

LIONS, TIGERS, CHRISTIANS, AND HEAVEN

Presented by

Justin Schumacher

Over 87,000 Roman citizens packed themselves into the huge amphitheater in the city of Rome to watch the afternoon's games. The spectators had come to see violence, bloodshed, and death—**lots and lots of death**. As the Roman Emperor took his seat, the games began. They started quite innocently. Elephants were brought in to do tricks, and bears were dressed as Roman officials and carried in on fake thrones.

However, the restless spectators had not come to watch such silly things, and they would not be satisfied by seeing just trained elephants and costumed bears. Instead, they wanted to see **killing and death**. As the elephants and bears were led out of the arena, a hush came over the crowd as sliding doors on the sides of the arena opened to let a tiger and a rhinoceros enter to fight a battle to the death. After that battle was over, a bull and a lion were released into the arena to see which one could kill the other. Again the doors opened as a wild boar and a leopard charged at one another. The crowds roared and cheered as the animals clashed together in ferocious battles.

But the Romans' **favorite** battle was saved until the very last. The crowd bubbled with excitement as all the animal carcasses were cleared from the arena and new sand was spread out to cover all the blood that remained behind. The spectators inched to the edges of their seats as Roman soldiers forced several harmless-looking men and women into the center of the arena. The people were wearing very few clothes, and they looked terribly afraid. But who were these people? And why were they in this giant arena in front of this crowd of thousands of Roman citizens?

The people in the arena were prisoners who had been condemned to death by the Roman government. But **why** had they been condemned? **They had been condemned because they were Christians!** The crowd once again grew quiet as the sliding doors opened and fierce lions and tigers ran wildly into the arena. The Christians looked up to heaven, prayed for God to have mercy on the crowd, and then were torn apart and eaten alive by the wild beasts. It was a horrible, bloody, sad sight—but one that was repeated over and over again while the Roman Empire was in power.

During the three centuries after Christ's death, the Romans tortured and murdered thousands of Christians, feeding many of them to wild beasts and burning others alive on crosses. These Christians were slain because they refused to deny Jesus, because they would not worship Roman idols, and because they would not call the Roman Emperor a god. Sometimes the martyrs were young women with babies. At other times they were 9- or 10-year-old boys. And sometimes they were 85-year-old men. But the Christians died bravely because they were determined to be true to Jesus. In the book of Revelation, the apostle John wrote about the deaths of these faithful saints when he said, "And they cried with a loud voice, saying, 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood?'"

How did God respond to their cry for help? John wrote, “It was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed just as they were, was complete” (Revelation 6:10-11). Why did God not **do something**—right then and there—to help His people? It was because He was working out a plan that would ensure the preservation of the church and the spread of the Gospel. Jesus had told the Christians in Revelation 2:10, “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you a crown of life.” Jesus promised a home in heaven to each faithful Christian who died. The psalmist wrote, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints” (Psalm 116:15). As word of the Christians’ deaths spread, and as people learned of the Christians’ devotion and dedication to God, it caused other people to want to be Christians, too. As a result, the Lord’s church grew like it had never grown before! Eventually, the Roman government collapsed because of its wickedness. But the church of Christ continued on—and those of us in the twenty-first century are members of that church because of the deaths of those Christians in the first century who refused to abandon their Lord.

We today probably will never have to choose between being true to Christ or being fed to wild lions and tigers. But we **do** have to decide every single day how important Jesus and His church are in our lives. **God and Jesus will not settle for second place!** God Himself said, “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Exodus 20:3). There is no such thing as a “part-time Christian” or a “half-way Christian.” **We are either faithful to God, or we are not!** In the book of Revelation, Jesus said to some Christians, “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were cold or hot. But because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth!” (Revelation 3:15-16). That is not a very pleasant picture, is it—to think of Jesus “vomiting us out of His mouth”? Yet that is how He spoke of people who are not **one-hundred percent faithful to Him**.

Today, let me ask you a question. Would **you** have the courage and strength to boldly stand up for Jesus, even if you knew that by doing so, it could cost you your popularity, your friends, **or even your life?** Our Christian brothers and sisters in the first century stood up for Jesus. And it **did** cost them their lives! Now, they are watching us to see if **we** will follow their good example. The writer of the book of Hebrews described them as “a great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us,” and then went on to say, “Let us therefore lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1-2). If we are faithful to Christ—even “unto death”—we will one day hear Him say to us, “Well done, good and faithful servant... Enter into the joy of your lord” (Matthew 25:21). I would much rather hear Him say **that** than to hear Him say, “Depart from Me, for I never knew you” (Matthew 7:23). Wouldn’t you?