she is condemned to death, just like the other Christians. At a nod from the governor, the soldiers step forward to take the captive Christians back to prison.

Perpetua's dad seizes his daughter and wants to take her with him. Sternly the soldiers command him to let her go. But the poor man, desperate with sorrow, refuses to obey that command. Finally, he is forced to let go of her as the soldiers started beating him. They rudely chase him from the market place. Stumbling, the poor man leaves.

Perpetua sees all this. She thinks it's *terrible* that her father gets beaten so unmercifully, but she may not give in. When she returns to prison, her child is not there anymore. Her father kept the little boy with him and so made Perpetua suffer even more!

### IN THE AMPHITHEATRE

It is several days later.  
Carthage is celebrating!  
It is the emperor's birthday, and that's the day the Christians will be put to death. The curious crowds



*Perpetua and Felicitas*

fill the large amphitheatre to overflowing. Even the streets are full of people. The gate of the prison opens, and the condemned Christians walk



*Perpetua and the slave girl Felicitas. Felicitas was eight months pregnant when she died*

outside. They are all young people.

The young men go ahead. Behind them walk two women. One of the women is Perpetua. Who is the other one?

She is a slave named Felicitas.

She and her husband were also converted to Christianity and made prisoner.

Look, the two women walk together. One is wealthy and prominent, the other a slave. But those two love each other like sisters because they both sincerely love the Lord Jesus. They are one in faith. Perpetua looks straight ahead because she senses that everyone is looking at her. Felicity looks around freely with a serene smile on her face.

This is their last walk.

They are going to meet death. But they do not fear the end.

They enter the place where the wild animals await them. The women must enter the arena first. Look, there they stand, two delicate figures alone in the wide-open space. The gate opens, and a snorting, raging bull emerges. For a moment, the furious animal blinks at the glare of the sunlight. Then the bull notices the women and runs toward them, head down, horns ready for attack.

Perpetua is hurled to the ground and wounded. Dazed, she gets up and looks around. She sees Felicitas lying bleeding on the ground. Felicitas is severely wounded. Perpetua runs toward her. With one hand, she keeps her torn clothes together, and with the other, she lifts Felicitas. She carefully puts her arm around the wounded slave, and, pale as death, they wait for the next attack from the ferocious animal. But when the crowds see the girls stand there like that, they have compassion on them. They demand that both women are taken away. This happens. At the gate of the arena, Perpetua's brother is waiting for her to support her. Perpetua is totally confused. She asks: "When is that angry cow going to be let loose on us?" When her brother tells her that this has already happened, she finds it hard to believe.

In the meantime, the soldiers send the young men into the arena. Leopards and bears are released from their cages and attack their prey. A few terrible moments and the young Christians lie torn to pieces on the ground.



*A gladiator with a sword will kill all who are still alive.*

Now Perpetua and Felicitas must enter the arena again. A gladiator with a sword will kill all those who are still alive. He kills both Perpetua and Felicitas. So those young Christians, including the two women, entered eternal glory. The way of suffering was extremely hard, but... that was only for a moment. Eternal bliss awaited them but *not* their tormentors.

Poor, poor pagans! Now *they* are tormented endlessly. There will be a vast difference between the Christians and their tormenters in eternity! Don't you think?

I told you these stories to show you that God's grace makes us capable of all things. Not the devil, but God is victorious. Here, not paganism, but Christ conquers.

The Christians did not deny their Saviour but remained faithful unto death, and they received the crown of life.

### QUESTIONS

1. Why was Severus tolerant of Christians?
2. What caused him to alter his views?
3. Why was Severus concerned about the extent of Christianity?
4. What was the new law he made?
5. Why was instruction necessary before becoming a member of the congregation?
6. List the three commands of Severus.
7. Why couldn't Perpetua be a Christian in secret?
8. What were the temptations placed before Perpetua while in prison?
9. Identify Felicitas.
10. What was the author's primary purpose in relating these stories?

### FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Why would a departure from paganism be so disturbing for the Roman state?

2. What is necessary before becoming a member of the church today?

3. Read Matthew 10. Find a text which shows why Perpetua must reject her father's pleas.

4. Show from this chapter that there is no barrier between rich and poor, bond or free in Christ Jesus.