
LETTERS FROM A MARTYRED CHRISTIAN



In AD67, Aulus Aurelius and his family were murdered for their faith. These are his letters to you.

H.L. Hussmann

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Dear Friend,

Let me tell you about the day I died.

I watched my wife tortured and killed. I saw my seven-year-old daughter murdered. And, worst of all, I heard my thirteen-year-old son denounce Christ. Then, in front of dozens of my neighbors, they killed me.

My name is Aulus Aurelius, though some of my friends added Pius Agricola (the pious farmer). You may call me Aulus.

I raised crops in a province south of Rome and converted to Christianity in the year 54. I pastored a group of believers who met in my home, and for several years we enjoyed peace as our crops flourished, our community expanded, and, most important, our fellowship grew. Nearly every soul in our province heard the Gospel, and a great

many responded. Every family within ten miles received a personal testimony of the Lord Jesus. I saw to it myself.

For three years, we had been haunted by the fact that Christians around the country were being persecuted. Since the fires of Rome in 64, the government had done its best to stifle the spread of the Gospel. Great numbers were dragged from their homes and fed to the lions. Others were killed in “battle” in arenas throughout the countryside. Still others were nailed to trees and skinned alive. Some were sawn in two, and some were dragged to death behind horses. Many were burned at the stake to illuminate the gardens of Emperor Nero.

Many nights I was unable to sleep. I would pace in our garden, staring at the stars and pleading with God. I had three requests: One, that I would remain faithful to the Gospel. Two, that if need be, I would die in a way that pleased Him. And three, that my wife and children would not suffer. Two of my requests were granted.

The day I died was an idyllic autumn day in the year 67.

I was returning home from a two-day journey selling crops. The streets of my town were empty. The stores were closed. Faces peered at me through shop windows but then vanished inside. My friend, Markus Valerius, a local storeowner, stepped outside and glanced around the area.

“Aulus. Come here.” He didn’t leave the porch and beckoned with one hand. “Hurry up. Come on. Come on.”

I led my horse in his direction. “Markus, what’s happening here? Where is everyone?”

He jumped down the stairs and placed his hand on my shoulder, pulling me in the direction of his shop. “We’ll talk inside.”

I tied off my cart and entered the building. He closed and latched the door, then produced a pair of chairs and motioned for me to sit, though neither of us did.

“I need to tell you something, Aulus.” He clasped his hands together in front of his mouth and paced, staring at the floor.

His soft leather shoes scraped the wooden planks as he walked. I could feel my heartbeat increase as I waited, knowing what was happening but hoping for another explanation. The pulse of blood in my ears soon matched his steps three to one. He tried to speak, but the words didn’t come. I couldn’t wait any longer.

“When did they arrive?”

Markus stopped pacing but kept his eyes on the floor. “I ... I mean, they”

“The Romans, Markus – when did they get here?”

His shoulders slumped, and he shook his head. “This afternoon. There were more than twenty – all on horses. We didn’t want to tell them anything, but what choice did we have? They were

asking about you. They went to your home, Aulus. That was almost an hour ago.”

Visions of my family flashed through my head as my stomach tightened. I gripped the chair in front of me as my legs threatened to give out.

When steadied, I slid the chair aside and took a weak step toward the door. “I need to go, Markus. Take care of my cart. If anything should happen, use it for the Kingdom.”

Stepping in front of me, Markus placed his hand on my chest. “Aulus, I can’t let you do that. If you stay here with me, or even go away for a while, maybe everything will.... Listen, I have supplies. You could—”

“Markus, you know I have to go,” I said. “Every moment I stay could be the last I might have with my family.” I wanted to push him aside, but I knew that would never do. I had been the one who introduced Markus to Jesus, and over the years he had become like a brother to me. I needed to move with haste, but I also needed to say goodbye. I embraced him as he wept.

“We all knew this day was coming, Markus. We just didn’t know when. I have to go. No matter what you hear, don’t be afraid.” Taking him by the shoulders, I looked into his eyes. “Keep the faith, Markus. That’s all that matters. Do you understand?” He nodded, sniffing. I placed my hands on the sides of his head and kissed him on the cheek, holding his head against

mine. “I love you, my brother. I believe in you. Everything will be as it should.”

With that, I reached for the door.

My mind was whirling. When I arrived, would my wife and children be alive? Would the Romans torture me or kill me outright? If tortured, could I withstand? I prayed as I unlatched my cart and mounted my horse, “Make me strong. Make me strong. Make me strong.” The few minutes it took to get home seemed hours as my thoughts turned to the past – the births of my children, my wedding day, and countless meals shared with friends and family. And behind my thoughts was a gnawing terror that made me want to scream and cry or dismount and vomit.

When I arrived, my nightmares were realized. A crowd of my neighbors had been herded by two dozen soldiers. Three of the armored men were still on horses, but the others were moving around the farm on foot. My house had been ransacked. My wife and children were on their knees in the yard, hands tied behind their backs.

“That’s him! That’s the one!”

Everyone turned as I slid from my saddle.

“That’s him! That’s him!”

As two soldiers moved toward me, I recognized the man speaking and berated myself for my foolishness. Two weeks earlier I had met him in the market of a nearby village. Our stalls had been adjacent, and over the course of the day he had come to know much about me – and

especially my faith in Christ. I had tried to judge his character and felt I could trust him, so I invited him to come to our village and hear more about Jesus. I had felt uneasy about sharing with him, but it soon had passed, as it always did. There was always the danger of meeting a Roman informant, but it was a risk we often took. In hundreds of situations I had been safe before. This man was the exception.

“Bring him to me!” One man stood out among the soldiers. He had been standing over my wife when I arrived. At his command, the two men shoved me forward.

As they bound my hands and drove me to my knees, I looked at my wife.

“Maria, did they hurt you?” A purple-red bruise across her cheek gave the answer.

“Silence!” I never knew which soldier said it, or which one hit me, but pain shot through the back of my head as something cracked into my skull. I pitched forward onto the ground. White lights spun through my vision. Coughing dirt from my mouth and struggling to stay conscious, I heard gasps and cries from my friends.

“You will speak only when the Optio asks you to speak, traitor!” The soldier grabbed my tunic and pulled me to a kneeling position. Dizziness and nausea swept over me, but I was strengthened at the sight of my wife. My children were crying, but she was not. Her brown eyes showed no fear as she looked at me.

“I’m so glad you made it.”

It was unspoken, but clear.

The Optio turned toward my gathered friends and read from a wax tablet, his booming voice travelling across the acres of fields surrounding my home. “Let it be known throughout this province and all of Rome that membership in, and propagation of, the cult of Christus is a treasonous offense, punishable by death.” Then, lowering the tablet, “It has been made clear that one Aulus Aurelius is guilty of such treason, as is his family.”

Strutting in front of my wife and children, he continued. “Aulus Aurelius, you are convicted of treason against your Emperor. It is well known you are member of this cult and teach its vile doctrines. You have been denounced by this man and by your neighbors.”

He walked closer to me and spoke in softer tones, though loud enough for all to hear. “However, as you may know, your Emperor is generous and kind-hearted and has given many the opportunity to repent of such foolishness.” He spun again toward the crowd and stood in place, feet together. “Let it also be known that, if abandoned, membership in this cult is a forgivable offense. The Emperor has no desire to punish his subjects for crimes of ignorance.”

“Aulus Aurelius, today you have the chance to save yourself. Denounce this false god Christus, and worship the gods of Rome, and you and your

family will be spared. Fail to do this, and you will die here today.”

With dirt caked on my face and sweat rolling down my cheeks, I remembered Jesus. He was silent before His accusers. My thinking, though foggy, was to do the same. I said nothing. Instead, I looked at the faces of my wife and two beautiful children, and did my best to comfort them. Several seconds ticked by with only the shuffling sound of horses and the sobbing of my children to be heard. My son refused to look at me.

“I don’t have time for this!” the Optio said, hastening toward my children. Without breaking stride, he grabbed my daughter Evie by her tunic and jerked her into the air. Her legs flailed as he towed her across the yard. She tried to scream, but the garment against her throat allowed only coughing and gasping. Several of my neighbors stepped forward, but a soldier slammed the butt of his spear into one man’s stomach, sending him to his knees. Several guards moved in and raised their weapons.

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