

# Viii. Life in the Catacombs

by Martyrs of the Catacombs

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*The sermon highlights the Christians' place of refuge from persecution, their faith and love in the face of adversity, and the spread of Christianity through the Catacombs.*

**Scripture:** Romans 8:18, 1 Corinthians 15:54, 1 Thessalonians 4:16, Hebrews 11:35, 1 Peter 4:12

**Topics:** "Early Christianity", "Persecution Faith"

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## Description

In the sermon 'Martyrs of the Catacombs,' the preacher describes the harrowing experiences of early Christians living in the Catacombs of Rome, facing persecution and death for their faith in Christ. Despite the darkness, dangers, and gloom of their underground refuge, these believers found solace in their unwavering faith, hope in the resurrection, and love for God and one another. The Catacombs became a sanctuary where the persecuted Christians gathered, worshipped, and supported each other, awaiting the final summons and the promise of eternal life.

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## Transcript

"O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon.

Irrevocably dark, total eclipse,

Without all hope of day!"

Upon his return to the Catacombs he was welcomed with tears of joy. Most eagerly they listened to the account of his interview with his superiors; and while they sympathized with his troubles, they rejoiced that he had been found worthy to suffer for Christ.

Amid these new scenes he learned more of the truth every day, and saw what its followers endured. Life in the Catacombs opened around him with all its wondrous variety.

The vast numbers who dwelt below were supplied with provisions by constant communication with the city above. This was done at night. The most resolute and daring of the men volunteered for this dangerous task. Sometimes also women, and even boys, went forth upon this errand, and the lad Pollio was the most acute and successful of all these. Amid the vast population of Rome it was not difficult to pass unnoticed, and consequently the supply was well kept up. Yet sometimes the journey met with a fatal termination, and the bold adventurers never returned.

Of water there was a plentiful supply in the passage ways of the lowermost tier. Wells and fountains here supplied sufficient for all their wants.

At night, too, were made the most mournful expeditions of all. These were in search of the dead which had been torn by the wild beasts or burned at the stake. These loved remains were obtained at the greatest risk, and brought down amid a thousand dangers. Then the friends of the lost would perform the funeral service and hold the burial feast. After this they would deposit their remains in the narrow cell, and close the place up with a marble tablet graven with the name of the occupant.

The ancient Christian, inspired by the glorious doctrine of the resurrection, looked forward with ardent hope to the time when corruption should put on incorruption, and the mortal, immortality. He was unwilling that the body which so sublime a destiny awaited should be reduced to ashes, and thought that even the sacred funeral flames were a dishonor to that temple of God which had been so highly favored of heaven. So the cherished bodies of the dead were brought here out of the sight of man, where no irreverent hand might disturb the solemn stillness of their last repose, to lie until the last trump should give that summons for which the primitive Church waited so eagerly, in daily expectation. In the city above the Christian religion had been increasing for successive generations, and during all this time the dead had been coming here in ever-increasing numbers, so that now the Catacombs formed a vast city of the dead, whose silent population slumbered in endless ranges, rank above rank, waiting till

"The wakeful trump of doom should thunder through the deep."

In many places the arches had been knocked away and the roof heightened so as to form rooms. None of them were of very great size, but they formed areas where the fugitives might meet in larger companies and breathe more freely. Here they passed much of the time, and here, too, they had their religious services.

The nature of the times in which they lived will explain their situation. The simple virtues of the old republic had passed away, and freedom had taken her everlasting flight. Corruption had moved over the empire and subdued every thing beneath its numbing influence. Plots, rebellions, and treasons cursed the state by turns, but the fallen people stood by in silence. They saw their bravest suffer, their noblest die, all unmoved. The generous heart, the soul of fire, awaked no more. Only the basest passions aroused their degenerate feelings.

Into such a state as this the truth came boldly, and through such enemies as these it had to fight its way over such obstacles to make its slow but sure progress. They who enlisted under her banner had no life of ease before them. Her trumpet gave forth no uncertain sound. The conflict was stern, and involved name, and fame, and fortune, and friends, and life, all that was most dear to man. Ages rolled on. If the followers of truth increased in number, so also did vice intensify her power and her malignity; the people sank into deeper corruption, the state drifted on to more certain ruin.

Then arose those terrible persecutions which aimed to obliterate from the earth the last vestige of Christianity. A terrible ordeal awaited the Christian if he resisted the imperial decree; to those who followed her, the order of Truth was inexorable; and when a decision was made, it was a final one. To make that decision for Christianity was often to accept instant death, or else to be driven from the city, banished from the joys of home and from the light of day.

The hearts of the Romans were hardened and their eyes blinded. Neither childhood's innocence, nor womanly purity, nor noble manhood, nor the reverend hairs of age, nor faith immovable, nor love triumphant over death, could touch them or move them to pity. They did not see the black cloud of desolation that hovered over the doomed empire, nor know that from its fury those whom they persecuted alone could save them.

Yet in that reign of terror the Catacombs opened before the Christian like a city of refuge. Here lay the bones of their fathers who from generation to generation had fought for the truth, and their worn bodies waited here for the resurrection morn. Here they brought their relatives, as one by one they had left them and gone on high. Here the son had borne the body of his aged mother, and the parent had seen his child committed to the tomb. Here they had carried the mangled remains of those who had been torn to pieces by the wild beasts of the arena; the blackened corpses of those who had been given to the flames; or the wasted bodies of those most wretched who had sighed out their lives amid the lingering agonies of death by crucifixion. Every Christian had some friend or relative lying here in death. The very ground was sanctified, the very air hallowed. It was not strange that they should seek for safety in such a place.

Moreover, in these subterranean abodes, they found their only place of refuge from persecution. They could not seek foreign countries nor fly beyond the sea, because for them there were no countries of refuge, and no lands beyond the sea held out a hope. The imperial power of Rome grasped the civilized world in its mighty embrace; her tremendous police system extended through all lands, and none might escape her wrath. So resistless was this power, that from the highest noble down to the meanest slave, all were subject to it. The dethroned emperor could not escape her vengeance, nor was such an escape even hoped for. When Nero fell, he could only go and kill himself in a neighboring villa. Yet here, amid these infinite labyrinths, even the power of Rome was unavailing, and her baffled emissaries faltered at the very entrance.

Here, then, the persecuted Christians tarried, and their great numbers peopled these paths and grottoes, by day assembling to exchange words of cheer and comfort, or to bewail the death of some new martyr; by night sending forth the boldest among them, like a forlorn hope, to learn tidings of the upper world, or to bring down the blood-stained bodies of some new victims. Through the different persecutions, they lived here so secure that although millions perished throughout the empire, the power of Christianity at Rome was but slightly shaken.

Their safety was secured and life preserved, but on what terms? For what is life without light, or what is the safety of the body in gloom that depresses the soul? The physical nature of man shrinks from such a fate, and his delicate organization is speedily aware of the lack of that subtle renovating principle which is connected with light only. One by one the functions of the body lose their tone and energy. This weakening of the body affects the mind, predisposing it to gloom, apprehension, doubt, and despair. It is greater honor for a man to be true and steadfast under such circumstances than to have died a heroic death in the arena or to have perished unflinchingly at the stake. Here, where there closed around these captives the thickest shades of darkness, they encountered their sorest trial. Fortitude under the persecution itself was admirable; but against the persecution, blended with such horrors as these, it became sublime.

The cold blast that forever drifted through these labyrinths chilled them, but brought no pure air from above; the floors, the walls, the roofs, were covered over with the foul deposits of damp vapors that forever hung around; the atmosphere was thick with impure exhalations and poisonous miasma; the

dense smoke from the ever-burning torches might have mitigated the noxious gases, but it oppressed the dwellers here with its blinding and suffocating influence. Yet amid all these accumulated horrors the soul of the martyr stood up unconquered. The Roman spirit that endured all this rises up to grander proportions than were ever attained in the proudest days of the old republic. The fortitude of Regulus, the devotion of Curtius, the constancy of Brutus, were here surpassed, not by the strong man, but by the tender virgin and the weak child. Thus, scorning to yield to the fiercest power of persecution, these men went forth, the good, the pure in heart, the brave, the noble. For then death had no terrors, nor that appalling life in death which they were compelled to endure here in the dismal regions of the dead. They knew what was before them, and they accepted it all. Willingly they descended here, carrying with them all that was most precious to the soul of man, and they endured all this for the great love wherewith they were loved.

The constant efforts which they made to diminish the gloom of their abodes were visible all around. In the ancient world art was cultivated more universally than in the modern. Wherever any large number of men was collected a large proportion had the taste and the talent for art. When the Christians peopled the Catacombs the artist was here too, and his art was not unemployed. In these chapels, which to the population here were like what public squares are to the inhabitants of a city, every effort was made to lessen the surrounding cheerlessness. So the walls were in some places covered over with white stucco, and in others these again were adorned with pictures, not of deified mortals for idolatrous worship, but of those grand old heroes of the truth who in former generations had "through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens." If in the hour of bitter anguish they sought for scenes or thoughts that might relieve their souls and inspire them with fresh strength for the future, they could have found no other objects to look upon so strong to encourage, so mighty to console.

Such were the decorations of the chapels. The only furniture which they contained was a simple wooden table upon which they placed the bread and wine of the sacrament, the symbols of the body and blood of their dying Lord.

Christianity had struggled long, and it was a struggle with corruption. It will not be thought strange, then, if the Church contracted some marks of a too close contact with her foe, or if she carried some of them down to her place of refuge. Yet if they had some variations from the apostolic model, these were so trifling that they might be overlooked altogether, were it not that they opened the way to greater ones. Still, the essential doctrines of Christianity knew no pollution, no change. The guilt of man, the mercy of the Father, the atonement of the Son, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, salvation through faith in the Redeemer, all these foundations of truth were cherished with a fervor and an energy to which no language can do justice.

Theirs was that heavenly hope, the anchor of the soul, so strong and so secure that the storm of an empire's wrath failed to drive them from the Rock of Ages where they were sheltered.

Theirs was that lofty faith which upheld them through the sorest trials, a sincere trust in God that could not doubt. There was no need here either of discussions about the theological term "faith," or of formal prayers that regarded it as some immaterial essence. Faith with them was everything. It was the very breath of life; so true that it upheld them in the hour of cruel sacrifices; so lasting that even when it seemed that all the followers of Christ had vanished from the earth, they could still look up trustfully and wait.

Theirs was that love which Christ when on earth defined as comprising all the law and the prophets. Sectarian strife, denominational bitterness, were unknown. They had a great general foe to fight, how could they quarrel with one another. Here arose love to man which knew no distinction of race or class, but embraced all in its immense circumference, so that one could lay down his life for his brother; here arose love to God which stopped not at the sacrifice of life itself. The persecutions which raged around them gave them all that zeal, faith, and love which glowed so brightly amid the darkness of the age. It confined their numbers to the true and the sincere. It was the antidote to hypocrisy. It gave to the brave the most daring heroism, and inspired the fainthearted with the courage of despair. They lived in a time when to be a Christian was to risk one's life. They did not shrink, but boldly proclaimed their faith and accepted the consequences. They drew a broad line between themselves and the heathen, and stood manfully on their own side. To utter a few words, to perform a simple act, could often save from death; but the tongue refused to speak the formula, and the stubborn hand refused to pour the libation. The vital doctrines of Christianity met from them far more than a mere intellectual response. Christ himself was not to them an idea, a thought, but a real existence. The life of Jesus upon earth was to them a living truth. They accepted it as a proper example for every man. His gentleness, humility, patience, and meekness they believed were offered for imitation, nor did they ever separate the ideal Christian from the real. They thought that a man's religion consisted as much in the life as in the sentiment, and had not learned to separate experimental from practical Christianity. To them the death of Christ was a great event to which all others were but secondary. That he died in very deed, and for the sons of men, none could understand better than they. Among their own brethren they could think of many a one who had hung upon the cross for his brethren or died at the stake for his God. They took up the cross and followed Christ, bearing the reproach. That cross and that reproach were not figurative. Witness these gloomy labyrinths, fit home for the dead only, which nevertheless for years opened to shelter the living. Witness these names of martyrs, those words of despair. The walls carry down to later ages the words of grief, of lamentation, and of ever-changing feeling which were marked upon them during successive ages by those who were banished to these Catacombs. They carry down their mournful story to future times, and bring to imagination the forms, the feelings and the deeds of those who were imprisoned here. As the forms of life are taken upon the plates of the camera, so has the great voice once forced out by suffering from the very soul of the martyr become stamped upon the wall.

Humble witnesses of the truth; poor, despised, forsaken; in vain their calls for mercy went forth to the ears of man; they were stifled in the blood of the slaughtered and the smoke of the sacrifice! Yet where their own race only answered their cry of despair with fresh tortures these rocky walls proved more merciful; they heard their sighs, they took them to their bosoms, and so their cries of suffering lived here, treasured up and graven in the rock forever.

The conversion of Marcellus to Christianity had been sudden. Yet such quick transitions from error to truth were not unfrequent. He had tried the highest forms of Pagan superstition and heathen philosophy but had found them wanting, and as soon as Christianity appeared before him he beheld all that he desired. It possessed exactly what was needed to satisfy the cravings of his soul and fill his empty heart with the fullness of peace. And if the transition was quick, it was none the less thorough. Having opened his eyes and seen the light of the Sun of Righteousness, he could not close them. Rather than relapse into his former blindness, he gladly welcomed his share in the sufferings of the persecuted.

Conversions like these distinguished the first preaching, of the Gospel. Throughout the heathen world there were countless souls who felt as Marcellus did, and had gone through the same experiences. It

needed only the preaching of the truth, accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit, to open their eyes and bring them to see the light. Apart from divine influence over human reason, we see here a cause for the rapid spread of Christianity.

Living and moving and conversing with his new brethren, Marcellus soon began to enter into all their hopes and fears and joys. Their faith and trust communicated themselves to his heart, and all the glorious expectations which sustained them became the solace of his own soul. The blessed word of life became his constant study and delight, and all its teachings found in him an ardent disciple.

Meetings for prayer and praise were frequent throughout the Catacombs. Cut off from ordinary occupations of worldly business, they were thrown entirely upon other and higher pursuits. Deprived of the opportunity to make efforts for the support of the body, they were forced to make their chief business the care of the soul. They gained what they sought. Earth with its cares, its allurements, and its thousand attractions, lost its hold upon them. Heaven drew nearer; their thoughts and their language were of the kingdom. They loved to talk of the joy that awaited those who continued faithful unto death; to converse upon those departed brethren who to them were not lost but gone before; to anticipate the moment when their own time should come. Above all, they looked every day for that great final summons which should rouse the quick and dead, and arraign all before the great white throne.

Thus Marcellus saw these dismal passages not left to the silent slumber of the dead, but filled with thousands of the living. Wan and pale and oppressed, they found even amid this darkness a better fate than that which might await them above. Busy life animated the haunts of the dead; the pathways rang to the sound of human voices. The light of truth and virtue, banished from the upper air, burned anew with a purer radiance amid this subterranean gloom. The tender greetings of affection, of friendship, of kinship, and of love, arose amid the mouldering remains of the departed. Here the tear of grief mingled with the blood of the martyr, and the hand of affection wrapped his pale limbs in the shroud. Here in these grottoes the heroic soul rose up superior to sorrow. Hope and faith smiled exultingly, and pointed to the light of immortal life, and the voice of praise breathed forth from the lips of the mourner.

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