

# Challenges & Faith

Proper 16 c (or 15 c)  
Isaiah 58:9b-14

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I have a story to tell you. A story from Christian History.

The time is 155 A.D. The place is Smyrna, a thriving Roman city near the Aegean Sea, in an area of the world now known as Turkey.

Christianity had been spreading during the 100 years before this time, but it had not occurred without its casualties. Roman citizens throughout the world were suspicious and untrusting of Christians. Roman governors and proconsuls themselves were generally not prone to hostility. But if the public they governed demanded it, they would torture and kill Christians for no other reason than that they were Christian.

So it was in Smyrna in 155. The atmosphere was entirely intolerant and hostile toward Christians. Eleven members of the local church had recently been killed before a screaming arena of citizens: all inhumanely tortured and whipped and eventually fed to the lions.

As bad as it was, none of these Christians cried out in their distress -- much to the consternation of the blood-thirsty crowd. "Away with these atheists!" they cried. "Let Polycarp be sought out!"

Now Polycarp was the saintly bishop of the church at Smyrna. He was 86 years of age and well-esteemed in the whole Church. In his youth, he had been a disciple of John the Evangelist. During his tenure as bishop, he had been a prominent teacher and defender of the faith against false notions that had arisen.

When Polycarp first heard the news that the crowds were demanding his life, he remained unperturbed and went about his usual business. Nonetheless, members of the church feared for him and persuaded him to leave the city for a nearby farm. There he remained with a few companions, devoting himself to prayer -- praying especially for peace to come to the church.

One night, while in bed, the old bishop saw a vision in which the pillow under his head was engulfed in flames. When he awoke, he told his companions prophetically, "I will be burned alive."

Within three days, Polycarp's pursuers were closing in. Again his followers moved him. But the officials soon came to the house where Polycarp was staying. "God's will be done," he told his companions.

Cheerfully, he greeted the officials, and ordered the table to be set with food and drink. For their part, the officials were astonished at the old man's age and gentleness, wondering why all the fuss over him. Polycarp asked for a single hour for prayer while they ate, and, with their consent, he stood before them and prayed for all

those whom he had known in his life and for the whole Church throughout the world. When he had finished, the officials brought the bishop back to Smyrna.

He was taken first to the chief of police, who tried to persuade the bishop to cooperate: "What harm is there in saying, 'Lord Caesar,' and sacrificing [to him as a god]? You will be safe then." But Polycarp made no reply.

The chief persisted in his persuasion, trying to save the old man's life. Polycarp said simply, "I have no intention of taking your advice." Persuasion turned to threats, and the old man was pushed to the ground, but to no avail. Undaunted, the bishop rose and walked quietly with the guard to the arena where the citizenry of Smyrna was gathered.

When the crowd saw that Polycarp had been arrested, they let out a tremendous shout. He stepped before the proconsul, who urged him to deny Christ, saying, "Respect your years! Swear by Caesar's fortune. Repent and say [of your followers], 'Away with these atheists!'"

The old bishop looked squarely at the crowd who were the real atheists, waved his hand towards them and cried, "Away with these atheists!"

The governor pressed further: "Swear by Caesar, and I will set you free. Deny Christ."

The bishop responded, "For 86 years, I have been a servant of Christ, and he has never done me any wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?"

Still they tried to persuade him, "Swear by Caesar's fortune." Still he persisted, "If you imagine that I will swear by Caesar's fortune, as you put it, pretending not to know who I am, I will tell you plainly: I am a Christian. If you wish to study the Christian doctrine, choose a day and you shall hear it."

The proconsul said, "Persuade the people!" Said Polycarp, "With you, I think it proper to discuss these things; for we have been taught to render as their due to rulers and powers ordained by God such honor as casts no stain on us. But to the people, I do not feel it my duty to make any defense."

"I have wild beasts at hand," threatened the proconsul. "Call them," replied the old man.

"I'll have you destroyed by fire," threatened the proconsul again. "The fire you threaten burns for a time and is soon extinguished," replied Polycarp. "But there is a fire you know nothing about -- the fire of the judgment to come and of eternal punishment, the first reserved for the ungodly. But why do you hesitate? Do what you want."

The proconsul sent a crier into the midst of the people. "Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian," he shouted. The crowd roared, demanding his life. They rushed to collect logs and firewood, and built a huge pyre in the midst of the stadium.

When all was ready, Polycarp took off his outer clothing, his belt and his shoes. They made ready to nail him to the pyre, but he stopped them and said, "Leave me as I am. He who enables me to endure the fire will enable me to remain on the pyre without moving, even if you don't secure me with nails." So they simply bound him with his hands tied behind him.

When they finished, Polycarp lifted his voice in prayer for all to hear: "O Lord God Almighty, Father of your beloved and blessed Son, Jesus Christ, through whom

we have come to know you as the God of angels and powers and all creation and of the whole family of the righteous who live in your presence: I bless you for counting me worthy of this day and hour, that with the martyrs I may partake of Christ's cup [of suffering], to the resurrection of eternal life . . . . May I be received among them in your presence today, a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as you have prepared, foreshadowed and fulfilled it, O God of truth. Therefore for every cause I praise you, I bless you, I glorify you, through . . . Jesus Christ your beloved Son, through whom and with whom in the Holy Spirit all glory is yours, both now and in the ages to come. Amen."

As soon as he had offered his amen, the fire was lit. A great flame shot up. Then a wondrous thing occurred. The fire took the shape of an arch, like a ship's sail filled with the wind, and it made a wall around the bishop's body. He appeared within it, not like flesh which is burning, but as bread that is baked, or as gold and silver glowing in a furnace. A wonderful fragrance came from the pyre also, like a breath of frankincense or some other costly spice. Everyone was astonished.

At length, when the crowd perceived that the bishop's body could not be consumed in the flames, they cried for an executioner to pierce him through with a sword. When it was done, a stream of blood poured forth, quenching the fire -- again astonishing the crowd that there should be such a difference between unbelievers and the elect of God, of whom Polycarp was a holy and worthy example in life and finally in death.

Such is the story of the martyrdom of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. In the first lesson from Isaiah, we read:

"If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail."

In comparison to the lives of the early Christian martyrs like Polycarp, our challenges seem like nothing. And yet we learn from such stories something that is still true of us today. First, we learn that, as Christians, we are not like unbelievers. God means for our light to "rise in the darkness and ... be like the noonday," as Isaiah says.

And secondly, God guides us "continually" and satisfies our needs "in parched places" -- in places of trouble and testing, in places of challenge and difficulty. God continually comes to us "like a spring of water, whose waters never fail."

Please God, may we never be tested as dear Polycarp was tested. But regardless of what comes, O God, help us to keep our focus and our faith on you.

- "The Martyrdom of Polycarp" in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds., Eerdmans 1981, pp.39-43.
- Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, G.A. Willsomson, trans., Penguin 1965, pp.168-74