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THE FALLEN HEROES OF FAITH – LESSON 3

APOSTLE JAMES, THE GREATER

Yesterday we shifted our focus from the fallen heroes of our military services to the fallen heroes of the Christian Faith. The deacon Stephen who had done many miracles, signs, and wonders in Jesus' name by the power of the Holy Ghost was tried by the council of Jewish religious leaders who condemned him for preaching Jesus. He was taken outside of Jerusalem and stoned to death. He became the first known Christian martyr. This was about one year after Jesus' ascension.

Ten years after the stoning of Stephen came the first execution of one of the twelve apostles. It was James, son of Zebedee and brother of John. He was of Jesus' "inner circle" consisting of Peter, James, and John.

Since there were two Apostles by the name of James, he has been called by scholars "James the Greater" or sometimes just "big James" (due to importance in the group, not for physical size). The other one named James was the son of Alphaeus, commonly called "James the Lesser" or just "Little James."

James the Greater had ministered around Jerusalem where most of the Apostles remained until persecution scattered the saints. However, he surely ministered in his home province of Judea as well. Judea was one of several areas given by Rome to Herod Agrippa to rule. Herod, as a gesture of favor to Rome, began the first period of government persecution of the Followers of the Way (later called Christians). Yes, there had been earlier persecutions (e.g., Saul) but that was from the Jewish establishment. The persecution from the Roman appointed Herodian Jew, Herod Agrippa, resulted in the martyrdom of James.

In Acts 12:1-2 it says that Herod started the persecution. He killed James by the sword. He proceeded to also imprison Peter intending to execute him also as soon as the feast days of unleavened bread were finished, completing the total Passover period. Herod never did get to kill Peter. Having killed James, God judged Herod. An angel delivered Peter from prison which highly displeased Herod Agrippa. Shortly afterwards, after Herod gave a speech in his royal robes that caused the people to hail him as a god, an angel of the Lord smote him, and he died.

How did James die, by Herod's order? We look to the writings of Clemens Alexandrinus and his account of it. James had an accuser in Herod's court that brought the ruling of a death sentence. After judgment was ordered, that accuser was greatly impressed with the extraordinary courage and demeanor of James that he got saved. He requested James to pardon him and professed Christ as his savior. He determined that James should not receive the Martyr's crown alone. He, together with James were beheaded.

Two other believers were also martyred about the same time, Timon and Parmenas. These executions took place in 44 A.D. according to Usher's calendar which is used by most scholars, including Fox, who wrote the Book of Martyrs.

Note: Ussher uses 33 A.D. for Jesus' crucifixion, although scholars today say it was 29 A.D., Jesus being born about 4 B.C. rather than 1 A.D. For simplicity's sake, I will use Ussher's dates as used by Fox.

The testimony of James' death resulting in an unbeliever being converted is remarkable and has occurred historically at other times as well. If you or I should ever face such a death due to our faith, I trust that our courage and our love and forgiveness would also touch others to inspire them to faith on Christ.