

Trial and Triumph

Trial and
TRIUMPH

STORIES FROM CHURCH HISTORY

RICHARD M. HANNULA

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With love to my children—
Teri, Kelly, John, Kimberly, and Marie

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INTRODUCTION

For Christians, this book is a family history. Our sister, Blandina, faced the snapping jaws of wild beasts rather than renouncing Christ. Our brother, Ambrose, gave away his vast wealth to the poor and proclaimed the gospel to emperors and paupers. William Tyndale, our father in the faith, lived on the run and died at the stake to give us the Bible in English that we might read it for ourselves. If we do not know about our Christian forebearers, we cannot draw inspiration and encouragement from their lives nor praise God for His grace and power at work in them.

The Psalmist calls us to praise the Lord and “tell of His works with songs of joy.” God’s greatest works are not the creation of the mountains and seas but His acts of saving love, which transform sinners into children of God. These stories were not written to exalt great Christian men and women. They were written to exalt the Lord who made them great.

The book of Acts tells the story of the growth of the church under the leadership of the apostles. Through great trials they spread the good news of Jesus throughout the Roman world. The stories found in this book are drawn from the lives of those who served God in the years after the apostles rested in the grave. Within these pages, you will encounter Christians from widely different places, times, and stations—from slaves laboring in chains to regal monarchs reigning over vast empires. The stories are not fiction but

historically accurate, biographical sketches. The background events and actions of the subjects were drawn from the most reliable sources, and all quotations were taken directly from the subjects' own speeches and writings.

I wrote the sketches originally for my own children, but if other readers may, in some small way, find inspiration in these stories from church history, I will be pleased and grateful.



AMBROSE WITHSTANDING EMPEROR THEODOSIUS

EARLY CHURCH

Facing Persecution, Fighting Heresy

The early church endured persecution from without and false teachers from within, but through every trial God proved faithful to bless and preserve His church. The first two stories portray the martyrdom of an old minister and a Christian slave girl, and it may seem odd to begin a book written to encourage young Christians with stories of believers suffering cruel deaths. The pagans hoped through brutal killings to wipe out Christianity, but God strengthened His children to stand firm in the face of death. The martyrs' faith and courage inspired many to follow Christ—"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints" (Ps. 116:15).

- Polycarp
Witness in the Arena
- Blandina
Martyr of Lyons
- Constantine
Defender of the Church
- Athanasius
Against the World
- Ambrose
Bishop of Milan
- Monica and Augustine
Christian Mother and Son
- Patrick
Missionary to the Irish

POLYCARP

Witness in the Arena

Polycarp, c. A.D. 69–155

“I will build my church,” Jesus said. “And the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” And He built it with shocking and glorious power. Christ burst from the tomb, showed Himself alive, and sent the Spirit in tongues of fire. This transformed the cowardly and confused disciples into valiant soldiers of the cross. They healed the sick, raised the dead, and boldly proclaimed the gospel. Thousands streamed into the Kingdom of God. Nothing like it had ever been seen before.

The Jewish religious leaders flogged the disciples and warned them to stop speaking about Christ. “Judge for yourselves,” the disciples answered, “whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God, for we cannot help speaking about all we have seen and heard.”

Fearing the growing number of Christians and hating their refusal to bow down to the pagan gods, the Roman emperors declared that following Christ was a crime punishable by death. They began blaming Christians for every calamity. One early Christian sighed, “If the rivers flood, or if there is drought or famine or plague, the pagans cry: ‘Throw the Christians to the lions!’”

The Romans put to death many of the first disciples of Christ, beheading Paul, crucifying Peter, and killing others by fire, sword, and beasts. They died with the words of Jesus ringing in their ears: “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.”

In the face of terrible persecution, the church grew stronger, expanding to the four corners of the Roman Empire and beyond. A new generation of Christian leaders arose to take

the place of the apostles and disciples. One of the foremost of these was a man named Polycarp. Here is part of his story.

Crouching low, hugging the sand, a lion circled the young man standing in the center of the arena. The crowd watched without making a sound. From the imperial box in the grandstands, the Roman governor looked on with a grin. The rulers of the Roman Empire called Christians “godless” because they refused to bow down to Roman gods or offer incense to the emperor. Here in Smyrna, the governor had ordered that any Christians unwilling to renounce their faith would be executed. So now this young man stood still, circled by the lion.

“Come now,” the governor shouted to the man. “You are young. A lifetime awaits you. It’s not too late. Some of your friends have just sworn the oath to Caesar. I will remove the beast, if you will do it. Swear the oath and you will live.”

The young man shook his head and stood his ground as the lion crept nearer. The lion paused and then pounced. In an instant the two were intertwined, with the animal tearing at the man with powerful swipes. The lion closed his massive jaws, and the young man went limp. The crowd cheered. “Death to the godless!” some shouted.

One of the Roman leaders spoke up. “He was just a follower.” Another shouted, “We want Polycarp, their leader! Death to the godless! Death to Polycarp!” Soon the chant sounded throughout the arena, “Death to the godless! Death to Polycarp!” The order was given, and a small troop left to arrest Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna.

Polycarp had been taught in his youth by the Apostle John, and he had led many people to faith in Jesus Christ. When the soldiers found Polycarp, they rushed him to the arena and hauled him before the Roman governor of the province. Upon seeing Polycarp, the crowd erupted with a roar, “Death to the godless! Death to Polycarp!”

Dressed in an embroidered robe of purple and gold, the governor stood in the imperial box, glaring down at Polycarp in his dusty tunic. He waved his hand and quieted the crowd. "Are you Polycarp, the teacher of the Christians?" the governor asked.

"I am," Polycarp answered.

"Have respect for the honor of your old age," the governor said. "Swear by Caesar and save yourself. Point to the Christian prisoners there and say 'Away with the godless.'"

Polycarp turned from the Christian prisoners, pointed to the pagan crowds, lifted his voice to heaven, and said, "Away with the godless."

The people gnashed their teeth at the insult. "How dare he call us godless!"

The governor tempted Polycarp a second time, "Swear the oath to Caesar and I will release you. Deny Christ!"

Polycarp stood straight and answered in a clear voice, "For eighty-six years I have been His servant, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

"Swear by Caesar!" the governor shouted.

"You try in vain to get me to swear by Caesar. Hear me plainly, I am a Christian!"

"I have wild beasts here," the governor said. "I will throw you to them unless you change your mind."

"Call for them," Polycarp answered.

"If you are not afraid of the beasts, I will have you burned alive."

"You threaten me with fire that burns for a little while and goes out," Polycarp said. "But you are ignorant of the fire of eternal punishment which is prepared for the ungodly. Why do you wait? Come and do what you want with me."

"This is the teacher of Asia," someone cried, "the father of the Christians, who teaches many not to worship our gods. Burn him!"

Soldiers tied Polycarp to a post and surrounded him with straw, oil-soaked kindling, and timber. Polycarp prayed aloud, “O Lord God Almighty, the Father of your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, through Whom we have received the knowledge of you: I bless You for granting me the honor of this day and hour that I might be numbered among the martyrs. You are the faithful and true God. To You be glory both now and for the ages to come. Amen.”

A long torch ignited the bonfire and a mighty flame leapt upward.

Polycarp’s courage in the face of death emboldened persecuted Christians throughout the empire to remain faithful to Christ.

BLANDINA

Martyr of Lyons

Blandina, c. 155–177

The young slave woman, Blandina, gasped for air as she lay shaking on the damp, stone floor. Several fellow Christian prisoners had suffocated during the night, and Blandina closed her eyes to shut out the sight of their pale, lifeless faces. Suddenly the cell door creaked open, and a Roman soldier shouted, “Get up, godless! Come with me!”

Blandina and the other prisoners were dragged out of their cells and into the arena. Shielding their eyes from the brilliant sunlight, the Christian men, women, and children huddled together in the center of the arena. The spectators shouted curses at them. Towering over them on a raised platform stood the Roman governor of Gaul, a laurel wreath crowning his head.

“Listen to me, you godless,” the governor said. “You Christians offend our gods and bring down their wrath upon us. But if you will just swear by Caesar, I will release you.” Silence fell over the arena. Squeezing the hands of two friends, Blandina trembled and pled with God for strength. Then a few Christians stepped out of the huddle and with downcast faces swore the oath to Caesar. They were permitted to leave the arena, but most stood their ground. “Very well then,” the governor said, “you have chosen the beasts, the fire, and the sword.” Pulling several Christians from the group, soldiers beat them with whips and slashed at them with swords. The crowd roared its approval.

Then, from the group of prisoners, a young man, Vettius, moved toward the governor’s platform. “Your Excellency, I humbly seek permission to speak in defense of the Christians.

I can prove to you that there is nothing godless or wicked in us.”

The pagan spectators howled at him. Ignoring Vettius’s request, the governor asked with disdain, “Are you a Christian?”

“I am,” Vettius answered loudly, standing unbowed before the governor.

With a wave of his hand, the governor signaled the guards. They drew swords and cut Vettius down on the spot. Then the governor summoned Sanctus, a deacon of the church, from the crowd in the arena and asked, “What is your name?”

“I am a Christian,” Sanctus answered.

“Where were you born?” asked the governor.

“I am a Christian,” Sanctus said.

“Are you slave or free?”

“I am a Christian,” Sanctus answered. The soldiers started to whip and beat him, but still his answer to every question remained: “I am a Christian.” The enraged governor ordered his body crushed between two red-hot copper plates. He died standing firm in his faith.

Blandina and the other Christians were returned to prison. From morning to night, jailers punished frail Blandina. They pierced her body with daggers and crushed her limbs upon the rack. “Curse Christ!” they taunted. “Tell us all the wicked deeds the godless do.”

“I am a Christian,” Blandina answered. “We do nothing to be ashamed of.”

At the close of day, the jailers could scarcely believe she was still breathing; her body was so broken. “Who are these Christians?” the jailers said to one another. “They go willingly and cheerfully to their deaths.”

The next day soldiers again brought Blandina and some other Christians to the arena. She was hung on a wooden post, intended as food for wild animals. Blandina lifted her eyes to the Lord and prayed aloud, “O Father, strengthen us as we suffer for the glory of Christ.”

Her faith gave fresh courage to the others. One by one the believers died, torn to pieces by the beasts. But to the crowd's amazement, Blandina remained untouched by the animals, and the guards hauled her back to prison. A few days later, she was again returned to the arena, now with Ponticus, a Christian boy of fifteen.

"Stand firm, dear Ponticus," Blandina urged him. Again, they were whipped and attacked by animals, and soon Ponticus lay dead. But Blandina, her body bloodied and broken, yet survived, her face radiant with the peace of Christ. "She looked," one eyewitness said, "as if she were invited to a wedding feast, not thrown to the beasts."

Her persecutors, frustrated and angry, wrapped her in a net and threw her to a bull that tossed her around the arena. Finally, a soldier reached down and slew her with a sword. The pagans said they had never seen a woman suffer so much or so long. The bodies of Blandina and the other Christians lined the streets of Lyons. Guards stood watch, preventing their friends from giving them a decent burial.

"Why won't you let them bury their dead?" the guards were asked.

"So they may have no hope in the resurrection," they answered. "It is this hope that gives them such courage."

After six days, the bodies were burned to ashes and thrown into the Rhone River. "Now let's see if they'll rise again," the guards said. Some Christians in Lyons survived the persecution. They wrote an account of the martyred believers and sent it to churches throughout the Roman Empire, encouraging them to hold fast to the faith.

