

# Dangerous Times

## Speak Up

"Michael, I am surprised that you didn't cheer for your team.


I take you to a major-league game, your team is playing, and you never cheer for them once. How come?"

"Grandpa, all those local fans with their hats and jackets were sitting around us. They cheered so loudly. I'm not from here, and if I had cheered for my team, I might have made them mad."

"But you don't want to hide your loyalties, Michael. You have to be who you are—even when you are in another team's stadium and even when they surround you with their enthusiastic cheering."

"There were so many of them. There was only one of me, Grandpa."

"Michael, remember there will be more



How could I  
curse my King,  
who saved me?

serious times when you are the only one who will speak out against lies or the only one to state the truth about Jesus. You must have courage then to be who you are, a baptized child of God. Even though you feel alone, remember that God is with you and will take care of you!"

## Martyrs

Before His ascension, Jesus called His disciples witnesses when He said, "You will be My witnesses ... to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). (The Greek word for *witness* is *martyr*.) The essence of Christian witness is to confess what God has done in Jesus Christ. To deny Christ is to reject God's salvation. To be a witness for Jesus does not require dying, though in extreme circumstances it might.

You may recall that Stephen (Acts 6-7) was the first Christian witness—"martyr"—to lose his life for confessing Jesus Christ.

In the early centuries of the church, other Christians became martyrs for their faith. In those days, the Roman government controlled the whole Mediterranean region and permitted many religions, including Judaism. At first, people thought Christians were part of Judaism.

Some Roman citizens heard about Christians and especially about the practice they called the Lord's Supper. They did not understand what it meant to eat and drink the body and blood of Christ together with the bread and wine. They were suspicious, even accusing Christians of cannibalism.

When Christians refused to make public sacrifices to Roman gods or to the statue of the Emperor, they were treated as traitors. As punishment, believers had their possessions confiscated, were made slaves in mines or on

ships, or were condemned to death.

Today we think of a martyr as someone who dies confessing the faith.

In A.D. 155, Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna, refused to worship the Roman gods. When the judge asked him to curse Christ in order to be freed, he said, "For 86 years I have served Him, and He has done me no harm. How can I curse my King who saved me?" He was brought to the stake, stabbed, and his body burned. The Christians came later to gather his bones and bury them. At his burial spot, they assembled to rejoice that he never gave up his faith. His firm faith was not his own doing, but it was a gift of God. It was an encouragement to others.

### Confessing the Faith

What was this faith that martyrs confessed? A document from Syria in the second century shows what they taught. It was a short manual on living the Christian faith, called the Didache (Teaching of the Twelve Apostles). It described the way of life based on God's holy Word in contrast to the way of death (paganism). It taught the Lord's Prayer, Baptism, fasting (typically on Wednesday and Friday), the Lord's Supper, and the return of Christ. Eventually, the church created the Apostles' Creed to summarize what was believed. The creed's present form came after the sixth century, but its roots reach back into these times of persecution. It expresses a faith that Christians have been willing to die for.

When the early church celebrated its martyrs, members saw themselves as brothers and sisters in the faith for which martyrs died. They would gather near the grave site on the date of a martyr's death. Often churches were built on these sites. Those who gathered gave thanks and asked God to give them a strong faith. As one ancient bishop said, "The blood of Christians is seed." The martyrs' witness helped the church grow.

### Did You Know?

Red robes and altar cloths are used in Christian worship when martyrs' days, saints' days, and Pentecost are observed.

### Confessing Your Faith

1. Who was the first Christian martyr, and why did he die (Acts 6-7)?

2. How did Peter witness at the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:34-43)?

3. What did Paul talk about when he witnessed before King Agrippa (Acts 26:12-29)?

4. How did Christian martyrs of the second and third centuries witness to their faith in Jesus? What did Christians celebrate when they gathered on the death date of a martyr?

5. Describe a situation in which believers of your age have the opportunity to confess their faith boldly.

### To Review and Remember

Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. ... Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. *Revelation 2:10*