

Polycarp Joy in Living and Dying for Jesus

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[0 : 00] would lie? Do you think you would give up Jesus to save your own life? I hope that if I was in that situation, that I would confess that Jesus is the Lord, that I wouldn't give him up.

Today we're starting a short series throughout the next four weeks of January, looking at heroes of the faith. And in particular, we're looking at their joy in Jesus. And today we're going to meet this black and white looking gentleman. I was going to say this good looking gentleman, but I can't really tell. This gentleman called Polycarp. It's a bit of a strange name, I know. But he had been living with joy for Jesus. He lived almost 2,000 years ago, born just after the death of Jesus. And Polycarp was faced with dying for Jesus. And he is going to help us today to see what it means to truly live for Jesus. So please, let me pray again for us. Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you for the many saints who have followed you throughout history. Thank you that we are not alone today as we follow you. Help us to be encouraged by Polycarp today to live worthwhile lives following Jesus. Amen. As I mentioned, Polycarp was the bishop in a place called Smyrna, which is in modern day Turkey. And he lived from about AD 70 to 156. And he was said to have been appointed bishop by John the Apostle himself. One of the other early church fathers, Irenaeus, would tell stories of Polycarp, that Polycarp would sit around telling stories about where he, you know, John the Apostle had sat when he told stories about Jesus. And so he was one of the very first disciples to be made bishop over this young church. John the Apostle was the last of the apostles to die around 100 AD. And so when Polycarp was bishop, there was many problems for this young church. There was problems of doctrine. There was problems of this church as an organization which quickly grew up and got big. And how do you organize a large church as it's spreading across the world?

There was issues of persecution. This time, Christians were collecting the letters of the apostles and beginning to form the set of scriptures that we have today. And around February of 155 AD, 156 AD, there was tensions mounting between Christians who were being persecuted by Caesar. Christians were different to the people of the time. The people of the time, the Romans, had a pantheon. They had many gods and they had Caesar as one of their gods. And the Christians were called atheists because they refused to worship all of these gods. So, you know, it's very strange to only have one god at that time. Now, it's very strange to have any god. But at that time, it was strange to only have one god. So, the Christians were called atheists. And Christians were strange, again, because they had no shrines. They had no images to worship. Under Roman law at the time, a Christian who professed faith in Jesus was subject to the death penalty because they would not join in worshipping the emperor. Some rulers were keen to keep the peace, though, and so they didn't enforce this law because they wanted to keep all the different religious and political parties happy and at peace. But in particular, Christians dreaded the sports festivals because many were thrown to the wild beasts, to the lions, to satisfy the bloodthirst of the crowds. On this occasion in February of 155, 155 AD, 11 Christians had already been martyred. They had already been thrown to the crowd and devoured by wild animals. But the crowd cried out for more. And they cried for Polycarp the bishop.

Give us Polycarp. A messenger quickly came to Polycarp to flee. He flees out of Smyrna and he is taken to a farm outside of the city. There he hid and he spent time praying for the Christians and praying for those who were suffering persecution. And there he hid until he had a vision from God that he must be burned alive.

[4 : 42] I can't even imagine what that kind of realisation would be. The authorities sought him and when they came to his house, he came down from the room that he was hiding in and he talked with those who arrested him. There's a quote that all those who were present marvelled at his age and constancy and that there was so much ado about the arrest of such an old man.

He asked for permission to pray before being taken away. They allowed it and being so filled with the grace of God that for two hours he could not but hold his peace. And so he is taken to the town by a sheriff. A sheriff met him and took him in his carriage and he tries to persuade him to give up Jesus, deny Christ. The sheriff said to him, now what harm is there in saying Lord Caesar and offering incense and then saving yourself? Polycarp said, I do not intend to do what you advise. And so he is then brought into the city and he's taken before the ruler and the ruler again tries to persuade him to save himself. Have respect to your age. Swear by Caesar. Repent and say away with the atheists, as in away with the Christians who don't believe in the Roman gods. And so Polycarp turned to the mob of lawless heathen in the stadium and he waved his hand at them. Away with the atheists, as in a way with those who don't follow Jesus. And again the ruler said, swear and I will release you. Curse the Christ. Now if you were there with Polycarp at this moment, what encouragement would you give him? He seems to be a living embodiment of those two passages that John just read for us.

Polycarp's life has been so impacted by Jesus' life, his death and his resurrection, that he will live for him regardless of what it means for himself. Wendy, can you just go to the slide, my slides for me? There we go. From Galatians 2, Paul says, I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live but Christ in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. Paul is saying that once we follow Jesus, the old life dies and our new life begins. As Jesus says in John 3 that we need to be born again. The old life dies, the old life begins. And this life can only happen because Jesus, he died and he was raised to new life. And so our entire lives are changed. It is not a preference to be a Christian. It is not that we now spend time on a Sunday morning at church instead of at the shops or at the beach or at a family meal. Everything has changed. Everything is different because we are different. When God reveals himself to us and we place our trust in him, in that moment we die and we are made alive. And the priorities of this new life are different to the priorities of the old life. Paul makes the good news of this resurrection are extremely personal. He says, I have been crucified with Christ and he gave himself for me. This is the wonderful truth of the gospel that Paul can say and that we can say and that Polycarp was living that Jesus died for me. He died for Rachel, he died for John, he died for Sue Wing.

[8 : 34] And he is alive and he is living in me and in you now. Because of this new life, Paul keeps talking about this new life and he declares in 1 Corinthians 15, where, oh death, is your victory? Where, oh death, is your sting? Death is defeated. Even though Paul died and we will all die, the sting of death is defeated.

All because we have a new life that cannot be destroyed by death. It keeps going in verse 56, the sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law, but thanks be to God, he gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus has won a victory over sin and death and he gifts it to us. He's won the victory and he gives us the victory. We no longer need to live lives fearful of death because in Jesus he has given us new life. And not just a good life now, but a new life that endures beyond the grave. I think this has massive implications for how we live our lives. When our lives after death are secure, we can fully trust God with what happens now. When Alyssa and I were first married, we had one car and we worked different shifts. So I bought a motorbike and I always used to joke about riding a motorbike. I'd say to Alyssa, oh look, it doesn't matter if I'm riding a motorbike. It doesn't matter if I have a higher risk of dying. You know, if I die, it's God's plan. If I go to God, it doesn't matter. It's all part of his plan. Now, that's not necessarily loving to a new wife to be saying, it doesn't matter if I die because I'll be with God and you'll just be here grieving me. But the sentiment in one sense is right. The future looks different because of what Jesus has done. And so it changes how we live now because tomorrow is different. The old life, the old attitudes have died. The new life has begun. We know that God has our future secure.

And so for us now, it is possible to face death. Even death by being burned alive on a pyre, because God is bigger and he is more powerful than that. And he also knows our pain of death.

[11 : 20] Because Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, God himself, has died so that we might live. Paul continues in 1 Corinthians 15.

New life for us means that our lives are different now. We can stand firm because even when we are knocked over, we are raised in Jesus. And so for Polycarp, when he is faced in that situation, when he is asked by the ruler, swear and I will release you, curse the Christ.

Polycarp gave his most famous response. Eighty-six years have I served him and he has done me no wrong. Where is it? Hang on.

Give me the quote, Wendy, if you can, please. Thank you. Eighty-six years have I served him and he has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my king who has saved me? Told to curse Christ and he can live.

Eighty-six years have I served him and he has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my king who has saved me? The ruler said again, swear by Caesar. And Polycarp answered, look, here plainly, I am a Christian.

[12:45] The ruler said, I will make you consumed by fire if you repent not. Polycarp answered, you threaten the fire that burns for an hour and in a little while is quenched.

For you don't know of the fire of the judgment to come. And the fire of the eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly. But why do you delay? Bring what you will.

And so the ruler sent word that should be proclaimed aloud to the crowd. Three times, Polycarp has confessed himself to be a Christian. And so Polycarp is taken to a pyre.

Spectators are crying and jostled for a view of this old Christian as he is about to be burned at the stake. The executioner approached Polycarp to nail him to the pyre.

And he said calmly, leave me as I am. He who grants me to endure the fire will enable me to remain on the fire unmoved. Without the security you wish from the nails.

[13:54] The gentle aged bishop raised his voice in prayer. Praising God that he was deemed worthy to die for God. And so in death, Polycarp received the crown of life.

And his faithful witness and testimony inspired many other Christians to persevere, to triumph, and to die following Jesus as this church grew and spread across the world.

Polycarp is such a wonderful example of what Paul is encouraging us in Galatians and in 1 Corinthians. He was able to stand firm, even to death.

All because of his confidence in life. He knew that even though death would hurt, the sting would last only a little while. That fire would only burn an hour, but that he would have an eternity with God.

When we are so satisfied in Christ that we would willingly die for him, we are free to live a life that he has for us.

[15:01] That shows that God is our greatest treasure. When we are so satisfied in Christ that we would willingly die for him, we are free to live the life he has for us.

To show that Jesus is our greatest treasure. Now, for us sitting here in Chatswood today, I don't think we'll be faced with that question.

Swear that Scott Morrison is God or die. It's very unlikely that we're going to be faced with this type of question.

Swear that Jesus is not God or die. Life for Christians is getting harder in Australia. The things that God loves and values are no longer things that our society broadly agrees with.

But we are not yet at the point where Christians are being thrown to the lions. So how does it help to know whether we would say, yes, I believe in Jesus if we're faced with death?

[16:03] How does this help us? It helps us to know what we are living for. Remember what Polycarp said before he died? Eighty-six years have I served him, and he has done me no wrong.

How then can I blaspheme my king? Polycarp's decision to stand firm was based on a life following Jesus. Because Jesus is always good.

Salvation by Jesus had shaped his footsteps going forward, even those steps that took him to his death. Polycarp stood firm in the face of death against the gods of his day, worshipping Caesar, worshipping the other gods, and worshipping what was approved by his culture.

But for us, the gods of our day are not gods. They're different gods. But being accepted by our culture, it's still an idol.

Following the gods that our culture sets can be a temptation for us. We are less likely to have people call to us that we should be burned at the stake.

[17:11] But we will have people like the sheriff and like the ruler who will tempt us. The sheriff and the ruler tried to tempt Polycarp to deny Jesus, but they don't come across as vicious in history.

They're actually... They can almost come across as looking out for Polycarp. Look, it's okay. It's all right. Just deny Jesus and everything will be fine.

I know, Clemmie, everything will be fine. Just deny Jesus and it'll go well for you. It's okay. These guys don't come across as enemies.

They almost appear as if they're on Polycarp's side. And that is how we can be tricked in our culture where people will try to tempt us, not by vicious words, but by saying it's okay.

It's all right. Just deny this little bit of God and just follow us over here. Just take a little step away from obeying God. Just take a little step away from saying that Jesus is the Lord and he has saved you and come and enjoy this sin with us.

[18 : 21] As we start a new year and as we start a new decade, Polycarp is a great encouragement of a life trusting God. A life of joy trusting in Jesus.

Treasuring Jesus even more than his life on earth. And so for us, at this point, it is worthwhile that we ask some tough questions. And we make some big commitments at the start of 2020 for the next decade.

When you came in, I hope you received one of these. Pull these out now if you can, dear brothers and sisters. If you didn't, our welcomers in the red vests would love to grab you one of these.

If you don't, please raise your hand and our helpers would love to get you one of these. This is a list of questions to help us to start a new year and a new decade well.

This is a list that I found on John Piper's website of questions as we start the new year. And I've made it in the form of a handy bookmark to slot into your Bible.

[19 : 30] These are 10 questions for us as we consider what we should be committing to for the next year and for the next 10 years. So I want to take a moment.

I'd love to go through these slowly. Firstly, I'd love for you to be writing a thing or two on these. Put this in your Bible so you can be remembering where you need to be going throughout the year.

Firstly, what is the one thing you can do this year to increase your enjoyment of God? God has promised to bless us most directly and consistently through His Word, the Bible, through prayer and through the church.

And so one specific suggestion that I'd offer would be to include some devotional or meditation on Scripture along with your daily reading. I actually think it's better to read less.

Read less of the Bible and spend time thinking about what you've read. For me personally, I have a thick head. You may have noticed but not said anything. I thank you for that. I need to go slower and I need to think about it so it gets into my head.

[20 : 42] Otherwise, I can just read lots of the Bible and it won't permeate through my head to my heart. Read less of the Bible if you need to. Keep reading it. But read it and save time for meditation and devotion.

God, what do you actually want me to get out of this? God, what am I learning about you? What am I learning about Jesus? What am I learning about myself from what I am reading today?

The result of meditation, remember, read something. It's better to read something more than nothing. So what is one thing to increase your enjoyment of God?

Secondly, what is an impossible prayer that you can pray? Some of my favorite parts in the Bible start with but God.

Situations that are humanly impossible are transformed by but God. Ephesians 2, we are dead in our sins. We can't do anything to save ourselves.

[21 : 49] But God. But God sent Jesus and he showed his grace to us. But God loves us. What is a but God prayer you can be praying for this year?

What is something that is seemingly impossible in your mind? Maybe it is a sin that you've had in your life and that you need healing from. Maybe it is a broken relationship that you need God to work on.

What is the prayer that you are saying, this is impossible for me but God? What is the most important thing, number three, what is the most important thing you could do to improve your family life?

Bringing your children to church is a wonderful thing. It is good to be doing that. Maybe you could be spending a moment of prayer together during a meal.

Share what you are reading in the Bible over food. About a year ago, my family, we started a prayer jar. We have got this jar at home that says prayer jar. And it has got these prayers.

[22 : 59] And I was pulling them out the other day. And they all say, help us as we start at the new church. Help us as we start. Isaac starts at the new school. And we went really hard on this prayer

jar.

And it was wonderful. Our kids were writing prayers. But we moved here a year and a half ago. We haven't picked this up for a while. And this was a wonderful thing to get us all praying as a family over a meal.

So I'm going to pick this prayer jar back up. It's still sitting there. It's still full of prayers. I think we probably need to pull some of those out and write some new ones. But what is the most important thing you can do to improve your family life?

Number four, in which spiritual discipline do you want to make the most progress this year? Actually plan it out. How do I want to be growing as I follow Jesus this year?

Here at St. Paul's, we talk about five areas of spiritual growth to grow in. How could you grow in one of those areas?

[24 : 11] Maybe you're not sure. Maybe you're like, I want to grow as a Christian, but I have no idea. I want to grow in those areas, but I don't know how to. We use this, which is, it's called the My Purpose Checkup.

In here, there's helpful questionnaires. And you can fill these out. And this will help you to identify, actually, I'm growing in maturity. I'm sharing the gospel.

But I'm not a strong member of the church. I actually need to get to know more people. What can I do? So please, I've got some of these. Come and grab one of these off me.

How can you be growing to make progress as a Christian? Number five. This might be the most painful. What is the single biggest time waster in your life?

And how can you redeem the time? How many people are thinking of their phone right now? I was thinking it would only be the young people. It wasn't. Is it social media?

[25 : 13] Is it the phone? On my iPhone, I have the Screen Time app, pops up on a Sunday morning, usually just before church starts. And it says, you've been using your phone, on average, for four hours a day over the last week.

And that's always a rebuke. What is the single biggest time waster? Is it video games? Is it sport? Is it hobbies? These things are all good and wonderful, but it's easy for any of these, or something else, to take too much of our hearts and our time.

Do we need to repent? Trying to stop by itself is probably not the answer, but actively replacing it with something else can make it better.

You know, if everybody at the family dinner table is on their phones, maybe it's, okay, let's write some prayers instead. Let's share what we've been reading in the Bible. Number six, flipping it over. What is the most helpful way you could strengthen the church St. Paul's? Christianity is not just a personal faith. We are part of the church.

[26 : 25] It is a body. So how can you be serving or giving or praying differently to last year? Back in November, we pledged support to the ministry of the church.

Have you changed your direct deposit giving to reflect what you pledged in November? However, how can you be serving? How can you be strengthening the church here? Number seven, who will you pray for to be saved this year?

And who will you be praying most fervently for? Praying frequently and fervently for someone's salvation makes us more sensitive to opportunities to share the gospel with them.

If I was praying for, I'll pick on John, not that I'm saying he's not saved, but if I'm praying for John to know Jesus every single day, and then I see John, what am I going to be thinking about?

His salvation. If it's not in my thought at all, I'm going to see John, and I'm going to ask him about his family, anything else. Who are we praying for most fervently?

[27 : 32] Write down their name. Number eight, what's the most important way by God's grace you will try to make this year different from last year?

Under God's sovereignty, he gives us a measure of responsibility over many areas of our lives. In which of these would you most like to see a change from last year?

The reality is the answer to this might be one of the above. I want to grow as a Christian. I want to learn how to share my faith. I want to read the Bible more. But to which of these is the Holy Spirit calling you to put your attention to most urgently?

Number nine, what one thing could you do to improve your prayer life this year? For many, it might be as simple as designating a prayer time instead of praying only the on-the-go, urgent-type prayers.

Last year, it was about this time last year, February I think it was, we started a series on prayer. And last year I committed to praying through the Psalms.

[28 : 45] And I did, and it was wonderful. All 150. And I loved it. This year, I'm doing it again, but I have a new goal.

I want to get through the Psalms twice this year. There's 150 of them. I should be able to do that twice. Pray through one Psalm a night.

And so for me, that is what I'm trying to do differently to last year. That's how I'm trying to improve my prayer life. What are you going to do to improve your prayer life? Last, number 10.

What single thing can you plan to do this year that will matter most at the end of this decade, in 10 years' time? What single thing can you do this year that will impact eternity?

Don't let the tyranny of the urgent distract you from something that you are neglecting that would have enormous long-term impact on your soul, for your family, or for this church.

[29 : 47] Now, we might say that we would die for Jesus. But will we live for Jesus? Are we living to show that He is the treasure worth living and dying for?

Are we living to show His good news that it should be spread? Are we living to show that because of Jesus' death and resurrection, we can be God's children, and that we have faith and trust in what our future holds?

Are we living to show that we will obey our Father who has loved us? Polycarp was able to stand firm following Jesus, even in the face of death, all because He knew the Jesus who had saved him. And He lived a life like that for 86 years. Let's commit this year and this new decade to following this Jesus. Let me pray for us. Let's pray for us.