

Xiv. the Temptation

by Martyrs of the Catacombs

Marcellus's unwavering faith and refusal to compromise his beliefs ultimately lead to his martyrdom in the Coliseum.

Scripture: Matthew 16:26, Mark 8:36, Philippians 1:21, Hebrews 11:35, Revelation 2:10

Topics: "Persecution", "Martyrdom"

Description

In the sermon by the Martyrs of the Catacombs, the story of Marcellus showcases unwavering faith and dedication to Christ, even in the face of intense persecution and temptation. Despite offers to renounce his faith for temporary safety and worldly gain, Marcellus remains steadfast, choosing to embrace martyrdom rather than compromise his beliefs. His courage and commitment serve as a powerful example of loyalty to God, even unto death.

Transcript

"All this will I give thee if thou wilt fall down and worship me."

That night Lucullus remained in the cell with his friend. He sought by every possible argument to shake his resolution. He appealed to every motive that commonly influences men. He left no means of persuasion unused.

All in vain. The faith of Marcellus was too firmly fixed. It was founded on the Rock of Ages, and neither the storm of violent threats nor the more tender influences of friendship could weaken his determination.

"No," said he, "my course is taken and my choice is made. Come weal, come woe, I must follow it out to the end. I know all that is before me. I have weighed all the consequences of my action, but in spite of all I will continue as I have begun."

"It is but a small thing that I ask," said Lucullus. "I do not wish you to give up this religion forever, but only for the present. A terrible persecution is now raging, and before its fury all must fall, whether young or old, high or low. You have seen that no class or age is respected. Pollio would have been saved if it had been possible. There was a strong sympathy in his favor. He was young, and scarcely accountable for his errors; he was also noble, the last of an ancient family. But the law was inexorable, and he suffered its penalty. Cinna, too, might have been overlooked. He was neither more nor less than a madman. But so vehement is the zeal against Christians that even his evident madness was no security whatever for him."

"I know it well. The Prince of Darkness struggles against the Church of God, but it is founded on a rock, and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it. Have I not seen the good, the pure, the noble, the holy, and the innocent all suffer alike? Do I not know that there is no mercy for the Christian? I knew it well long ago. I have always been prepared for the consequences."

"Hear me, Marcellus. I have said that I asked but a small thing. This religion which you prize so highly need not be given up. Keep it, if it must be so. But make allowance for circumstances. Since the storm is raging bow before it. Take the course of a wise man, not of a fanatic."

"What is it that you would have me to do?"

"It is this. In the course of a few years a change will take place. Either the persecution will wear itself out, or a reaction will take place, or the emperor may die and other rulers with different feelings may succeed. It will then be safe to be a Christian. Then these people who are now afflicted may come back from their hiding-places to occupy their old places, and to rise to dignity and wealth. Remember this. Do not therefore throw away a life which yet may be serviceable to the state and happy to yourself. Cherish it for your own sake. Look about you now. Consider all these things. Leave aside your religion for a time, and return to that of the state. It need only be for a time. Thus you may escape from present danger, and when happier times return you may go back and be a Christian again."

"This is impossible, Lucullus. It is abhorrent to my soul. What, can I thus be doubly a hypocrite? Would you ask me to perjure my immortal soul to the world and to my God? Better to die at once by the severest tortures that can be inflicted."

"You take such extreme views that I despair of saving you. Will you not look at this subject rationally? It is not perjury, but policy; not hypocrisy, but wisdom."

"God forbid that I should do this thing and sin against him!"

"Look further also. You will not only benefit yourself but others. These Christians whom you love will be assisted by you far more than they are now. In their present situation you know well that they are enabled to live by the sympathy and assistance of those who profess the religion of the state but in secret prefer the religion of the Christians. Do you call these men hypocrites and perjurers? Are they not rather your benefactors and friends?"

"These men have never learned the Christian's faith and hope as I have. They have never felt the new birth of the soul as I have. They have not known the love of God springing up within their hearts to give them new feelings and hopes and desires. For them to sympathize with the Christians and to help them is a good thing; but the Christian who could be base enough to abjure his faith and deny the Saviour that redeemed him, could never have enough generosity in his traitorous soul to assist his forsaken brethren."

"Then, Marcellus, I have but one more offer to make, and I go. It is a last hope. I do not know whether it will be possible or not. I will try it, however, if I can but gain your consent. It is this. You need not abjure your faith; you need not sacrifice to the gods; you need not do anything whatever of which you disapprove. Let the past be forgotten. Return again, not in heart, but in outward appearance, to what you were before. You were then a gay, lighthearted soldier, devoted to your duties. You never took any part in any religious services. You were seldom present in the temples. You passed your time in the camp, and your devotions were in private. You gathered your instruction from the books of the philosophers and not from the priests."

Be all this again. Return to your duties. Appear again in public in company with me; again join in pleasant conversation, and devote yourself to your old pursuits. This will be easy and pleasant to do, and it will not require anything that is base or distasteful. The authorities will overlook your absence and your misconduct, and if they are not willing that you should be restored to all your former honors, then you can be placed in your former command in your old legion. All will then be well. A little discretion will be needed, a wise silence, an apparent return to your former round of duties. If you remain in Rome it will be thought that the tidings of your conversion to Christianity was wrong; if you go abroad it will not be known."

"I do not think, Lucullus, that the plan which you propose would be possible for many reasons. Proclamations have been made about me, rewards have been offered for my apprehension, and above all, my last appearance in the Coliseum before the emperor himself was sufficient to take away all hope of pardon. Yet even if it were possible I could not consent. My Saviour cannot be worshiped in this way. His followers must confess him openly. 'Whosoever,' he says, 'is ashamed to confess me before men, of him will I be ashamed before my Father and the holy angels.' To deny him in my life or in outward appearance is precisely the same as denying him by the formal manner which the law lays down. This I cannot do. I love him who first loved me and gave himself for me. My highest joy is to proclaim him before men; to die for him will be my noblest act, and the martyr's crown my most glorious reward."

Lucullus said no more, for he found that all persuasion was useless. The remainder of the time was passed in conversation about other things. Marcellus did not waste these last precious hours which he passed with his friend. Filled with gratitude for his noble and generous affection, he sought to recompense him by making him acquainted with the highest treasure that man can possess--the religion of Christ.

Lucullus listened to him patiently, more through friendship than interest. Yet some, at least, of Marcellus's words were impressed upon his memory.

On the following day the trial took place. It was short and formal. Marcellus was immovable, and received his condemnation with a calm demeanor.

The afternoon of the same day was the time appointed for him to suffer. He was to die, not by the wild beasts, nor by the hand of the gladiator, but by the keener torments of death by fire.

It was in that place where so many Christians had already borne their witness to the truth that Marcellus sealed his faith with his life. The stake was placed in the center of the Coliseum, and the fagots were heaped high around it.

Marcellus entered, led on by the brutal keepers, who added blows and ridicule to the horrors of the approaching punishment. He looked around upon the vast circle of faces, hard, cruel, and pitiless; he looked upon the arena and thought of the thousands of Christians who had preceded him in suffering, and had gone from thence to join the noble army of martyrs who worship forever around the throne. He thought of the children whose death he had witnessed, and recalled once more their triumphant song,

"Unto Him that loved us,

To Him that washed us from our sins."

Now the keepers seized him rudely and led him to the stake, where they bound him with strong chains so that escape was impossible.

"I am now ready to be offered," murmured he, "and the time of my departure is at hand. . . . Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day."

Now the torch was applied, and the flames rose up and dense volumes of smoke concealed the martyr for a while from view. When it passed away he was seen again standing amid the fire with upturned face and clasped hands.

The flames increased around him. Nearer and nearer they came, devouring the fagots and enveloping him in a circle of fire. Now they threw over him a black veil of smoke, again they dashed forward and licked him with their forked tongues.

But the martyr stood erect, calm amid suffering, serene amid his dreadful agony, by faith clinging to his Saviour. He was there though they saw him not; his everlasting arm was round about his faithful follower, and his Spirit inspired him.

Nearer grew the flames and yet nearer. Life, assailed more violently, trembled in her citadel and the spirit prepared to wing its way to its mansion of rest.

At last the sufferer gave a convulsive start, as though some sharper pang flashed resistlessly through him. But he conquered his pain with a violent effort. Then he raised his arms on high and feebly waved them. Then, with a last effort of expiring nature, he cried out in a loud voice "Victory!"

With the cry life seemed to depart, for he fell forward amid the rushing flames, and the soul of Marcellus had ascended to the bosom of the Father.

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