

Polycarp



The child had never felt so frightened in all of his life. And it wasn't helped one little bit that his mother was crying so hard that it looked as though she would never stop.

'I don't want to go away and leave you,' said Polycarp. 'I want to stay here at home with you for ever.'

His mother tried to pull herself together. Wrapping her son in her arms, she whispered into his ear.

'I wish you could stay here with me too, my son. But slaves don't make decisions; they are told what to do. And we've been told that the time has now come for you to be sold to another master. It may be that he will be a kind man and not work you too hard.'

Recognising the effort his mother was making, young Polycarp did the same. He wiped the tears from his cheeks, undid himself from his mother's arms, and stood as tall and straight as he could.

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'I'll work hard,' he said. 'And even if my new master is not a kind man, I'll work so hard that he'll come to respect me. When I'm grown up he'll maybe put me in charge of all his slaves, and I promise I'll be good to them if he does.'

Smiling through her tears, the woman nodded.

'I know you will, my son. I know you will.'

For the last time she sat by his mat in the darkness of their poor home and told the boy a story before he went to sleep.

'This is the story of a slave family,' she began, 'a family just like our own. They had a son about your age whom their master didn't want to keep. So he was taken to the slave market where he stood with all the other child slaves waiting to be bought by new masters. Strange men came and looked at them, felt their arm and leg muscles and looked to see if their eyes were clear and if they were free from obvious diseases. Eventually a man approached the boy. He looked him up and down, turned him round, asked his age and what he was good at. Then the man walked away. The boy was just beginning to breathe normally again when the man reappeared with the market official.

"I'll take that one," the man said.

The official cut the rope that bound the boy to his neighbours on either side, though

he left his hands tied together. Not knowing what lay before him, and whether he would ever see his parents again, the boy slave went with his new master into his new life, determined to make the very best of it.'

Polycarp knew his mother was preparing him for what was to come.

'Did the boy ever see his parents again?' he asked quietly.

His mother smiled sadly. 'I don't know the end of the story, my son,' she said. 'I only know that when the boy went to his new master, he went bravely.'

Kissing him goodnight for the very last time, the woman wrapped herself in her sadness and curled up tight on her mat on the floor.

Polycarp had no sleep at all that night, not a single wink. 'Is that how I'll be sold?' he wondered. Then a shudder ran right through his thin body. 'Will I be tied up in the slave market or has the master already arranged where I'll be going? Will I ever see Dad and Mum again?' The whole night was full of questions and shudders that seemed to shake his whole world, then more and yet more questions. In the first light of dawn he looked across the room at his mother and his heart gave such a lurch he thought he was going to be sick. Then, just as he thought he could be no more miserable, his mother

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stirred. It was time she was up and at work. Pretending to be asleep, Polycarp put a hand over his eyes so that he could watch what she was doing between his fingers. Before she left to begin her day's work the poor soul knelt beside her son, laid her hand on his shoulder, and whispered near his ear, 'Be brave, my son. And I will be brave for you.'

Later that morning Polycarp discovered that he had a mistress rather than a master, a mistress named Calisto. New things seemed to come at him from all sides, so much so that by evening he felt as though he'd got up in a rush in the morning and put his head on backwards! And when bedtime came, it seemed like he'd closed the door of one world and opened the door of another, and somehow it didn't seem quite as scary as he thought it would be. The boy hoped his mother knew where he was and what kind of home he'd gone into.

'She won't worry so much if she knows,' thought Polycarp.

And that was certainly true, though we don't know whether his family knew or not.

The years that followed were very different from the ones that had gone before. As a little boy, when Polycarp's master clapped his hands everyone jumped to attention and did exactly what they were ordered. Nobody ever

asked a slave to do things; they gave orders that had to be obeyed. He had had enough food, but only just. And the cloth of his tunic was the cheapest in town, and it was covered in darns and patches. His bed had been a mat on the floor, and the nearest he ever got to a book was when he had to carry one to his master. As he settled down in Calisto's home the boy thought back to his 'old days'.

One night he lay in bed thinking over all the changes that had come about in his life.

'There's the bed to start with,' Polycarp smiled. 'I don't sleep on the floor now because I've got my own straw mattress. There are no patches on my tunics. Then he grinned. It was tunics, not tunic. He had three, one to wear and two to change with. No wonder they didn't wear through and need patching! 'And what would Mum say if she knew I was learning to read and write?' The truth of it was that Calisto was bringing Polycarp up as her son not as a slave in her household. Eventually the day came when the boy realised that servants were looking after his needs rather than him being a servant. He remembered his promise to his mother and was good to them.

We don't know how it happened, but we do know that by the time Polycarp was a man he had come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. That was the biggest blessing in his life, but

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there was another blessing too. When Calisto died she left Polycarp everything she owned! The little slave boy had become a wealthy and educated man in the ancient town of Smyrna. (Smyrna is now known as Izmir, and it is on the west coast of Turkey).

Polycarp's money didn't make him self-centred; instead he used it to help spread the good news about Jesus Christ.

'Sometimes I wish I'd been born a hundred years ago,' he thought to himself, 'for then I might have seen Jesus for myself. But old John knew him well, and I can trust all he has told me about the Master.'

As he thought about the word Master, an idea flashed through Polycarp's mind.

'The night before I was sold, I promised Mum that I'd be a good slave to my new master. Little did I know that one day the best of all masters would call me into his service, and that I'd become a willing slave of the Lord God Almighty. He has called me to minister to his people here in Smyrna, and I'll do it to the very best of my ability.'

Many years later the persecution of Christians became the sport of the day. Those who trusted in Jesus had been persecuted to a greater or lesser degree ever since the Lord rose from the dead, but it developed into a fine art. Polycarp watched as member

after member of the church was targeted, and he knew that his day would probably come before long.

'I'm an old man anyway,' he thought. 'I'd rather they took me and left young energetic men to continue the Lord's work.'

Then one night Polycarp had a dream, a dream he felt sure would come true. And in his dream he was burnt at the stake for being a Christian. He had just told his friends about his dream when news spread that Roman soldiers were on the hunt for old Polycarp.

'Come away with us,' some church members insisted, as they hustled him off to a village near the town. 'We'll keep you safe.'

But they had no sooner arrived than their bishop told them that he wasn't going to run away and hide, that he would face up to whatever was to happen to him.

Just three days after his dream, soldiers appeared in the village to which he'd been taken. Far from hiding away from them, the old man strode out to meet them and invited them in for a meal! Taken by surprise - and hungry as soldiers always are - they accepted the invitation and went in.

'May I pray while you eat?' Polycarp asked his captors.

They saw no harm in that, and for the next two hours the bishop prayed aloud to his Father in heaven. Some of the soldiers were

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so impressed by what he said in his prayer that they were uncomfortable about arresting him after all... not that their feelings made any difference to their orders. But they did try to make things easier for him.

'Just do what they say,' the kinder soldiers told him, when they arrived back in the city and put Polycarp into a chariot. 'Just agree that Caesar is god and offer a sacrifice to him. There's no harm in that, and if you do it they'll release you and that will be an end of it.'

'I will not do what you want me to do,' the old man said firmly, much to the annoyance of his captors.

'I thought this one would be a walkover,' one soldier said to another.

His colleague shook his head. 'The old ones can be obstinate,' he muttered.

In a fit of mass fury the crowd that had gathered to watch the spectacle threw Polycarp from the chariot. He landed on his side and badly injured his thigh. Seeing him lying there seemed to set the bloodthirsty crowd alight, and they screamed for his execution.

'You're an old man,' one of the judges said, in an effort to help, 'just say you're sorry and deny that you believe in Jesus.'

'Eighty and six years have I now served Christ, and he has never done me the least

wrong,' Polycarp told him. 'How then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?'

Again the judges tried to make him change his mind, but the old man's mind was not for changing.

That was it. Three times the judge called out to the crowd what Polycarp's crime was.

'He is a Christian, the leader of the Christians here, and he's an enemy of our gods. He has taught many people that they should not sacrifice to our gods or worship them.'

Sentence was passed.

'Take him to the stake and burn him alive.'

Polycarp nodded.

'So my dream is to come true after all,' he thought.

The old man was led away to be burned. But when the soldiers prepared to secure him to the stake before lighting the fire, he told them not to bother. 'Let me alone as I am,' he said. 'God will give me courage to stay in the fire. I won't move away.'

It was then that Polycarp stopped speaking to men and began speaking to God. Looking up to the heavens, he prayed aloud, thanking his heavenly Father for the privilege of being a martyr for Jesus Christ. And when he had finished praying, the executioner lit the fire.

When the Apostle John wrote the book of Revelation, God gave him these words, 'Be

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faithful to death, and I will give you a crown of life.' Seventy years after John wrote these words, Polycarp, who as a young man is said to have met the Apostle John, was faithful to death. And when he died and went to heaven God kept his promise and gave him a crown of life.

Polycarp died not much more than 100 years after Jesus' death, which is a very long time ago. But papers from that time still exist, including some letters written by Polycarp himself, one written to him by another famous Christian martyr, and a brief account of his life written shortly after he died.

Fact file



Slavery: At the time that Polycarp lived in Smyrna, Turkey was known as the Province of Asia and was part of the Roman Empire. Slavery was a big part of the Roman economy and the Romans viewed their slaves very differently from the way that we view people today. In the eyes of the law, slaves were not really people. They did not own anything themselves. All that they had was really owned by their master. In earlier times, the owner had the power of life and death over his slaves, although public authorities did more to control this by the time that Polycarp died.



Keynote: Polycarp was very scared about being sold to a new master and moving away from his mum and dad. It meant moving to a new place and leaving everyone he had ever known. However, God used it to place him with a much kinder master and to give him the chance to hear about Jesus. God is still the same. He can use situations that seem very scary to work for our good and to give us more opportunity to serve him.



Think: Polycarp did not fight with the Roman soldiers when they came to arrest him. He followed Jesus' instruction to turn the other cheek instead (Matthew 5:39). This did not mean that Polycarp was a coward or ready to back down. He showed courage and loyalty but not by fighting. Can you think of any situation where you can turn the other cheek and follow Jesus' and Polycarp's examples?



Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for caring for us and being with us wherever we are. Please help me to trust you in every situation and to be brave enough not to use violence. Amen.