

## EXCERPT

When they come to the cave, they find Paul on his knees praying aloud, “O Lord Jesus Christ, grant that the fire may not touch your devoted servant Thecla – but be her helper, for she is pure in heart and full in faith.”

Then quietly coming up and standing behind him, Thecla cries out,

“O sovereign Lord, Creator of heaven and earth, the Father of your beloved and holy Son, I give praise to you for having preserved me from the fire, and for being able to see Paul once again.”

Startled, Paul stumbles as he arises and turns around, and then sees her standing right behind him. Her beauty is radiant, but her body has been weathered. With great relief and thanks, he prays in a loud voice, “O God, who searches the heart, Father of my Lord Jesus Christ, I give all praise to you for having answered my prayer.”

Having heard Paul’s voice and prayer, the others come running up from further back in the cave, where it was warmer. They see Paul and Thecla in an embrace of happiness, and they are all filled with great joy and relief. Then, they pray together for a time and worship God for the good fortune. They now have five loaves of bread, with some herbs and water, so they share a blessed meal while they comfort each other and reflect upon the holy works of Christ.

After an hour or so, Barnabas asks Thecla what had happened to her in Iconium after separating from Paul and leaving the magistrate’s courtroom. Paul, and all the others are curious as well. So, Thecla begins to relate the whole series of events that happened to her in the amphitheatre and in the days that followed:

### ***IN THE AMPHITHEATRE***

“Governor Castellius was exceedingly agitated. He arose immediately and commanded all the elders, court staff, and interested onlookers to immediately report to the amphitheatre. When only he and I, and my mother and Thamyras, were left

present, he pleaded for one of us to recant. When there was nothing but silence, he threw up his hands and pronounced a judgment.

“Then, I was led into the wings of the theatre where participants make preparation. A bunch of young men and women were ordered to gather wood, straw, and hay. I saw some workers fumbling with a large post, and then I started to become nervous. I tried to run away but the guards held me tight. Soon, I heard the sound of people’s voices coming from out in the arena, so I knew that something big was going on out there.

“But I kept thinking about all the messages that Paul had taught in his sermons – how we need to have faith in the one true God, and in His Son Jesus Christ, even during times of stress and adversity – and how we need to keep our minds and bodies pure in preparation for the resurrection. I knew that what Paul had said was right and that all these people were confused. I just couldn’t go back to my earlier life, no matter what. So, I said nothing.”

“A short while later, an official barked something and two rough looking characters greedily came up to me and said, ‘It’s time.’ With that, they loosely bound my wrists and then eagerly ripped off all my clothes until I was almost completely naked, left with only a threadbare loincloth. Smirking, snickering, and making snide remarks the whole time, they then moved me to the entrance of the arena. Two policemen were waiting at the door.

“I was then escorted out to the center of the field where a large stake had been erected, with dry wood arranged around it. They forced me to go up on the pile and stood me by the stake. Just before they lashed my hands behind it, I made the sign of the Christian cross, and yelled out,

*My God, forgive them. They know not what they do.*<sup>1</sup>

“I remember the crowd was very noisy – most seemed to be cheering loudly.

“The governor himself came right up to me and said, in a soft voice, something like, ‘What a shame. What a beautiful body you have. What a waste.’ I thought I detected a tear in his eye. But he was only seeing the physical and not the spiritual. He looked around, and then he exclaimed in a loud voice, ‘Let it proceed!’

“Frantically, I looked around the multitude – as a lamb in the wilderness looks everywhere to find its shepherd – looking for Paul, or maybe supporters or friends. But all I could see were mad, angry faces.

“Then, suddenly, I saw the Lord Jesus Christ sitting among the throng. Our eyes met, but His face was in the likeness of Paul! My heart leaped for joy, and I said to myself, *Paul has come to be with me in my hour of need – praise the Lord!* But then, as I gazed upon him with heartfelt peace and contentment, he morphed into a ghostlike image, and rose up into heaven in a swirling misty column. I wasn’t sure what it all meant, but I knew that I was not alone. The Lord was with me.”

### ***THE SPECTACLE***

“And then, to a great roar of the crowd, the workers set fire to the pile. I prayed to God with all my heart.

“And although a great fire was soon blazing, it did not touch me. For almighty God, having compassion upon me, caused a great trembling in the earth, followed by thunder, lightning, and buckets of rain and hail falling from the sky. The trembling and deluge covered the entire amphitheatre, and was so great that the stake I was tied to, broke – the arena support structures started to collapse and many in the crowd were injured and in danger of death. But thanks to God, nobody died, the fire was put out, and I was saved.

“There was terrible confusion and panic in the stadium, with people running in every direction. Amidst the chaos, the governor officially put a halt to the proceedings and ordered that I be given back my clothes and released.

“‘I bow down to the god of Thecla,’ he stammered. ‘Her god is truly a powerful god. I dare not cross her god.’ Of course, despite everything Paul had said, he had no appreciation for the one true almighty God.<sup>ii</sup>

“After quickly dressing, and making my way out of the amphitheatre, I ran back to my house to look for my mother. But she was nowhere to be found – and neither was Thamyris. So, I ran over to the house of Onesiphorus, but it also was empty.

“I spent the next day wandering around looking for Paul, and

for my mother. I didn't know what to do or where to go. And then, by the grace of God, I met up with Zeno, and together we ran here to the cave.”

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i. This, of course, is analogous to Jesus' renowned saying while on the cross. Reference Luke 23:34.

ii. Governor Castellius perceived that the god of Thecla was just another god within the greater pantheon of gods – albeit one that he had not yet heard of.