

The Hideout

Fight or flight is the natural response to the threat of danger. Polycarp was not inclined to adopt either position, even though his enemies were looking to kill him. As the Bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp intended to stay in his beloved city. His strong faith in Jesus Christ would help him face his enemies with steadfastness and courage. The elders of the Smyrnaean church, however, preferred he hid from his foes.

‘Bishop, you must flee Smyrna. The mob is crying out for the blood of Christians in the city, and it would be a great travesty if you should die at the hands of these devils,’ said Marcus, one of the church elders.

‘I will not run away,’ replied Polycarp. ‘My people need me during this dark hour.’

‘You will be no good to them dead,’ said another elder.

‘Our Lord warned us in the Scriptures of these days of tribulation. I am not afraid to die,’ said Polycarp.

‘No one doubts your faithfulness, bishop, even to death,’ said Marcus reassuringly, ‘but there is no need to

placate the bloodthirstiness of the mob. Please consider leaving the city. I know of an abandoned farm not that far outside the city. It is quite hidden, and you will be safe there for a while,' said Marcus.

'At least until the Festival of Hellenes is over,' added the other elder.

'And no one will think that you are running away. You are our bishop, and we love you and need you to help us keep walking the straight path of the Lord, as you have always done,' said Marcus.

The plea from the elders of the Smyrnaean church came at the time when Smyrna was crowded with pilgrims. There were business people among them; traders, and bankers, all wise in the ways of the world and familiar with the power of Rome. They were keen to serve and exploit the visitors to the city, who had come from all over Asia Minor for the Festival of Hellenes. This festival was organised by the League of Hellenes which was an association of representatives from the leading cities of the province. The four chief cities were Ephesus, Pergamum, Smyrna, and Miletus. The annual Festival of Hellenes was held in each of these cities in turn.

Each and every day of the festival, the stadium was packed with over twenty thousand shouting spectators, all eager to be entertained. Like all the stadia throughout the empire, the Smyrnaean stadium was a splendid building, decorated with gold, silver, and precious stones. There were statues of early

Roman emperors lining the walkway – men like Augustus, meaning ‘exalted one’; Caligula, the violent and unpredictable ruler; Hadrian, who built a wall across the width of England; and the present Emperor Antonius Pius. These stadia were designed by emperors and ambitious nobility to offer Games to the citizens of the Roman provinces. Arenas could seat thousands of spectators for special events such as chariot races and athletic meetings. It also gave the people an opportunity to frantically gamble their money on potential winners. It kept them happy. A contented population didn’t cause many problems for the Roman authorities.

The bloodlust of the crowds grew over the years, as they sought more vicious forms of amusement. New Games were offered. They were battles between gladiators. There was nothing like the spilling of human blood to quench the mob’s thirst for violent entertainment. Gladiators often fought to the death in front of cheering crowds who loved every brutal moment of their scrap. These gladiators were usually slaves, criminals, or prisoners of war. Sometimes special volunteers would seek the title of gladiator. All of them were trained in elite camps that would prepare them for combat in the arena. They would learn how to use a sword, trident, or other weapon that could be used to kill the opponent. If a gladiator was wounded in a battle, the crowds would exercise the power of life or death over the injured. They would wave hankies to spare the life of the incapacitated warrior. But if they

were so inclined, a thumbs down would signal their displeasure, giving permission for his opponent to dispatch him to the afterlife.

Each morning in the stadium, the day's activities began with a loyal demonstration of devotion to the Emperor, Antonius Pius. Incense would be burned as a fragrant offering with the words, 'Caesar is Lord'. It provided an excellent opportunity for an outcry against Christians who were hated in the Roman province of Asia Minor and good targets for persecution.

The gospel of Jesus Christ had been faithfully preached in Asia Minor since the apostle Paul proclaimed it in Ephesus over a hundred years ago. The churches had grown by the grace of God. By now it was common knowledge that Christians would never say, 'Caesar is Lord.' For them, Jesus is the only Lord of life. So it was easy to accuse people of being Christians and of rebellion against Caesar's rule. Often the authorities had some amusement putting the believers' loyalty to Christ to the test. If they recanted and convinced the Roman leadership that they were no longer Christians, they would be pardoned. But if their faith in Christ was proved genuine, then they would be punished. Perhaps sentenced to prison or even death! Surely if the Christians were going to die, why not make a spectacle of them, and throw them to the beasts in the arena? It would make for good sport, at the very least.

During the Games in Smyrna, crowds started to demand the death of Christians. The roar would go up,

‘Away with the Christians! Away with the Christians!’ each cry getting louder than before. The din was deafening.

It was on a cold and crisp February morning in A.D. 156¹ that thousands of people walked excitedly into the stadium in Smyrna for the beginning of the Games, which were an important part of the Festival of Hellenes. Some made accusations against a number of Christians who had travelled for the festival celebrations from Philadelphia, about eighty-five miles east of Smyrna. It was a terrifying ordeal for those who loved Christ. At the same time, the excitement was palpable.

The Christians believed that to die for Christ was a truly honourable death. Some even sought the martyr’s path, like a Phrygian Christian called Quintus, who was caught up in the exhilaration of it all. He even managed to persuade some others to be arrested for the sake of Christ. The soldiers arrested them, and they were put into the local prison until they could be examined by the authorities.

The elders pleaded with Polycarp that he should immediately leave his home and go somewhere safe, preferably out of the city. However, they had little time to argue, as the Roman death squad was being rounded up to hunt for the bishop. In the end, Polycarp relented. He relocated to a derelict farmhouse in the countryside, not too far from the city. He had a handful

1. *Anno Domini* – ‘in the year of our Lord’

of trusted attendants to care for him – three men and two younger boys.

The abandoned farmhouse had been empty for many years, that is, until now. The fugitive Polycarp was angry, frustrated and deeply saddened by the turn of events in his beloved hometown of Smyrna.

‘How long do I have to hide in this awful place?’ he asked.

‘Until this whole thing dies down,’ replied Lucas, his trusted assistant.

‘This whole thing, as you call it, is the persecution and killing of the Lord’s people,’ Polycarp said in mild rebuke. ‘I am the leader of the church here in Smyrna. As I said before, it is not right that I should flee my home, when our brothers and sisters in Christ are imprisoned and murdered for their faith in our Lord. You know how bloodthirsty the mob gets, especially during the Games of the Festival of Hellenes. Some may even die.’

‘Bishop Polycarp,’ began Lucas his attendant, ‘it is really important for us that you should live. You teach us the Scriptures and exhort us to walk in the ways of the Lord. We need you and we would all be heartbroken if you should die, especially at the hands of the Romans.’

‘You should know well enough by now, Lucas, that those who live in Christ Jesus, never see each other for the last time when death comes.’ Lucas nodded in agreement. He loved the wisdom of the old bishop.

The small farmhouse that provided sanctuary for Polycarp and his attendants had fallen foul of bad weather, too much rainfall and numerous pest infestations which contributed to the failure of the arable crops there. Still, the derelict farm made for a good hideout.

The main room, or atrium, was dirty and dank due to its abandonment. In its heyday, this room was the hub of family life. The family would have taken their meals, entertained friends, cooked the food and worshipped household gods in this room. The atrium was open to the sky in the centre, where a square hole in the roof admitted light and air and allowed the smoke of the fire to escape. The roof sloped inwards and there was a shallow pool in the floor to catch rainwater. A small kitchen had been added, suggesting that the farm had some success in the past to allow the farmer to increase the size of the dwelling. Adding smaller rooms was a common practice for those whose position in society improved.

When the men arrived at the farmhouse, they found some wooden chairs strewn over the floor. On first inspection the chairs looked sturdy enough to hold a man's weight. There was a draughty bedroom upstairs due to a hole in the corner wall of the room. It could be easily plugged with some broken bricks and timber that were lying around the place. Then at least the bishop would have a room to sleep in which would give him a bit of privacy and peace over the next few days.

The group began the work of tidying up the place to make it a bit more habitable for their short stay. Polycarp did not plan on being absent from his flock for more than a few days. He strongly felt the need to stay close to the church in Smyrna. Before he left, he promised them that he would not be too far away and that he would earnestly pray for them. He would beg God to be their refuge and strength in their hour of need.

Lucas finished fixing a small fire and positioned some of the chairs around it. 'It is important to rest now, bishop,' said Lucas. 'It has been a difficult day and I know that you are tired. I shall make you something to eat before you retire to bed.' Lucas disappeared to prepare supper. Max was already in the kitchen trying to tidy up a bit, with the support of two younger boys who wanted to help the bishop in any way they could at this time. Young Max had not been in Polycarp's service for long. He nodded at Lucas as he entered the room. The other two boys just ignored him and got on with clearing any debris from the kitchen surfaces.

After a short while, Lucas appeared with the supper he had promised to make Polycarp before bed. 'There you go, bishop,' he said as he gently placed a small plate of food on a table next to the old man's chair.

'Thank you, Lucas,' said Polycarp. 'Please sit with me for a moment,' he said pointing to a chair opposite. Lucas sat down.