

Hebrews Lesson 15 Articles

About A.D. 150, fierce anti-Christian persecution erupted in Asia Minor. One of the most famous examples of these trials occurred in Smyrna in A.D. 156. The rabble of the city demanded that Christian leaders swear obedience to Caesar by burning incense before his statue and affirming, “Caesar is Lord.”

Polycarp served as bishop of Smyrna. His persistent devotion to Christ for decades had made him a highly visible local figure. When an unruly mob looked for Christians to humiliate, they called for Polycarp.

A police squad went to get the aged Christian leader. The captain, probably wanting to spare Polycarp from the coming hardship, said, “What harm is there in saying that Caesar is Lord? Swear loyalty to Caesar and save yourself.” Polycarp refused the captain’s request, and they hauled him to the city arena.

There the proconsul of Asia renewed the plea and said to him, “Consider your age. Swear by the divinity of Caesar. Just say, ‘Away with the atheists.’ ”

Polycarp knew that the true atheists were those who denied the deity of Christ, not those who refused to acknowledge the divinity of Caesar. He waved his hand toward the pagan crowd and exclaimed, “Away with the atheists.”

The proconsul still insisted, “Take the oath of loyalty to Caesar, and I will let you go. Revile Christ.”

Then Polycarp made a noble confession: “Eighty-six years have I served Him, and He has done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my Saviour and King?” Further argument with Polycarp proved useless, and they sent him to the stake.

Polycarp’s martyrdom did two things. It produced a temporary revulsion against martyrdoms among the pagan population. The pagan crowd had no stomach for burning old men at the stake. It also gave Christians a high level of credibility before their pagan neighbors. If Christianity could produce people like Polycarp, then even pagan people were interested in their source of conviction and commitment. Christianity produces people who both live well and die well. Polycarp’s death provides powerful evidence of this truth as do the saints of Hebrews 11.¹

B. H. Carroll was an elderly but widely respected Baptist preacher in Texas in the early 1900s. *Completely deaf*, he sat silently on a train through the Texas Panhandle. His mind fell to the needs of the rapidly growing Baptist churches in Texas. The state had medical schools for doctors, law schools for lawyers, but no special school for training Baptist preachers. Carroll sensed that God was calling him to begin such a school, but he resisted because of his age and his plans to retire soon to devote time to his beloved books. Finally, a conviction that God was calling him to the task overpowered his resistance. Carroll found himself standing up on the train, his hands clutching the seat in front of him, and exclaiming, “Lord, it is clearly thy will; what is impossible with man is possible with God; go thou with me, and I will try.”

Then he looked around and realized that his fellow passengers were staring at him with amusement and amazement. He sat down embarrassed but committed to the task. Armed with the determination of faith, Carroll founded Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth in 1908. He had responded to the call of a God he could not see. He had shown a faith that was pleasing to God. He lived by the conviction that God **rewards those who earnestly seek him.** ²

¹ Lea, T. D. (1999). *Vol. 10: Hebrews, James*. Holman New Testament Commentary (199–200). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

² Lea, T. D. (1999). *Vol. 10: Hebrews, James*. Holman New Testament Commentary (206–209). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.