

Events:

Persecution and Perseverance of the Christians

- Basic Roman policy – tolerate other religions as long as the Roman gods (and later the Emperor himself) were also worshipped.
- Rome at first believed that Christianity was a sect of Judaism, and so Christians were exempt from worshipping the Roman Gods.
- Later the Jews made it clear that Christians were not Jews, and trouble began.
- Persecutions started no later than the 60's. Nero blamed the Christians for the fire in Rome in 64 to turn suspicion away from him.
- Peter and Paul (both in Rome) were probably tortured and killed not long after 64.
- Christians who renounced Christ and/or acknowledged the Emperor as god were spared. Those who persevered and resisted were tortured and/or killed.
- Christians were gathered up as “atheists” (since they did not believe in the gods) and were tortured or killed by wild beasts (as Ignatius).
- The practice of using wild animals was later abandoned in favor of other forms of torture such as burning at the stake (as Polycarp) or beheading (as Justin).
- Persecution subsided for a while after it became both costly and “boring”
- It flared up again occasionally – particularly in 250-251 (under the Emperor Decius) and in 305-311 (under the Emperors Diocletian and Galerius).
- Persecution effectively ceased when Constantine became emperor in 312.
- The word “martyr” means witness. Tertullian wrote, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

Heroes:

Polycarp of Smyrna

- Born around 70 (or 80). Died in 155 (or 166).
- Very little is known about Polycarp's early life.
- Tradition says he met and studied under John the Apostle. Some writers claim that it was really John the Presbyter.
- He was a friend and acquaintance of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch.
- He was also a friend of a fellow named Papius (Bishop of Hierapolis).
- Irenaeus claims to have known and studied under Polycarp.
- Polycarp defended the traditional day of “Easter” as the 14th day of the first month of the Hebrew calendar () against the newer Roman .
- Polycarp was a defender of Christianity against the Gnostic heresies of the time. He faithfully taught the teaching of the apostles and John, quoting their teaching from memory.

Heroes of the Christian Faith
Lesson 4 – 8/23/2009

- The following quotation is from his letter to the Philippians:

“Stand fast, therefore, in these things, and follow the example of the Lord, being firm and unchangeable in the faith, loving the brotherhood, and being attached to one another, joined together in the truth, exhibiting the meekness of the Lord in your intercourse with one another, and despising no one.”
- According to Irenaeus, Polycarp visited Rome in 154 or 155 and defended Christ against the Marcionites and won many of them back to Christ.
- During the persecutions of the mid-second century, Polycarp was arrested by the authorities and brought before the proconsul, who tried to persuade him to admit that Caesar is lord. Polycarp refused, and after a lengthy dialog, he was burned at the stake (since wild beasts were no longer used) and then stabbed since the flames would not consume him.
- Eusebius fixes Polycarp’s death in 166 and Jerome in 167. Jerome mentions the proconsul in charge of Asia at the time was Satius Quadratus, who ruled 165-166. But that date was later recalculated to be 155-156. Jerome puts Polycarp’s death on Saturday, 16 Nissan. 16 Nissan was on Saturday in both 155 and 166. Modern church writers adopted the earlier date of his death as February 23, 155.

Audio CD: #1 – Polycarp

Discussion

- Fill in the blank: “The blood of the martyrs is the _____ of the church.”
- Who are some of the other church fathers associated with Polycarp?
- How did Polycarp react when he was arrested and subsequently reviled?
[Romans 12:18-21; 1 Peter 2:23]
- What can we learn from Polycarp that is relevant to our own lives?