

Polycarp, John and Jesus

by Peter Hammond

The sermon explores Polycarp's steadfast faith in Christ amidst persecution and the profound trust shared between him, the Apostle John, and Jesus.

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 16:9, Proverbs 15:8, Jeremiah 17:10, John 3:16, John 14:6, John 15:13

Topics: "Discipleship", "Perseverance"

Description

Peter Hammond preaches about the inspiring story of Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna, who faced persecution with unwavering faith and courage, refusing to renounce Christ even in the face of death. Polycarp's trust in Christ, mentored by the Apostle John, exemplifies true discipleship and sacrificial service, challenging believers to trust Jesus completely, even in the midst of trials and tribulations. The sermon emphasizes the importance of being trustworthy and faithful servants of Christ, willing to be entrusted with hard assignments and fully committed to God's will.

Transcript

The year was A.D. 155. The persecution against Christians had swept across the Roman Empire. It had come to the city of Smyrna. The Pro-Consul of Smyrna, swept up into this persecution, put out the order to arrest Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp. He was to be arrested and brought to the local Coliseum, for execution.

Facing Persecution

Polycarp had been warned to flee, but he had decided not to. He invited his captors in, treated them as friends, prepared them food and served them a meal. Polycarp just asked for one hour to pray before they took him away. The Roman officers overheard his prayers, which actually went on for two hours. They probably began to have second thoughts: "What are we doing arresting an old man like this?" A man well advanced in his eighties.

An Offer for Reprieve

The crowd screamed when they saw this famous Christian leader come forward. They wanted his blood. The Pro-Consul, however, offered him a way of reprieve. He said: "Pity your grey hairs old man. Just curse Christ and I will release you." Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna, responded: "Eighty-six years I have served Christ and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who has saved me?"

Picture

Compromise Suggested

The Pro-Consul reached for a compromise: "Then just do this old man. Swear by the genius of the Emperor and that will be sufficient." The genius was 'the spirit' of the Emperor. To do this would have been to recognise the pagan idols and the pagan religion of Rome. At that point, Polycarp responded, "If you imagine for a moment that I would do that, then I think you pretend that you do not know who I am. Hear it plainly: I am a Christian!"

"Away with the Atheists!"

There were more entreaties. At one point the Pro-Consul commanded him to say, "Away with the atheists!" referring to the Christians who were considered atheists because they did not worship the Roman gods. Polycarp pointed at the jeering mob in the stands and cried out, "Away with the atheists!"

Picture

Wild Beasts

Polycarp was threatened that he would be fed to wild beasts. "Bring them" said Polycarp. "I would change my mind if it meant going from the worse to the better, but not to change from the right to the wrong."

Fire

The Pro-Consul's patience was exhausted: "I will have you burned alive!" Polycarp responded: "You threaten me with a fire that burns for an hour and then is extinguished. But you know nothing about the fire of Eternal Judgment that will burn forever and ever. Bring what you will!"

Singing Praises to God

The fire was prepared. Polycarp was burned to death and he died praying, praising God and singing. As the fire engulfed him, people were converted to Christ in the stands. That was 22 February A.D. 155.

Polycarp Trusted Christ

What is it about a man, in those worst of circumstances that enabled him to behave in such an extraordinary way and make it his greatest moment? He trusted Christ.

God gave grace for Polycarp's unique courage. But there is something of a human explanation for it as well. Polycarp was mentored by a man who knew our Lord Jesus Christ in a most unusual way. Polycarp's mentor was the Apostle John.

Picture

Mentored by the Apostle John

Thousands thronged around Jesus, hundreds followed Him, but a dozen became His disciples. And of that Twelve, three were in the inner circle - Peter, James and John. And John was described as "the disciple whom Jesus loved". The relationship of the Lord Jesus with John was unique. John must have passed on something of that close relationship to Polycarp and to others of his disciples. It can be summed up in

these words: John trusted Jesus.

True Discipleship

Look at these striking words that the Apostle John was inspired to write in the Gospel of John 2:23-25: "Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His Name when they saw the signs which He did. But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man." This is the Word of God.

Many Believed in Jesus - But He Did Not Trust Them

In Jerusalem, many people believed in Jesus. But He did not believe in them. They trusted in Jesus, but He did not trust in them. Jesus knew their hearts. He knows all men. He does not need men's testimony about a man - He knows our heart motivations. They believed when they saw the miraculous signs He was doing.

Inverse Reality

When one looks at church history, you see that as the cost of discipleship increases, the numbers decrease. We should not be surprised at this.

Picture

More Turn Out for Food than for Teaching

At the first church picnic, over 5,000 people participated. It is well known that if you want a larger attendance, organise a meal. If there is food, then people gather in far greater numbers. So there were 5,000 at the first church picnic. But at the first church sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, there were several hundred.

Prayer Meetings are Not as Popular

For the first church prayer meeting, the prayer meeting in the Upper Room, when our Lord commanded them to pray day and night, until the power from above came down upon them, there were 120 who gathered in the Upper Room for the Pentecost prayer meeting.

Even Fewer are Available for Evangelism

When it came to the first mid-week outreach, the first door-to-door street Evangelism, there were 70 who went out, two by two, to Evangelise, in the highways and the byways.

Daily Discipleship is Even More Rare

When it came to daily discipleship, when the Lord wanted men and women to be with Him day and night to follow Him and to be where He was, there were 12 men and about 4 women.

The Apostle John Trusted Jesus

Of those 12 men, one betrayed Him, one denied Him, one doubted Him and they all forsook Him. Only John went all the way to the Cross and stood, with the women disciples, underneath the Cross and identified with the sufferings of Christ.

Picture

Love is Measured by Sacrifice

As the cost of discipleship increases, the numbers decrease. (We see this in our mission. Sometimes we have seen thousands turn up for an event, but much less for Bible teaching, even less for prayer meetings. Very few can be depended upon for evangelistic outreaches and even less for cross-border missions, especially in restricted access areas and war zones.) When we look at John's life, we see that John trusted Jesus.

John Gave Up His Comfortable Lifestyle

John trusted Jesus enough to forsake prosperity. Most of the followers of Jesus were not wealthy people, but John was prosperous. John was a man who worked in a family business owned by his father, Zebedee, in northern Galilee. As they had a second home in Jerusalem, John would sometimes stay at this home. We are told that John had access to the house of Caiaphas, the High Priest. So his family had servants, they had a family business and access to famous and important people. John's family was actually quite well off.

An Encounter with Eternity

But one day, John was captivated by a Man who spoke like no other man had even spoken before. John was drawn to Jesus. While he did not have a complete understanding of all that Jesus was, or all that He taught, yet John knew that Jesus was different. He sensed the Person and the power of God in this Man.

Picture

Called by Jesus

When Jesus said, "Follow Me and I will make you a fisher of men" John decided that this Teacher from Nazareth was worth trusting. Even if it meant giving up everything he owned, he trusted Jesus enough to forsake prosperity, comfort and safety.

Willing to Face Suffering and Death for Christ

He also trusted Jesus enough to risk his life for Him. At the Mount of Crucifixion, at Golgotha, other than the women disciples, only John showed up. All the men had fled. They had abandoned the Lord in fear that their fate would be the same as that of Jesus. John was the only man to stand at the foot of the Cross. He stood there at the risk of his own life. There was every probability that he could be arrested and crucified as Jesus had been.

It is Easy to Follow in Times of Popularity and Success

John had followed Jesus when miracles were performed and when thousands applauded Him. When the Lord was multiplying the loaves and the fishes. When Jesus came in triumph into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the crowds waved palm branches and took off their cloaks to pave the road, crying out: "Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Highest!"

It Is Difficult to Trust in Times of Trial and Tribulation

It was quite another thing, however, to trust Jesus when He was humbled, stripped, whipped, bleeding, dying and "powerless", dying a disgraceful death on the Cross. John trusted Jesus enough to risk his life for Him.

Picture

Willing to Die for Christ

One Missionary to Uganda, Alexander McKay, said, "I want to remind the Missionary Committee that within six months they will probably hear that one of us is dead. But when that news comes, do not be downcast, but send someone else immediately to take the vacant place." In fact within a few months, several of the mission team had died of disease, or been murdered and within two years Alexander McKay was the sole surviving member of the original Mission team of eight.

Single Minded Determination

Roland Bingham, a Missionary to Nigeria, vowed: "I will open Africa to the Gospel or die trying."

Sacrificial Service

This kind of single-minded determination and devotion to duty can also be seen in the example of Nate Saint, one of the five missionary martyrs amongst the Auca Indians in Ecuador, South America. He said: "The way I see it, we ought to be willing to die. In the military we were taught that to obtain our objective, we had to be willing to be expendable. Missionaries must face that same expendability... and people who do not know the Lord, they ask why in the world we waste our lives as missionaries. They forget that they too are expending their lives. When the bubble is burst, they will have nothing of eternal significance to show for the years that they have wasted."

Revealing a Terrible Secret

Several decades ago a denomination in Zaire (present Democratic Republic of Congo), had their 100th anniversary of the coming of Christian missionaries to that part of the country. There were long speeches, music and all sorts of feasting and celebrations. One event overshadowed it all. A very old man, over 100-years old, came before the crowd at the end of the last day. He insisted that he be allowed to speak. He said that he would soon die. There was some information that he had to share, which, if he did not speak, would go with him to the grave.

Picture

A Plot to Poison the Missionaries

The man explained that when the first Christian missionaries came over 100 years ago before to this part of central Africa, when it was controlled by Belgium, his people did not know what to think of them. They thought the missionaries strange and their Message unusual. The tribal leaders decided to test the missionaries by slowly poisoning them to death. Over a period of many months and years the missionary children and then their parents died one by one. The old man said: "It was as we watched how they died that we decided we wanted to live as Christians!"

Faithful Unto Death

It was incredible that this story had not been told for 100 years. Those Christian missionaries had died painful, strange deaths. They never knew why they were dying, or what the impact of their lives and deaths would be. Yet through it all, they did not leave. They stayed. They ministered. They planted the Gospel year by year. There are churches in that very area to this day, because these missionaries, like John, trusted Jesus Christ. Even at the risk of their lives, even to martyrdom.

Willing to Remain Anonymous

John trusted Jesus. He trusted Jesus enough to forsake prosperity. He trusted Jesus enough to risk his life for Him. And John trusted Jesus enough to remain anonymous. It is a fascinating fact, that in John's Gospel, he never mentions himself by name. He refers to most of the other disciples. He refers to Peter, to Andrew, to James and to Judas, but he never writes his own name. John refers to himself most often as "the other disciple", or as "the disciple whom Jesus loved". In John's relationship with Jesus, John did not promote himself. The sufficiency of Jesus Christ in his life was an expression of his trust. He trusted Jesus enough to remain anonymous.

The Lord Jesus Trusted John

There is another side to this relationship that is quite different. John trusted Jesus, Yes. And Jesus trusted John.

Jesus trusted John to Write One of His Gospels

The first three Gospels of the New Testament, Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels. They cover much of the same content. Many of the same stories, many of the same teachings, many of the same incidents and miracles, are related in different words and sometimes word for word. Much of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke are similar.

An Awesome Responsibility

In the later Gospel of John, we read a tremendous amount of new information that we would not have otherwise had. The Lord Jesus wanted more of His story told. He wanted different miracles mentioned. He wanted a new perspective that had not yet been incorporated by the earlier Gospel authors. He chose someone He could trust to do that job. The final lines of John's Gospel say there were many other things that Jesus did and that the world could not contain all the books that could be written if you put all the things Jesus had done as the God of the universe into it.

Picture

Eyewitnesses

John had an infinite editing job. He had to edit down enough volumes to fill all the library shelves of the world, to just twenty short chapters. He had to leave out far more than he actually included. He had to get it right. John, in the inner circle of three, had been on the Mount of Transfiguration. He had sat next to Jesus at the Last Supper. He had heard that whisper about Judas. He had information that no one else could give. Jesus chose someone He could trust to get the story straight. To communicate what was most important.

Precious Truths - Unique to John's Gospel

Because John was trustworthy, we have some of the most beloved and familiar Words in all the Bible:

"...Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!" John 1:29

"...unless one is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.'...unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God." John 3:3-5

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." John 3:16

"...when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him." John 4:23

"... lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!" John 4:35

"...those who have done good, to the resurrection of life and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation." John 5:29

"How can you believe, who receive honour from one another and do not seek the honour that comes from the only God?" John 5:44

"...I am the Bread of Life..." John 6:35

"All that the Father gives Me will come to Me..." John 6:37

"This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last Day." John 6:39

"He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." John 7:38

"...Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more." John 8:11

"...I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness..." John 8:12

"And you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." John 8:32

"I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep." John 10:11

"...I am the Resurrection and the Life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live." John 11:25

"...I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." John 14:6

"Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends." John 15:13

These and many other passages were first written in the Gospel according to St. John.

Jesus Trusted John with His Love

John trusted Jesus and Jesus trusted John. Jesus trusted John not only to write His Gospel, He also trusted John with His love. It is a most extraordinary thing to be described as, "the one whom Jesus

loved." To be Jesus' best friend, in our egalitarian age, almost seems inappropriate. It does not seem right that the Lord Jesus could have a best friend. But the fact is, that is what the relationship was.

Picture

God is Not Egalitarian

We read that Enoch walked with God and that Enoch pleased God. We read that Enoch was taken up to be with God. That is about all we know about Enoch. What an incredible epitaph! He walked with God and he pleased God.

Abraham was called God's friend.

Moses spoke with God and God spoke to him face-to-face.

David was described as, "A man after My own heart" by God. Imagine being described by God as: a man after God's own heart!

What would it be like to know who is the Lord's best friend on earth today? What do you think would happen? Imagine if we could know: "This is the person whom God loves the most."

Do you know what would happen in 2019 if someone was identified as "Jesus' best friend?" They would be on the cover of Christian magazines. They would probably write a book, or put out a CD, or go on a Best Friend of Jesus Seminar speaking tour. There would be a tremendous potential of ruining that person's life. A real temptation to arrogance. A possibility of treating others in an inappropriate and disparaging way.

It was critically important that our Lord chose someone whom He could trust to be His best friend, with the confidence that that person would never misuse their friendship.

Picture

Jesus Trusted John to Care for His Mother

Jesus trusted John with His Gospel. Jesus trusted John with His friendship and Jesus trusted John with His mother. In Chapter 19 of John's Gospel, we read the last gasping breaths of our Lord, whose excruciatingly painful crucifixion allowed very little breath for speaking.

Last Words from the Cross

Jesus, in agony, said few words. Seven phrases from the Cross: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do. It is finished! Into Thy hands I commend My Spirit." From the Cross, as well, He gasped out to Mary, "This is your son." Then to John he said, "This is your mother."

His Responsibility for His Mother

These are some of the most powerful, personal and private words recorded of our Lord Jesus. While it is absolutely true that Jesus was and is, the eternal Son of God and while it is true that His primary Mission on earth was the Redemption of His people, yet it is also true that He was a Man. As the eldest son, when His stepfather died, He was responsible for His mother's care. Now crucified, soon to die, His hands nailed to the Cross, He could not (humanly speaking) even touch her. He could not care for her as He should. So

His most important human responsibility on earth, He could no longer fulfil.

Commissioned by Christ

Now Theologians struggle with the idea that God would ever need anything, for our very definition of God is that he is all-sufficient. Jesus entrusted John to fulfil the duties that He could not do Himself: take care of His mother. Jesus chose John to care for His mother, Mary. He chose someone He could trust.

Picture

To the Ends of the Earth

The Record states how all the followers of Jesus, the Apostles, left Jerusalem. Thomas went as far as India. Peter ended up in Rome. Matthew went all the way to Ethiopia. Simon the Zealot ended up in the present-day Crimea. The Apostles spread out all throughout the Mediterranean area and across the Roman Empire to Britain, to Africa and Asia. They went in the Power of the Spirit of God with the Gospel of Christ. They pioneered the expansion of the Church of Christ. John went to Patmos in Asia Minor (present day Turkey) where he disciplined Polycarp.

Do You Trust Jesus?

You have probably been asked many times: Do you trust Jesus? I hope your answer has continued to be a resounding: "Yes I do! I trust Jesus completely. I would trust Him enough to devote my health and to risk my life for Him. I would trust Him that my name is in His hands."

Can Jesus Trust You?

Let me ask you: Does Jesus trust you? Can He trust you? Can He trust you with your family and ministry? With the education of the next generation? With standing up for the Right-to-Life of pre-born babies? To stand for Truth? Can He trust you to do His will? To fulfil His Mission? To be faithful in small matters? To be trustworthy in great matters? To care for His creatures? To protect the environment? To write what He wants written? To do what He wants done? Can Jesus trust you?

Do Not Waste Your Life

In our world today, we need people who will live for Christ. What is needed is people whom Jesus can trust to be faithful, loyal, productive servants and soldiers of Christ.

Picture

Are You Willing to Be Entrusted with Hard Assignments?

There is a long list of volunteers who are willing to be 'successes' for Christ, but there is a very short line of people willing to be 'failures' for Christ. It is much easier to trust God in health, wealth and success. But we also need people, like Joni Eareckson, who can trust God in a wheel chair as a paraplegic. We need people who can be trusted by Christ to raise children with medical and educational problems. We need people who can be trusted to show what it is to be a Christian with cancer. We need dedicated disciples who are able to both trust Christ and Christians who can be trusted by Christ. Hard assignments are entrusted to devoted servants of God.

God is Looking for Hearts Fully Committed to Him

In 2 Chronicles 16:9 we read: "For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him..." His eyes are searching into your church and home, into your heart, looking for hearts that are fully committed to Him.

Searching Hearts and Minds

"I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings." Jeremiah 17:10

When God Looks at You - What Does He See?

God can use suffering to alert us, to direct us, to shape us and to unite us. "The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is His delight." Proverbs 15:8. The Lord's eyes are searching. He is examining your heart now.

Are you fully committed to Him?

Do you trust Jesus?

Can Jesus trust you?

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/peter-hammond/polycarp-john-and-jesus/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net