

CYPRIAN, BISHOP OF CARTHAGE BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage Biographical Sketch

167 years after Jesus Christ died, was resurrected, appeared to the disciples, and ascended into heaven to be seated at the right hand of the Father; Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage was born to a wealthy paganistic Carthage senator and his wife. The famed and martyred church father who had been born as Thasius Cyprianus, had come from wealthy parents who were of Phoenician descent. At the time of Cyprian's birth in 200AD, the Second Punic War was taking place as the Romans and the descended Phoenician's were at war with one another. These wars brought about the war hero, Hannibal and also led to the demise of Carthage as well as the rise to power over Carthage by the Romans.

Carthage & Childhood

Founded by Queen Elissa, Carthage was a place full of possibilities and rich in polytheistic and paganistic religion, influence, and culture. Growing up in the paganistic ancient African colony of Carthage, which is now modern-day Tunisia, Cyprian was exposed to a variety of things that would ultimately shape his lifestyle for the years to come. Cyprian was educated and undoubtedly enjoyed the comforts of life because his family was one of the wealthiest in Carthage. At that day and time, much like Rome, a senate was part of the government. Only the wealthy could be on the Senate and make laws for the people they governed, which ultimately worked in their favor.

Having grown up in a very privileged household, there was no doubt that Cyprian would be educated at the finest schools. After receiving a classical education, the church father had become enamored with the field of law and politics. This impulse to study law and politics certainly must have come from his father. It was popularly known that the subject of this biographical sketch was excellent in professions as an innovative instructor of rhetoric, and a

lawyer. Cyprian had made a name for himself not only as the son of an influential leader, but a man who had great stimulus in the courtroom as he would argue cases. Cyprian was a man of honor and of rank.

Conversion & Life After

In the year of 246, Thasius Cyprianus had met a priest who was known in those years as a presbyter by the name of Caecilius. Caecilius was a man that was of even greater influence than Cyprian at that time. One day as Caecilius was preaching the Gospel, Cyprian was stricken with awe at the deliverance of the message, was converted and baptized. He was 46 years old. Having the zeal to learn more about the Good News, he began to engulf himself more into the works and writings of fellow Carthage native, Tertullian. Through the later writings of Cyprian, he regarded Tertullian as his “master.”

As time went on, Cyprian was so focused on his newfound life and being born again in Christ that he abandoned the things that he loved. Things such as giving away most of his wealth to the poor, taking a vow of celibacy, and living an impoverished life. One could speculate that Cyprian wanted to abandon every level of comfort that would resemble his former life of carnality and pleasure. His love for Christ and salvation as well as grace had motivated him to become a prominent leader in the church. An astounding two years after his conversion, Thasius Cyprianus had become Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage. Before being proclaimed a bishop, Cyprian had been an officer of the church and a priest.

In just a matter of a few short years, Cyprian, a babe in Christ had more power and influence in Christianity in Carthage than those who had been following Christ their entire lives. It is believed that this high-ranking title was given to Cyprian because of his knowledge and earnest work in the field of Christianity. Also, Cyprian would be of good use as a lawyer when

certain edicts were passed by Roman emperors. He could defend the Christians. Some bishops did not approve of Cyprian being Bishop of Carthage after Donatus because of those reasons. Soon after his advancement of priest to bishop did Cyprian face opposition from the new Roman emperor, Decius. This would be the ultimate test of his faith and the faith of thousands of other Christians.

Emperor Decius had released an edict in 250AD that was used for the purpose of eliminating Christianity and purifying the Roman government and people by returning to their paganistic gods. If one would not do as the edict ordered and worshipped other gods, their property, money, etcetera would be taken from them, or they would receive death and die as martyrs. Those who participated with the edict and worshipped other gods would receive a certificate that would deem them safe from death and the confiscation of their valuable worldly possessions. The news of the edict was ultimately horrifying—especially for Christians. There had been no real persecution for a very long time.

Learning of this diabolical edict and the arrival of those that were enforcing the edict in Carthage, Cyprian had fled into exile and managed his flock from afar. Most scholars criticize the church father and believe that he should have stayed with the flock and stand up to the persecution that the church was receiving at that time. During this time in exile, while Cyprian was safe from the Roman enforcers carrying out the edict, some of his parishioners had fallen and worshipped other gods, some died as martyrs, and some lied about worshipping other gods just so they would be saved from death.

Thankfully, the persecution did not last for a very long time. While in battle in June of 251AD, the diabolical persecutor of Christians, the Roman Emperor Decius was killed. Receiving the news of Decius' death, Cyprian had come out of hiding and resumed duties as

normal as Bishop of Carthage. Despite the death of Decius, the Christians still faced a looming battle; this time within its own community. After Decius died, Christians had come together again and started to worship together and carry out Christian practices. This was an issue because there had been some who had “lapsed” or abandoned the faith (apostasy), and some who had possessions of certificates after they lied about their worshipping of idols in the time of persecution. It wasn’t long before the church was divided on the issue.

After Cyprian had returned to Carthage, there were many Christians who abandoned the faith and wanted to be restored back into the faith again. Before rendering what, he believed to be the right ruling, he called a council of bishops to take care of this pressing and moralistic matter. Cyprian amongst other bishops had decided that after genuine repentance, those that falsified their worshipping of idols could be restored to the faith. However, it was also decided that those who did offer sacrifices to idols at the time of persecution could only be forgiven and accepted back into the church when they were near the very point of death. If a bishop had offered any kind of sacrifice, they were never to be restored. These very happenings contributed to the birth of the heretic ideology of Donatism which had been solidified in the fourth century.

It was during the reign of Roman Emperor Valerian in 256AD that the church had experienced its second mass persecution. The 56-year-old Bishop of Carthage was prepared this time to stand and fight against the henchmen of the Roman Empire that sought to be sure the edict was in full effect. He mentored his congregants and encouraged them to stand firm as the promised persecution was looming. This worked and encouraged the Christians of Carthage to stand firm. Those that stood firm were either jailed or killed. One could speculate that at the time of the first persecution, Cyprian was unprepared, but during the second persecution, the Carthage native was ready to die for what he believed in.

In 257AD, Cyprian was brought before the proconsul to stand trial for violating the edict of Valerian. Cyprian wanted his people to model his way of handling the coming persecution: with bravery, strength, and trusting in Christ. He had gone before the former Roman senator, Aspasius Paternus to answer the charges in which he did not deny his faith in Jesus Christ. At the time of the persecution, Paternus was the governor of Africa, appointed by the emperor. Appalled at Cyprian's defiance and willing to receive the penalty of death, Paternus had decided that the best thing to do was not kill Cyprian but hold him hostage in his own house and away from his congregants in Carthage. Also, there was no law that would back Paternus even if he did want to kill Cyprian.

It was when Valerian had issued an edict that required that all clergy who did not obey the previous edict was to be put to death. Cyprian was brought back into court a year later, and was sentenced to death by Galerius Maximus, a Roman proconsul. When he was sentenced to death, he did not tremble, nor did he fear the thought of death; instead, he glorified God for such a sentence. Perhaps he was exuberant because he would die a martyr's death and experience eternal life and perfect bliss. On September 14, 258AD, he was sentenced to die by guillotine. Most of his parishioners watched in horror and awe from afar at their leader's bravery, and at his generosity when he had presented the executioner with pieces of gold.

