

## BLANDINA, PERPETUA, AND POLYCARP: *SHEDDING THEIR BLOOD AS THE SEED OF THE CHURCH*

**Luke 21:16-17:** *You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish.*

**Philippians 4:19:** *And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.*

“The present confession of faith before the authorities has been all the more illustrious and honorable because the suffering was greater. The struggle intensified, and the glory of those who struggled grew with it.” -Cyprian

“The early church’s theology of martyrdom was born not in synods or councils, but in sunlit, blood-drenched coliseums and catacombs, dark and still as death. The word ‘martyr’ means “witness” and is used as such throughout the New Testament. However, as the Roman Empire became increasingly hostile toward Christianity, the distinctions between witnessing and suffering became blurred and finally nonexistent.”

### I. PERPETUA

One such time was the year 202 when the Emperor Septimius Severus disallowed conversions to Christianity. “In the wake of that act, severe persecution broke out against Christians, particularly in North Africa. Living in Carthage at the time was Perpetua, a young noblewoman and new Christian who was preparing for baptism. Though Perpetua was only about 22 years old, and was still nursing her infant son, she was arrested and thrown into prison with four other catechumens.”

From Perpetua’s diary: While we were still under arrest, my father, out of love for me, was trying to persuade me and shake my resolution. “Father,” I said, “do you see this vase here, for example, or water pot or whatever?” “Yes I do,” he said. And I told him: “Could it be called by any other name than what it is?” And he said, “No.” Well, so too I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian.” At this my father was so angered by the word ‘Christian’ that he moved toward me as though he would pluck my eyes out. But he left it at that and departed, vanquished along with his diabolical arguments.

The church deacons bribed the guards to allow Perpetua and her cellmates to move to a better part of the prison, where she was also allowed to hold and nurse her infant son. After spending time in prayer Perpetua had a vision. Picking up from her journal, “I saw a ladder of tremendous height made of bronze, reaching all the way to the heavens, but it was so narrow that only one person could climb up it at a time. To the sides of the ladder were attached all sorts of metal weapons: there were swords, spears, hooks, daggers, and spikes; so that if anyone tried to climb up carelessly or without paying attention, he would be mangled, and his flesh would adhere to the weapons. At the foot of the ladder lay a dragon of enormous size, and it would attack those who tried to climb up and try to terrify them from doing so. And Saturninus [Perpetua’s instructor] was the first to go up, he who was later to give himself up of his own accord. As he arrived at the top of the staircase, and he looked back and said to me: “Perpetua, I am waiting for you. But take care; do not let the dragon bite you.”

“He will not harm me,” I said, “in the name of Christ Jesus.” Slowly, as though he were afraid of me, the dragon stuck his head out from underneath the ladder. Then, using it as my first step, I trod on his head and went up. Then I saw an immense garden, and in it a grey-haired man sat in shepherd’s garb; he was tall, and milking sheep. And standing around him were many thousands of people clad in white garments. He raised his head, looked at me, and said, “I am glad you have come, my child.”...I at once told my brother, and we realized that we would have to suffer, and that from now on we would no longer have any hope in this life.

Then, they heard a rumor that they would receive a hearing, which they did. They all confessed their guilt but as the judge called Perpetua forward, her father again arrived with her infant son in his arms begging her to recant. “I tried to comfort him, saying, “It will all happen in the prisoner’s dock as God wills, for you may be sure that we are not left to ourselves but are all in his power.” This is where Perpetua’s entry ends and an onlooker narrates the rest: “The day of their *victory* dawned, and they marched from the prison to the amphitheater joyfully, as though they were going to heaven, with calm faces, trembling, if at all, with joy rather than fear. Perpetua went along with shining countenance and calm step, as the beloved of God, as a wife of Christ, putting down everyone’s stare by her

own intense gaze...At this time the crowds became enraged and demanded that they be scourged before a line of gladiators. *And they rejoiced at this, that they had obtained a share of the Lord's sufferings.*

The authorities initially brought out the two women, Perpetua and Felicitas (who had just given birth in prison!) into the arena naked, tied them in a net, and loosed a mad heifer on them. However, even the Roman crowds booed in disgust at two young mothers, one fresh from childbirth with milk still dripping from her breast, being stripped naked in such a fashion. So, they had the two women dressed in tunics and flung them back into the arena. "First the heifer tossed Perpetua and she fell on her back. Then sitting up she pulled down the tunic that was ripped along the side so that it covered her thighs, thinking more of her modesty than of her pain. Next she asked for a pin to fasten her untidy hair; for it was not right that a martyr should die with her hair in disorder, lest she might seem to be in mourning in *her hour of triumph.*" Perpetua got up and rushed to Felicitas' side as she too had been crushed to the ground by the mad cow. Perpetua then called for her brother and spoke to him and the catechumens and said, "You must all stand fast in the faith and love one another, and do not be weakened by what we have gone through."

Two of the three men, Saturninus and Revocatus, had been killed immediately, but no beast would approach the third man, Secundulus. Some of the beasts even attacked the soldiers. Finally, Secundulus announced that a leopard would kill him, and so it happened: "Immediately as the contest was coming to a close, a leopard was let loose, and after one bite Saturninus was drenched in blood and thrown unconscious with the rest. And so the martyrs got up (P. & F.) and went to the spot of their own accord, and kissing one another they sealed their martyrdom with the ritual kiss of peace." The Roman soldier then struck Perpetua with the sword, cutting her to the bone, but it was not her death. At that moment "she took the trembling hand of the young gladiator and guided it to her throat. It was as though so great a woman could not be dispatched unless she herself were willing. Ah, most valiant and blessed martyrs! Truly you are *called and chosen for the glory of Christ Jesus our Lord.*"

## II. POLYCARP

We must remember that in the early days of the church, the statement "Jesus is Lord" was a crime punishable by death. The Romans claimed that Caesar was the world's only true Lord, so when Christians began to say that Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord, an uproar followed. At first, government officials tried to coax Christians into being reasonable by worshipping Caesar in addition to Christ, but this only further cemented Christians' belief in and witness for Christ. Thus, Rome began to kill Christians for treason against Rome, creating what we know today as 'martyrs' (those whose death is a testimony to reality of their faith). As the Roman government killed the Lord's apostles, God raised a new generation of leadership to carry the church through these difficult trials. One such leader was an elderly minister named Polycarp. He was born about A.D. 70, and he knew eyewitnesses of Jesus, possibly including the apostle John. Before 110 Polycarp was named bishop of Smyrna, and during his life he stood for orthodoxy. At a pagan festival c. 156, Polycarp was arrested at the demands of an angry mob.

Because Polycarp was such a prominent Christian leader, the Roman governor, in collusion with many of the people, called for his death. Polycarp was quickly arrested and brought before the Roman governor. "Have respect for the honor of your old age, swear by Caesar and save yourself. Point to the Christian prisoners and say, 'Away with the godless,'" the governor said. Polycarp instead pointed toward the pagan crowds, lifted his voice to heaven, and said, "Away with the godless."

The governor tried a second time, "Swear the oath to Caesar and I will release you. Deny Christ!" Polycarp stared intently at the governor and proclaimed, "For 86 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. Calmly, Polycarp responded, "You try in vain to get me to swear by Caesar. Hear me plainly, I am a Christian!" Nearly undone, the governor threatened, "I have the wild beasts here. 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."

With the unbelievable courage, Polycarp fired back, "You threaten me with fire that burns for a little while and goes out, but you are ignorant of the fire of eternal punishment which is prepared for the ungodly. Why do you wait?"

Kindle the fire and do what you will.” At that, the soldiers rushed in, tied the old pastor to a post, and surrounded him with timber.

As the flames licked his feet, he called out to the Lord, “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.*” At the close of his prayer, the flames consumed his body.

### III. BLANDINA

The young slave woman, Blandina, awoke on a cold, damp, stone floor, her body severely wounded from the previous day’s torture. Along with several other Christians, she had been arrested for refusing to worship Caesar and the other Roman gods, and now she was prepared to die for her faith. The cell door suddenly opened, and a Roman guard appeared, ready to drag them to a new day of pain. Blandina and her Christian friends were dragged out of their cells and into the arena at Lyons. As they huddled together in the center of the arena, spectators jeered at them until a deep voice cut through the commotion: “You Christians offend our gods, but if you will swear by Caesar, I will release you,” said the governor.

At this offer of mercy, a few beleaguered Christians stepped forward, swore the oath to Caesar, and were freed. Most, however, remained knotted in the arena, pleading for strength from God. “Very well then,” the governor shouted, “You have chosen the beasts, the fire, and the sword.” Immediately soldiers began beating the prisoners with whips and slashing them with swords, all to the crowd’s roaring approval. Blandina and her friends watched as the Roman guards murdered several friends, but Blandina remained unmoved in her faith.

Blandina had lasted another cruel day, but the guards tormented her all night, piercing her with daggers and crushing her limbs upon the rack, all the time calling out to her, “Curse Christ!” She responded simply, “I am a Christian, we do nothing to be ashamed of.” The jailers, themselves exhausted, finally gave up. They could hardly believe this frail woman was still alive, and they remarked to each other, “who are these Christians who are willing *to go cheerfully to their deaths?*”

The next day, Blandina and her friends were again brought to the arena, this time to be hung on a post as food for the wild animals. Blandina lifted her eyes to the Lord and prayed, “O Father, strengthen us as we suffer for the glory of Christ.” One by one, the other believers were killed by the beasts, but to everyone’s amazement, Blandina remained untouched, and was hauled back to prison. *Instead, “she grew in strength as she proclaimed her faith.”*

A few days later, she was hauled out again, this time with a 15-year old boy named Ponticus. “Stand firm, dear Ponticus,” Blandina urged him. Soon, Ponticus lay dead, but Blandina lived on, her face radiant with the glory of Christ. According to the church historian Eusebius, she did not show despair before the animals but was *“rejoicing and exulting at her departure as if invited to a wedding supper, not thrown to beasts.”* Her tormentors, now exasperated at her unwillingness to die, reached down and killed her with the sword. Surviving Christians who witnessed this brutality wrote and account of the martyred believers, sent it to churches throughout the Roman Empire, giving them strength to persevere in their faith as had Blandina before them.

### IV. ANALYSIS

**Revelation 12:11:** *And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.*

“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” -Tertullian

“There is another cause why God permits persecutions to be carried out against us, that the people of God may be increased.” People inquired what was so good that it seemed preferable to life itself, “so that neither loss of goods, nor of the light, nor bodily pain or tortures deter them.” -Lactantius