The Burning of Polycarp

From a letter from the church of Smyrna about 155 A.D.
Who was Polycarp?

- A Christian who lived from A.D. 69 to 155.
- His name means “Fruitful”. From the Greek name Πολυκαρπός (Polykarpos), which meant "rich in fruit" from Greek πολύς (polys) "much" and καρπός (karpos) "fruit".
- A disciple trained directly by the Apostle John.
- One of three of the principle “Church Fathers” – early leaders in the generation that followed the Apostles. Two other famous Church Fathers were Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch who was also killed for his faith.
- The bishop of the church in Smyrna in Syria.
Polycarp of Smyrna 155 A.D.

A picture from the Church of St. Polycarp, in Smyrna (modern day Izmir, Turkey)
Smyrna was a Roman city where Christianity had come in the age of the apostles.

It is mentioned as one of the Seven Churches of Asia in Revelation 1-3.

Ruins that have been excavated include the central market area (Agora) and statues of lions that were used in the coliseum.
From the Letter of the Smyrneans (1)

The following pages are a translation from an ancient letter that has been preserved from the second century AD.

... all the multitude, marvelling at the bravery of the God-beloved and God-fearing people of the Christians, raised a cry, 'Away with the atheists; let search be made for Polycarp.'

Now the glorious Polycarp at the first, when he heard it, so far from being dismayed, was desirous of remaining in town; but the greater part persuaded him to withdraw.

So he withdrew to a farm not far distant from the city; and there he stayed with a few companions, doing nothing else night and day but praying for all men and for the churches throughout the world; for this was his constant habit.

And while praying he fell into a trance three days before his arrest; and he saw his pillow burning with fire. And he turned and said unto those that were with him: 'It must be that I will be burned alive.'
From the Letter of the Smyrneans (2)

He departed to another farm; meanwhile those that were searching for him seized two slave boys. One of these confessed under torture (where to find Polycarp).

So taking the boy with them, on Friday about supper hour, the horsemen left well armed, as if chasing a robber. They found the man himself in bed upstairs in a certain cottage. Polycarp decided not to try to escape, saying, “The will of God be done.”

Polycarp went downstairs and talked with them. The bystanders marveled at his age and his quality of character. They wondered how there should be so much eagerness for the arrest of an old man like him. Polycarp provided a table of food for them and gave them as much as they desired. And he persuaded them to give him an hour to pray. When they agreed, he stood up and prayed, being so full of the grace of God, that he prayed for two hours. Those that heard him were amazed. Many were sorry that they had come against such a respectable old man.

But when finally he brought his prayer to an end, after remembering all who at any time had come in his way, small and great, high and low, and all the universal Church throughout the world, the hour of departure being come, they seated him on an donkey and brought him into the city. It was a high Sabbath Day.
At the city he was met by Herod the captain of police and his father Nicetes. They took him into their carriage and tried to change his mind. They sat next to him and talked.

“What is so wrong in saying, ‘Caesar is Lord’, and offering incense? You will save yourself by doing so.”

At first he would not answer them. When they continued to push him, he finally said,

“I am not going to do what say.”

After failing to persuade him, they threatened him and pushed him out of the carriage, so that he bruised his shin as he got down from the carriage.

When they arrived at the stadium there was so much shouting that it was impossible to hear someone speak.
From the Letter of the Smyrneans (4)

But as Polycarp entered into the stadium, a voice came to him from heaven; 'Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man.'

No one saw the speaker, but those of our people heard it.

Polycarp was brought before the proconsul who tried to persuade him to deny Christ. He said,

“Have respect to your age. Swear by Caesar. Repent and say, ‘Away with the atheists.’”

(Christians were called atheists in those days because they didn’t believe in the gods of Rome.)

Then Polycarp with a serious look on his face looked upon the whole multitude of lawless heathen that were in the stadium, and waved his hand to them. Groaning and looking up to heaven he said, 'Away with the atheists.'
From the Letter of the Smyrneans (5)

But when the magistrate pressed him hard and said, “Swear the oath, and I will release you. Revile the Christ!”

Polycarp said, 'Fourscore and six years have I been His servant, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

Persisting again the proconsul said, “Swear by the genius of Caesar.”

“If you think that I will ‘swear by the genius of Caesar’, as you say, and pretend that you are ignorat who I am, listen clearly, I am a Christian. But if you would like to learn the doctrine of Christianity, assign a day and give me a hearing.”

The proconsul said, “Plead your case to the people.”

But Polycarp replied, “We have been taught to respect authorities, such as yourself, who have been appointed by God. But as for these people, I do not hold them worthy, that I should defend myself before them.”
Then the proconsul said, “I have wild beasts here and I will throw you to them, unless you repent.”

“Call for them! A repentance from something good to bad is a change not permitted to us, but it is a noble thing to change from something bad to good.”

Then he said to him again, “I will burn you in the fire, if you think the wild beasts are nothing.

But Polycarp said, “You threaten that fire which burns for a short time and after a little while is quenched. But you are ignorant of the fire of the future judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. But why are you waiting? Come, do what you will.”

They continued talking this way for some time. Instead of becoming fearful, Polycarp grew more joyful and bold so much so that the Proconsul sent his own herald to proclaim three times in the middle of the stadium,

“Polycarp has confessed himself to be a Christian!”
From the Letter of the Smyrneans (7)

The whole multitude both of Gentiles and of Jews cried out with uncontrollable anger and with a loud shout,

“This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the puller down of our gods, who teaches numbers not to sacrifice nor worship.”

Saying these things, they shouted to Asiarch Philip to let a lion loose upon Polycarp. But he said that he was not allowed now, since he had already brought the sports to a close.

Then they shouted that Polycarp should be burned alive. For it must happen this way so the matter of the vision of his burning pillow should be fulfilled. Quickly the crowds went collecting timber and sticks from the workshops and hot baths. The Jews more especially assisting in this with zeal, as is their practice.

But when the wood pile was ready, Polycarp took off his upper garments and loosing his girdle, he tried also to take off his shoes, though he was not in the habit of doing this before. All the faithful at all times had competed eagerly to touch him. For he had been treated with all honor for his holy life even before his gray hairs came.
From the Letter of the Smyrneans (8)

When they were going to nail him, he said; 'Leave me as I am; for He that has granted me to endure the fire will grant me also to remain at the pile unmoved, even without the security which you seek from the nails.”

So they did not nail him, but tied him. Then placing his hands behind him and being bound to the stake, like a noble ram out of a great flock for an offering, a burnt sacrifice made ready and acceptable to God, looking up to heaven said the verse:

“O Lord God Almighty, the Father of Thy beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received the knowledge of Thee, the God of angels and powers and of all creation and of the whole race of the righteous, who live in Thy presence; I bless Thee for that Thou hast granted me this day and hour, that I might receive a portion amongst the number of martyrs in the cup of [Thy] Christ unto resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and of body, in the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit. May I be received among these in Thy presence this day, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as Thou didst prepare and reveal it beforehand, and hast accomplished it, Thou that art the faithful and true God. For this cause, yea and for all things, I praise Thee, I bless Thee, I glorify Thee, through the eternal and heavenly High-priest, Jesus Christ, Thy beloved Son, through whom with Him and the Holy Spirit be glory both now [and ever] and for the ages to come. Amen.'
After he prayed, the firemen lit the fire. A mighty flame flashed forth. An we who were privileged to see it, reported a marvellous thing.

The fire made a wall around Polycarp like the sail of a ship filled by the wind. Instead of burning his flesh, his body was like gold and silver refined in a furnace. We perceived such a fragrant smell, as if it were the wafted odor of frankincense or some other precious spice.

After some time, the lawless men, seeing that his body could not be consumed by the fire, ordered an executioner to go up to him and stab him with a dagger. And when he had done this, there came forth a quantity of blood, so that it extinguished the fire; and all the multitude marvelled that there should be so great a difference between the unbelievers and the elect.
From the Letter of the Smyrneans (10)

Nicetes, the father of Herod and brother of Alce, went to plead with the magistrate not to give up his body, 'lest,' so it was said, 'they should abandon the crucified one and begin to worship this man.'

This being done at the instigation and urgent entreaty of the Jews, who also watched when we were about to take it from the fire, not knowing that it will be impossible for us either to forsake at any time the Christ who suffered for the salvation of the whole world.

The centurion therefore, seeing the opposition raised by the Jews, set him in the midst and burned him after their custom.

And so we afterwards took up his bones which are more valuable than precious stones and finer than refined gold, and laid them in a suitable place where the Lord will permit us to gather ourselves together. When able we gather there in gladness and joy to celebrate the birth-day of his martyrdom. We remember those that have already fought in the contest, and for the training and preparation of those that shall do so hereafter.