

From Acorn to Oak

Why Do We Believe the Bible is the Word of God? Part 4: The Testimony of the Martyrs
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“Think of your mother, your brother, your aunt. Please Perpetua, think of me, your aging father. But most of all, think of your little baby!” Her father’s anguished pleas sliced deeply into her heart, especially since he was well-respected, and a daughter’s denial of her father’s wishes in this patriarchal society would disgrace him. Yet, the young Christian woman refused to deny that Jesus was her Lord and offer incense to the Roman gods. As a result, she was in a Carthage jail awaiting execution. Four others were with her.

Their resolve steeled. To deny Christ was unthinkable and worse than death. Perpetua and the others left the prison “joyfully as though they were on their way to heaven,” in the words of an eyewitness. Entering the arena wild beasts charged them. A mad heifer tossed Perpetua and another young mother, Felicitas, who had just given birth in the jail. After she was thrown to the ground by the animal, Perpetua discovered that her clothes were ripped. She calmly covered herself and requested a hairpin. She fixed her hair to avoid looking disheveled and as though she were in mourning.

“You must all stand fast in the faith and love one another,” Perpetua implored the other martyrs, and “do not be weakened by what we have gone through!” When the beasts failed to kill them, soldiers were sent in to finish the job, but the one who was to slay Perpetua trembled so much she had to guide the sword to her throat, indicating her willingness to die for Christ.

In previous essays we have looked at five reasons why it is reasonable to believe that the Bible is God’s Word and therefore true. We considered that Jesus, himself, affirmed the Old Testament. Eyewitnesses to Jesus’ Resurrection and other events or their close associates, as in the case of Mark and Luke, wrote the New Testament. Historical writings and archeological findings confirm Scriptural statements. The Bible contains an extraordinary number of fulfilled prophecies. The Bible is unique in its unity and consistency, even while being written by over 40 authors, some from different cultural backgrounds, throughout a 1500-year span. Now, let’s consider another reality that supplies sufficient evidence to convince one who is sincerely seeking the truth.

The first Christians chose death rather than deny Christ.

In addition to Perpetua and those who died with her, countless other Christians in the early church willingly, even gladly, gave their lives for Christ. Most importantly, 10 of the 12 original disciples, and others who witnessed Jesus’ Resurrection, willingly gave up their lives rather than recant their faith or stop preaching it. The Apostle John was willing to die for the faith but was spared. You know about Judas.

Furthermore, such powerful testimony has continued throughout history. In the 20th century alone, more Christians were martyred than in all the preceding 19 centuries combined. Many throughout the world, especially in Africa, the Middle East and Asia, continually face persecution, including the most extreme form. Please remember them in prayer and in any other way you can help.

What does this have to do with the Bible? One of the charges leveled against the New Testament is that it is a myth written by dispirited disciples who fabricated their accounts in order to save face. The blood of the martyrs discredits that opinion. People do not willingly die for what they know to be a myth. Neither do they willingly allow themselves and their families to suffer for something they know to be untrue.

I know people today in different parts of the world, who are living under the threat of death and who have suffered greatly because they refused to recant their faith. I met a man in China who was hauled out of his house during the horrific Cultural Revolution under Mao. He was told, "Recant your belief in Jesus Christ, or you're going to prison with hard labor." He told the official, "I cannot recant my faith in Jesus my Lord." So he was taken to prison and forced into hard labor on the communal farms for nine years in all kinds of weather and severe conditions. Several times during that nine-year period, he was taken aside and the official said, "Deny Jesus Christ, and you can go home; you can leave right now!" The man said, "I cannot deny my Lord." So he remained in prison in hard labor for nine years. While he was doing so, his wife and child were begging for food, but because he and they remained faithful, the Lord took care of them all that time!

Some may say, "Well, what about the Buddhist monks who doused themselves with gasoline and ignited themselves in the '60's? Or the subsequent Jonestown and Heaven's Gate cults that committed mass suicide on account of a wrong belief?" These false religions only support the point: they thought they were dying for something that was true. In fact, though, concerning the Buddhists, they, as those before and after them still do, prayed to idols that could neither hear nor help them (cf. Isaiah 44:9-20); they also sinned in taking their lives which is God's prerogative (Exodus 20:13; Job 1:21; Hebrews 9:27); and Jesus' Resurrection proved the truth of his Gospel that he alone is Lord and Savior. These realities also apply to the others; they just had different idols (Jim Jones and Marshall Applewhite).

Standing on the Mount of Olives just before his ascension, Jesus told his eleven disciples, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8) The Greek word for witness in that text and elsewhere in the New Testament is *martyres*. The testimony of those who witnessed with words backed up by their own blood powerfully affirmed the truth of the Gospel. It still does today.