

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 4

Martyrs – Part One

The church is composed of believers in Christ, knitted together into the kingdom of God. While in the church we see the kingdom of God in our world, it is a kingdom different from those in the world itself. As Christ said, “My kingdom is not of this world” (Jn. 18:36). So, what of the citizens of this other worldly kingdom that dwell as aliens on planet earth?

Jesus explained that as Christians we may expect suffering and persecution in this lifetime. For some, the persecution is ridicule and aspersions those of the world cast. For others, the persecutions may involve separation from family and loved ones. Still, others are called to follow Christ in the ultimate human price of martyrdom. As Jesus said, “I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town” (Mt. 23:34).

When Jesus made these prophecies, he knew that he was calling some to a life that followed a trail he would first blaze to Calvary. Peter wanted to follow Christ immediately, but that was not to be. Still, as John noted, Peter would eventually spread his arms in crucifixion death as well (Jn 21:18-19). Once Christ was faced with his own moment of crisis in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter sought to fight the martyrdom with his sword. Jesus had Peter put up his sword, and Jesus healed the moment’s careless cut and submitted his life in accordance with God’s greater plan (Jn 18:10-11; Lk 22:50-51).

Not long after the victorious death of the Lord, the apostles were confronted with his victorious resurrection. Although there was doubt (at least with Thomas), those doubts soon vanished. As Paul would later relate, over 500 at a time eye-witnessed the resurrected Lord, and most of those were still alive at the time Paul wrote (1 Cor. 15:6). Were these folks really convinced? Was the resurrection a legend, a possibility, or a fact? In our culture, we often ask someone to “put your money where your mouth is!” when we question the depth of one’s conviction. These early martyrs did more. They gave their very lives with confident conviction that Jesus was a resurrected Lord who would resurrect each one in glory.

Before we focus on the early Christian martyrs, it is useful to examine the word itself. The word comes from the Greek word μαρτυς (*martus*). The Greek word referenced a witness who had personal knowledge of something. It is used in Acts 1:8 and 1:22 and translated “witness.” Somewhere by the end of the first century, the term means more than merely a witness. “Martyr” starts to take on the meaning of a blood-witness, someone who was killed because of his testimony to Christ. In Revelation 2:13, John calls Antipas a “faithful witness” who was “put to death in your city.” As persecution spread, this word became common in its usage for Christians suffering death for their faith.

NEW TESTAMENT MARTYRS

Stephen

In the New Testament, we read about Stephen as the first Christian martyr. Luke wrote of it in Acts chapters 6 and 7. Stephen was a man “full of God’s grace and power” whom the Apostles chose to help distribute food to the widows among the believers. Because Stephen was vocal about Jesus and the scriptures that attested to Jesus, he was brought before the Jewish Sanhedrin for judgment. False witnesses testified against Stephen who listened with “the face of an angel.”

When the high priest asked about the issues, Stephen made a profound and memorable speech. Starting with God’s call to Abraham, Stephen explained how God also worked through Joseph, Moses, Joshua, King David, and Solomon. Stephen then pointed out that the Jewish powers historically persecuted and killed prophets, and then, in violation of the law, betrayed and in essence murdered Jesus the Messiah.

This speech made two important points that apply to our focus on church history. First, persecution itself was a historical reality for God’s messengers. Second, while subtler but nonetheless important, was the teaching of the church through Stephen on issues of the Temple and its worship system. While there was a Temple-cult in Jerusalem and much of Judaism teaching that the Temple was the core requirement in worship that brought Jews from all over the world for worship, Stephen, and by extension the church, taught this was not so. God was never a “real estate God.”

We see Stephen’s denial of the Temple-cult woven throughout his speech. Stephen focused on God’s activity away from Jerusalem and the temple, beginning in Mesopotamia (7:2-3), then Haran (7:4). Stephen points out that Abraham possessed no real estate in the “holy land” (7:5). Abraham’s descendants then went to Egypt (7:6). Later Moses went to Midian and encountered God in the

bush there, not in Israel (7:29ff). Israel received God's Torah in the wilderness (not Jerusalem or the holy land -- 7:38). When the Jews finally entered the Promised Land, God threw them out for disobedience (7:43). As for the temple, Solomon (not David) built it, but Stephen noted that even then God never dwelt in houses made with hands (7:47-49).

Stephen and his teaching demonstrate that an intellectual corner had been turned in the church, away from a Temple/Jerusalem focused religion to a God of the whole world who works his greatest works wherever he pleases.¹

The reaction of the Sanhedrin was not one of contrition like we read about in Acts 2. Instead of seeking to make things right, the Jerusalem/Temple establishment leaders were furious and stoned Stephen. In the midst of their fury, Stephen had a glorious vision of God's glory in heaven with Jesus at the right hand of God, standing to receive him. Recounting the vision brought the event to a climax as the people dragged Stephen out and stoned him. Stephen's dying words were for God to forgive his killers. Paul, not yet a believer, watched and approved the whole killing.

Stephen's martyrdom is celebrated on the day after Christmas, December 26. This is the day referenced in the song, "Good King Wenceslas looked out on the Feast of Stephen..." As the Christmas carol recounts the blessings of helping the poor, it does so on the day honoring this first Christian martyr. The tune itself predates the words of the Christmas Carol. It is a tune from a song frequently sung in honor of Christian martyrs. The original lyrics included, "Christian friends, your voices raise. Wake the day with gladness. God himself to joy and praise turns our human sadness: Joy that martyrs won their crown, opened heaven's bright portal, when they laid the mortal down for the life immortal."

James the Great

In Acts 12, we read Luke's note that the apostle James (John's elder brother, a son of Zebedee) was also martyred². King Herod put James "to death with the sword" and sought others to kill and imprison as well. Based upon an Acts chronology,

¹ See also Stephen's testimony to Jesus standing at God's right hand as "Son of Man" (7:56). It is based on the vision of Daniel 7, which presents God (and his Messiah -- the "Son of Man") as sovereign over all nations (including the Jewish national authorities opposing Stephen) and ultimately accountable to God. This further underscores Stephen's rejection of the national/religious Temple cult and seems the final irritant that moves his persecutors to murder. Thanks to Edward Fudge for adding this Temple cult insight to this lesson.

² This James is called "James the Great." He was the apostle and is so called to distinguish him from James the brother of Jesus.

our best estimate puts the martyrdom of James around ten years after Stephen was stoned, around 44 A.D. We can recall that in Mark 10: 34-45 (Mark wrote Peter's recollections and teachings), James and his brother John asked Jesus to grant them the request of their choice, namely sitting at Jesus' right and left in glory. Jesus explained that neither knew what he was asking for, and then pressed with the question: "Can you drink the cup I drink?" James and John stated they could indeed drink that cup. Jesus prophesied that in their lives they would drink the cup, but that the right-hand/left-hand stuff was outside the scope of Jesus' granting. In Acts 12, James drank the cup.

Writing some 130 years later, Clement of Alexandria, added an interesting historical memory of the events surrounding this apostle's death. The man who brought James into court stayed and listened to James's confession. The accuser was so moved by James's testimony that the accuser became a Christian on the spot, confessing as much to King Herod. Clement then writes, as recorded by Eusebius, "So they were both taken away, and on the way, he [the accuser] asked James to forgive him. James looked at him for a moment and replied, "Peace be with you" and kissed him. So they were both beheaded at the same time."³

DEATHS SCRIPTURE DOES NOT COVER

What happened to the remaining apostles? Scripture itself does not give us the demise of the other apostles.⁴ If we search church history, then we find some fairly reliable information on the deaths of several, but not all, of the apostles.⁵

James, Jesus' Brother

The James that wrote the Epistle of James was not the James already discussed above, but rather James, the brother of Jesus. This would have been one of Jesus' brothers referenced in John 7:5 as not believing in Jesus during the ministry of Jesus. We know that after the resurrection, Jesus appeared to this James (1Cor. 15:7) which must have caused an about face in the belief category! Certainly,

³ Eusebius, Church History, Book 2, Chapter 9.

⁴ For completion's sake, we should note that technically Judas Iscariot was an apostle and scripture does recount his death (Mt 27:5-10; Acts 1:16-20).

⁵ Around 1559, John Foxe wrote "*Book of the Martyrs*" detailing his information about the deaths of significant church figures from Biblical times to his present. That book is still updated and published today with the many of the martyrdoms since Foxe wrote. While Foxe was indeed a formidable scholar, much of the early information he gives on deaths of the original apostles, for example, is not from historically credible sources that would seem worthy of reliability.

James became a leader in the Jerusalem church, as we see Paul speaking of him in a leadership role in Galatians 2.

Eusebius, writing in the early 300's, gives a good deal of information about the death of this James. Eusebius records that after Paul was sent off to Rome, the attention of the Jewish power structure in Jerusalem turned to James. After hauling James in front of a great crowd and demanding James deny Jesus as Messiah, James surprised all with his serenity and tranquility. Rather than denounce Jesus, James clearly declared that Jesus was indeed the Son of God and Lord Messiah. Eusebius then cites Clement of Alexandria's writings (a mere 100 years after the death of James) as recording that James was thrown from the parapet of the Temple and then clubbed to death.

Eusebius also provides greater detail by recounting the earlier writings of Hegesippus (written around 170 A.D.) Hegesippus explained that James had kept Nazarite vows from birth. He had never had his hair cut and had refrained from alcohol. James was also a vegetarian who wore only linen, never wool. James was well known as a holy man among the Jewish community. In fact, James was often found kneeling in prayer and worship seeking God on behalf of others. James was reputed to have the knees of a camel and was called, "James the Righteous."

As Hegesippus recalled the events, James was placed on the parapet of the temple and quizzed publicly about Jesus. James replied, "Why do you ask me about the Son of Man? He sits in heaven at the right hand of the Great Power, and he will return on heavenly clouds." Hegesippus adds that a number of the Jews watching were moved to faith by these words and events. The Scribes and Pharisees realize the mistake of allowing this open testimony and pushed James off the pinnacle of the Temple, hoping others would back away from faith when they saw the cost!

The fall itself did not kill James, so some of the people started stoning him. While the stones were raining down, James made it to his knees and began praying out loud for his killers, "Lord God and Father, I pray, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing." One fellow, named to us as the son of Rachabim, shouted for the people to stop stoning James saying, "Stop throwing your stones. What do you think you are doing? The righteous one is praying for you!" It was at this point that someone picked up a club and cracked it over James head in a death blow.

This is the James whose ossuary might have recently been discovered. An ossuary is a "bone box" used to store deceased peoples' bones. Most ossuaries date from 30 B.C. to 70 A.D. in the Jerusalem area. There were limited burial spots in Jerusalem and this was one solution to the space problem. A person was interred

for several years. The bones were then condensed into a bone box where they could be stacked in the tombs. Recently there has been quite a controversy over a bone box that dates from the right time era and is inscribed, “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.” Most ossuaries would bear an inscription of lineage (“James, son of Joseph”) but it is rare for one to refer to a sibling (“brother of Jesus”). The sibling referral would only be found if the sibling had particular notoriety or fame. Some scholars and the Israeli Antiquities Agency believe the inscription to be a forgery. Other equally solid scholars believe it authentic.

Andrew

Perhaps you’ve seen an “Andrew Cross.” It is a cross that looks like a capital “X” rather than a “t.” Why? There is a 3rd Century writing called the Acts of Andrew⁶. In that writing, Andrew’s crucifixion is explained as occurring on a cross, which was in the shape of an X. Andrew was not nailed to the cross but was tied with ropes so that his death might be longer and more painful. The executioner’s plan was for dogs to eat away at the legs of Andrew in the night, figuring Andrew would last two days at most. The martyrdom recounts that Andrew lived on the cross with no food for four days, preaching and proclaiming the Lord with a clear head and a clear voice. Echoing his own comments earlier before being fastened to the cross, Andrew told all who would listen that he had spent his adult life as a slave to the cross, and so he prayed for a chance to be on the cross, not to escape it. In fact, Andrew stripped himself, handed his clothes to the executioner, and urged them to get on with their work.

Eventually, the Proconsul was going to let Andrew down, as the masses marveled in faith over the events. Out of fear, the Proconsul tried to let Andrew down from the cross after four days, but Andrew prayed and died first.

⁶ There are five so-called “primary” books of Acts that are products of the early church and not included in our scriptures. These are not fully accurate, but do contain early traditions about a number of New Testament people. The books are called: The Acts of John, The Acts of Paul, the Acts of Peter, The Acts of Andrew, and the Acts of Thomas. There are also some “secondary” books of Acts, including the Acts of Philip, the Acts of Andrew and Matthew, and others. Some of these have greater credibility and reliability than others. Even internally, portions of some of these books contain more reliable data and passages than other portions. Of these books, the “primary” books seem to date fairly early and have some reliable data in them. Still, they also contain a good bit of teaching and a number of stories that seem unorthodox and even outlandish! The credibility of these books was no doubt tarnished in the church when the Manicheans adopted them as their New Testament “Acts” in place of that Luke wrote (but more on that when we study the Manicheans!). Most scholars date the Acts of Andrew around 260 AD, though some as early as 200.

Peter and Paul

We covered the martyrdom of Peter and Paul as noted in Clement's letter to the Corinthian church around 95 A.D. Those two were martyred under Nero's persecutions in Rome around 65-69 A.D.

If we look at the Acts of Paul (written around 160-170 A.D.) for data on his death, we read of Paul arriving in Rome with Luke and Titus already there. The Acts of Paul records that Paul was beheaded, not crucified or burned as many other martyrs were. That beheading is consistent with Roman law that a Roman citizen could not be crucified or burned. As given in the Acts of Paul, the beheading occurred with Paul standing, facing east, with arms outstretched to heaven in prayer.

The Acts of Peter were most likely written down around 200 A.D. It is in this book we read of Peter requesting his crucifixion be upside down because he did not deserve to die in the manner Jesus did.

John

John the brother of James and author of the fourth gospel, Revelation, and the three Johanne epistles, certainly suffered greatly in the cause of Christ. Revelation itself was written while John was exiled for his faith on the island of Patmos. But, history does not tell us clearly how John died. The church has considered him a martyr because of the events on Patmos and historical references to being burned in oil. Still, those accounts, even the burning, did not ultimately cost John his life.

While we do not know for certain the events surrounding the death of John, we have a decent indication. Most scholars agree that Leucius, one of John's disciples, wrote the early book, The Acts of John, within 50 years or so of John's death. The book recounts many of the horrible occurrences like the burning in oil. Concerning the ultimate death, the book tells us that John finally went to a trench, prayed, and then "stood and said: 'Thou art with me, O Lord Jesus Christ and laid himself down in the trench where he had strewn his garments, and having said unto us, 'Peace be with you, brethren' he gave up his Spirit rejoicing" (Chapter 115).

Philip

The apostle Philip's death is also not contained in scripture. Scripture teaches us that a deacon named Philip was assigned the chores of helping distribute food in Acts 6. Some scholars believe this was a different Philip than the Apostle, while others believe it the same. This Philip was noted in Acts for his missionary efforts in Samaria and for his work in the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8.

While scripture does not tell us of Philip's death, we have multiple other writings that do. We do have references in the 2nd Century from Papias (130ish A.D.) and Polycrates (190 A.D.) that reference Philip and his three daughters. These indicate Philip was martyred but provide no details. The Acts of Philip, a legend filled account from later 3rd century offers the tradition that Philip was crucified.

Other Apostles

Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* gives us accounts of the deaths of the remaining apostles, but there is no credible early evidence to support the information Foxe gives. While Foxe relied upon early church traditions and feast days, it is uncertain to what extent he relied on early church writings. So, for example, Foxe writes that Bartholomew was crucified and beaten by impatient idolaters. Where Foxe got his information, he never tells (perhaps footnoting was not a big deal in the 1500's!). The previously referenced Acts of Philip does convey that Bartholomew was crucified in Lycaonia (Chapter 131).

There are writings that come from later years of the early church (4th and 5th centuries) that convey other legends and folklore about the apostles. The Martyrdom of Matthew, for example, gives an accounting of Matthew's death. But, its relatively late date and glaring inaccuracies in other areas make its information of very dubious value historically.

But, the apostles were not the only people to give their lives in conviction and faith. There were many martyrs in the early church. In fact, there are many martyrs in our life time as well.

We will closely focus on the martyrdom of two early church leaders, Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna. As we examine these two specific cases, we will also look at the general atmosphere surrounding the martyrdoms. Why were Christians killed for their faith?

POINTS FOR HOME

In Hebrews 11, we read of an impressive array of Old Testament figures who lived for God in faith. In chapter 12, we are taught, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” Why? Because we have a faith worth dying for, it is certainly worth living for!

1. Jesus radically affected his generation and those following.
2. Jesus instilled faith that brought joy in death and suffering.
3. We have the same Jesus.
4. We have a faith worth living and dying for.