

## 9. POLYCARP

### MARCUS AURELIUS

Some distance north of Ephesus, in Asia Minor, lies the city of Smyrna. In those days, Smyrna was a thriving trade centre. Through the preaching of the gospel, a flourishing Christian congregation existed there.

But in Smyrna too, persecution broke out. The Christians were hunted, arrested and put to death in many cruel ways. The most brutal tortures were invented, but the Christians faced death with great courage.

When emperor Trajan died, persecutions stopped for a while. The two emperors who succeeded Trajan were not fiercely opposed to Christianity.



Marcus Aurelius  
121-180 AD

Every now and then persecutions flared up in certain areas, but they usually did not last long.

The next emperor, however, was fanatic in persecuting the believers. His name is *Marcus Aurelius*. Oh, Marcus Aurelius was not a bad emperor as such. Some writers tell us that he was one of

the best emperors who ever reigned over the Roman world empire. But during his reign, the Roman empire was attacked both in the west and the east by hostile nations.

Marcus Aurelius did not have an easy time as emperor. On several occasions, the emperor was involved in heavy fighting with those hostile tribes, and...the Christians got the blame *again!* They were apparently the cause of all that misery! They no longer sacrificed to the gods, and therefore the gods were punishing them!

Marcus Aurelius re-introduced the laws which Trajan had made against the Christians and

persecution broke out again. Especially the congregations in Asia Minor suffered severely, including the one in Smyrna. The Lord Jesus had revealed this to the apostle John at Patmos. Just read Revelation 2:8-11. There we read: 'And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write...

With 'the angel of the church' the bishop or minister in Smyrna is meant. In a moment you'll hear who he was. In verse 10, we read: *'The devil is about to throw some of you in prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days.'* Here you see that the Bible prophesies that persecution would come to Smyrna. *That* persecution was now raging.

The gentiles and the Jews stirred up the Roman governor, and many Christians were thrown to the wild animals. Some Christians had themselves arrested on purpose because they desired the martyr's crown. That was not right; no-one needs to or may seek death. Life is a gift from God, and we may not wilfully endanger it.

### QUINTUS

A certain Quintus did that. He went to the Roman governor and said, "I also am a Christian. You may arrest me." That happened. But when he saw how other Christians were torn apart by wild animals and tortured, he began to tremble violently. He became so afraid that he retracted everything. He sacrificed to the gods, ridiculed the Christians and returned to paganism. He was not a true Christian. He sought a martyr's death, to earn God's favour, but when it came to the crunch, he denied everything.

At times God removes the fear and sting of death for those who are called to die a martyr's death so that they can face death fearlessly. But usually, death is and remains the last enemy which must be overcome. Never think little of life; never sneer at death.

## GERMANICUS

A large crowd gathers around the judgement seat of the Roman governor at Smyrna. It becomes quiet; all eyes turn to a young Christian who has been arrested and now appears before the governor.

“Oh, look at that young boy. Must he also be killed?”

This is what the people whisper. The pagan crowd, who want to see the Christians destroyed, take pity on him. This young Christian's name is Germanicus. The governor sees him come, and he also feels sorry for him.

He speaks kindly to Germanicus. He tries to tempt Germanicus away from Christianity.

“You are still so young,” he says persuasively, “why should you sacrifice your young life? Just recant and sacrifice to our gods, and I will set you free.”

What will Germanicus' answer be? Everyone waits in suspense.

Calmly, the young Christian shakes his head; he firmly refuses. No matter what the governor says, however friendly he talks to Germanicus, it does not help. The lad refuses even to consider returning to the pagan idols. Germanicus cannot deny his Saviour because he genuinely loves the Lord Jesus.

When he continues to refuse, the governor gets angry. He threatens:

“If you refuse to do what I command, I will have you thrown to the wild animals. They shall tear you to pieces.”

Yes, his servants even take Germanicus to see those bloodthirsty animals, hoping that he becomes afraid.

With gleaming eyes, those wild animals watch their prey. Yet, instead of becoming afraid, the brave Germanicus walks towards those wild animals and, according to some writers, he holds his arms out to them.

Angrily, the governor sees all this. Then he commands for the cage to be opened and soon this young Christian is torn to pieces. He remained faithful unto death. By grace, he has received the

crown of life; by grace, he entered into eternal glory.

Breathlessly the multitude watched this terrible scene, but then they become furious.

Furious?

Why?

With who do they get so angry?

Listen.

“This is all Polycarp's fault!” they scream.

“Polycarp has sent this boy to his death because he made him a Christian! Away with Polycarp!”

Polycarp? ... Who is he? ... Listen, I will tell you.

## POLYCARP

Earlier, we mentioned the 'angel of the church in Smyrna' from the book of Revelation. That 'angel of the church' was most probably Polycarp. He is a grey-haired man of nearly one hundred years old. Polycarp was also a student of the apostle John, just like Ignatius, whose story you read in the previous chapter. Polycarp was appointed by John as bishop, as minister at Smyrna.



Polycarp 69-156 AD

He worked there for many years. Some writers tell us that he held that office for some 60 - 70 years. He was a faithful and sincere preacher, known

and much loved in the whole region. Everyone spoke of him with great respect.

He even went to Rome but soon returned to his beloved congregation at Smyrna. He also wrote letters to the various churches in that area. Now the angry pagans demanded the death of this old man.

Polycarp wants to wait quietly to see what will happen to him. He entrusts his life in the LORD's hands. But his many friends beg him to flee.

"Please flee" they urge him, "then you may be spared for the congregation and us. We cannot miss you yet. We still need you so much."

And?

The aged preacher listens to their well-meant advice. He flees to a farm outside the city. Do you see that he does not deliberately seek death? Oh, no, he is not afraid to die; he does not fear death, but he uses the God-given opportunities.

But some of his enemies discover Polycarp's hiding place and betray him. So the aged preacher flees to another hiding place. Will he succeed? Will this faithful servant of the Lord be spared? No! God's counsel determined differently. This second hiding place is betrayed as well, possibly by a traitorous slave who worked there. Unexpectedly, soldiers surround the farmhouse where he is hiding.

Escape is now impossible.

Polycarp knew that he would be arrested. Maybe you ask:

"How did he know that?"

Three days before the soldiers arrested him, while sleeping peacefully, he dreamt that the pillow under his head was burning. He believed that dream was a warning to prepare him for his approaching death. To him, this was a sign that he would die by fire. His feeling that something would happen proved to be correct because a few days later, his persecutors arrest him.

Polycarp is upstairs when his enemies force their way into the farmhouse. Quietly the grey-haired man goes downstairs and willingly surrenders. However, before they leave, he first has a meal

prepared for his enemies. No, Polycarp is not vindictive. Then he asks if he may pray once more.

Touched by his kindness, the rough soldiers allow this. The old man prays out loud for his friends, who will mourn him. He prays for his congregation at Smyrna, who will miss him. He prays for the other congregations in the area who he can no longer serve. He also prays for his enemies, who do not realise what they are doing. Deeply moved, his persecutors listen to that prayer. When he finally says 'Amen', they leave. But now they treat that very old man kindly. He does not need to walk the long way to the city; they place him on a donkey, so he won't get tired.

### **THE TRIP TO SMYRNA**

On their journey to the city of Smyrna, a coach carrying the chief of police and his son, comes up behind them. When the coach gets close to the soldiers, it stops, and the police chief says, "That old man may ride with us."

That happens.

The soldiers help Polycarp into the coach, which then continues. While they travel, the police chief, who knows his passenger very well, says:

"Polycarp, just say: "The emperor, our Lord" and offer some incense. What is wrong with that?"

That is not so hard, is it? Man, be sensible, you can save your life by doing that."

At first, Polycarp ignores their comments, but when these two men keep trying to persuade him, he finally shakes his head and firmly states:

"I will not do as you suggest."

"Oh no?" snaps the driver, "do you refuse? Then I don't want you in my coach any longer. Get off and be quick about it!"

Polycarp immediately gets up and slowly, with difficulty, gets out of the vehicle. But as he does not get out quick enough to their liking, they shove him out, causing Polycarp to fall on the road and hurt his leg badly. The two brutes ride on, smirking. Polycarp gets up and starts walking to Smyrna, looking content. Soon he stands before the governor.

## BEFORE THE GOVERNOR

The governor looks at the old man with pity and tries to save him. It bothers him to kill that defenceless old man. Meanwhile, people come running from all directions, as the news of Polycarp's arrest soon spread through the city. Soon a big crowd is gathered before the judgement seat. There stands the grey-haired man. No, he does not shake or tremble. He is ready to die for the name and the cause of the Lord.

The governor does not know what to do. He cannot resolve to pronounce the death sentence on the honourable Polycarp. He tries to induce him to return to paganism.

"Swear by the emperor and shout, 'Away with the infidels!'" he demands. With infidels, the governor means the Christians, as they do not acknowledge the deity of the emperor.

Immediately, Polycarp points to the crowd of pagans and cries out with a loud voice:

"Away with the infidels!"

Is Polycarp caving in?

Is he denying his Saviour? No way!

Can't you see he is pointing his finger at the pagans? Not the Christians, but the pagans were infidel because they did not believe in the God and Creator of heaven and earth. When Polycarp cries out: "Away with the infidels," he is referring to the pagans. It is as if he says:

"Not the Christians, but the yelling pagan crowd are the infidels!"

However, the governor does not understand that. He smiles and thinks: "This is going well." He believes that Polycarp is renouncing Christianity. Then the governor says:

"Now curse your Christ, and I will set you free."

The crowd becomes deathly quiet. All listen intently. How will Polycarp respond?

Listen!

Polycarp firmly answers: "I have served Him for eighty-six years and He has never done me any harm. How then could I curse my King Who has saved me?"

Do you hear that? Oh, Polycarp cannot curse his Saviour, because he loves Him with his whole heart.

The governor looks at the brave old man. Trying to save him he urges: "Swear by the emperor."

Calmly Polycarp answers: "I am a Christian." No, Polycarp is not ashamed of his Saviour. The governor hesitates for he cannot yet decide to condemn the old man. "Try to convince the people," he suggests.

Polycarp emphatically shakes his head. Should he beg that blinded and resentful crowd to spare his life? Not a hair on his head thinks of it.

Then the governor gets angry. He threatens, "I will have you torn to pieces by the vicious animals!"

Fearlessly, Polycarp answers: "Let them come. I am not afraid of the wild animals."

Irritated by that courageous answer, the governor responds contemptuously: "Oh, if you're not afraid of the wild animals I'll have you burned at the stake".

Brave and undaunted, Polycarp answers: "The fire you threaten with only burns for a moment, but there is another fire that burns forever, which God reserves for the unbelievers. Do as you wish."

The governor shrugs his shoulders and informs the crowd that Polycarp professes to be a Christian. An angry roar breaks out.

"Away with him, burn him!" they scream.

The governor, offended by the refusal of Polycarp, agrees to their demand. Polycarp receives the death sentence. Hurriedly, a stake is prepared. Everybody helps to gather the necessary wood, and soon the stake is ready to go. The faithful bishop is now standing on the stake. They want to nail him to the centre pole.

"Oh no", Polycarp calls out: "that is not necessary. God will give me the strength to endure the pain."

One more prayer, or rather a hymn of praise, that God judges him worthy to obtain the martyr's crown.





*Polycarp dies the Martyr's death.*

The fire is lit. The first little flames begin to rise and soon the dry wood crackles. Smoke blows into the faces of the spectators.

And then?

Oh, look!

The flames rise in a wide arc around Polycarp, but they do not touch him. Those large tongues of fire meet above his head and form a crown, a crown of honour. Some writers tell us that his body glittered like gold.

The enemies cannot tolerate that. If the *fire* does not consume him, then *they* will kill him. They thrust a sword through him. That is how Polycarp entered eternal glory.

That evening, after the crowd dispersed and went home, some friends gathered his bones from the pile of ash and respectfully buried those few remains. That was the only thing which they could still do for their beloved preacher.

But one day, his body will rise again from the dust. Then his enemies will meet him again, but they will not be able to harm him. Then *they* shall shake and tremble, but that despised Polycarp will enter the joy of his Master. There he will forever

praise God with body and soul. But his enemies will be cast into outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

## QUESTION

1. Why did Marcus Aurelius begin persecutions?
2. What type of city was Smyrna, and where was it located?
3. Who was the 'angel of the church' of Smyrna?
4. What was God's message to Smyrna in Revelations 2:8-11?
5. Prove the statement in 1 Corinthians 13, "Though I give my body to be burned, and have not love..." to be true in the story of Quintus.
6. Why is death called the last enemy for God's people?
7. Who was Polycarp?
8. Why was he brought to trial?
9. Was Polycarp right in fleeing persecution? Explain.
10. How did the Lord prepare Polycarp for his capture?
11. What two things did the governor ask Polycarp to do?
12. What famous answer did Polycarp give to the second request?
13. What final request did the governor make?
14. How did Polycarp die?

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Study Matthew 10. Did Christ support fleeing from persecution? Explain.
2. How did Polycarp prove the words of God in Isaiah 43:2 to be true?