What can we learn from the martyrdom of Saint Polycarp?

Polycarp lived between AD 69 and 159. He was the bishop of the church in Smyrna—an ancient city in Asia Minor (modern-day İzmir, Turkey)—and a direct disciple of the Apostle John. His closeness to the apostolic tradition gave him unique authority and insight, making his life and death particularly significant for the early Church.

During his lifetime, the Roman Empire waged severe and violent persecution against Christians. Believers were viewed as enemies of the state because they refused to worship the Roman gods or declare “Caesar is lord.” Their allegiance to Jesus Christ as the only true Lord and Savior put them on a collision course with imperial power.

This context gives fresh weight to the words of Romans 10:9:

> If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

> Romans 10:9 (ESV)

In the first century, to “confess Jesus as Lord” was not a casual statement—it was a declaration of loyalty that could cost your life. Christians were often given a choice: renounce Christ and live, or remain faithful and die. This stark contrast highlights the intensity of early Christian discipleship and reminds us that salvation is not a shallow decision, but a costly commitment.

As persecution increased, Roman officials began targeting not just ordinary believers but also church leaders. Polycarp was eventually singled out. Despite being urged by his followers to flee, Polycarp chose to remain. He found refuge in the home of friends and spent his remaining days in prayer, interceding for the universal Church.

Three days before his arrest, Polycarp had a vision in which he saw his pillow engulfed in flames. He interpreted this as a divine revelation that he would be martyred by fire. Like many prophets in the Bible—such as Jeremiah and Paul—Polycarp accepted his fate not with fear, but with spiritual resolve.

> For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.
>
> Philippians 1:21 (ESV)

When the soldiers arrived, they were shocked to find an old man full of grace and hospitality. Instead of resisting arrest, Polycarp welcomed them as guests, fed them, and made one final request: to pray for an hour before they took him away. He ended up praying for two hours, during which the soldiers were so moved by his humility and devotion that they began to feel remorse for arresting him.

The Trial and Temptation to Deny Christ

At the stadium, a large crowd had gathered. Roman officials sought to persuade Polycarp to recant. They told him, “Swear by the genius of Caesar. Curse Christ, and we will release you.”

His response is one of the most famous declarations in Christian history:

> Eighty-six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?

Polycarp’s answer demonstrates the doctrine of perseverance—the biblical teaching that true believers will endure to the end because they are kept by the power of God:

> But the one who endures to the end will be saved.
>
> Matthew 24:13 (ESV)

> I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.
>
> John 10:28 (ESV)

Even when given more opportunities to compromise, Polycarp remained steadfast. When told to worship the Roman gods, he boldly said, “I am a Christian.” When threatened with wild beasts, he did not flinch. When threatened with fire, he gave a sobering theological reply:

> You threaten me with fire that burns for a time and is quickly quenched. But you are ignorant of the fire of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly.

Here, Polycarp affirms the doctrine of eternal judgment—that hell is a real place of conscious, eternal torment for those who reject Christ.

> And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.
>
> Revelation 20:15 (ESV)

A Martyr’s Crown

Polycarp was then tied to a stake, ready to be burned. Miraculously, the flames surrounded him but did not consume him. Seeing this, the executioners ended his life with a spear. His final words were a prayer:

> I bless You, Father, for judging me worthy of this hour, so that I may be counted among the martyrs and drink from the cup of Christ.

This is a reference to the “cup” of suffering that Jesus spoke of in Matthew 20:22 and that every faithful disciple must be prepared to share:

> Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?
>
> Matthew 20:22 (ESV)

The Testimony That Speaks Today

Polycarp’s death was not in vain. His life fulfilled the promise of Revelation 2:10—ironically, a message originally sent to the church in Smyrna:

> Do not fear what you are about to suffer... Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.
>
> Revelation 2:10 (ESV)

His testimony, and that of many other martyrs, stands as a loud witness to us today. The writer of Hebrews says:

> Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,
>
> looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith...

> Hebrews 12:1–2 (ESV)

We may not be called to face the sword or the flames, but the call to die to self remains.

> If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me.
>
> Luke 9:23 (ESV)

If we struggle to follow Christ in a time of peace, how will we stand in a time of persecution? How can we excuse ourselves when we've received the gospel in a season of freedom, while others remained faithful in chains and flames?

A Call to Holiness and Endurance

Let us not read Polycarp's story as just a piece of history. It is a living example of what it means to live and die for Christ. It's a call to abandon compromise and cheap grace. It's a call to put off

sin and worldly attachments—whether it’s immodest fashion, gossip, ungodly friendships, or spiritual laziness—and pursue holiness.

> Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.
>
> Hebrews 12:14 (ESV)

Let us be willing to be mocked, misunderstood, or ridiculed for Christ. Let us be faithful in prayer, in fasting, in the Word, and in godly living. Let us suffer, if need be, for righteousness’ sake.

> Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.
>
> 2 Timothy 3:12 (ESV)

Polycarp’s death calls us higher. May we too be found faithful.

May the Lord give us grace to follow Christ with courage, faith, and endurance. Amen.

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