

Preacher's Pen points

Inscriptions from the Catacombs

Almost everyone has heard of the Christian catacombs in Rome. They were the burial places of the Christians in the first four centuries of the church. One of the most important things about them is the insight they give us into the faith of the followers of Jesus, which they manifested through the inscriptions they made in connection with the burial of their loved ones. Archaeologists have been able to record numerous inscriptions from this period. Phillip Schaff in his church history records a collection of inscriptions recorded by 19th century archaeologist De Rossi.

A People Who Suffered Life's Hard Blows

The catacomb inscriptions reveal that the early church had no exemption from tragedy and disappointment. Their inscriptions recorded the deaths not only of aged saints, but also little children. Two parents, Crescentius and Micina, inscribed the commendation of their daughter Crescentina who lived only ten months. Another parent wrote of the death of Paulinus a child of eight years old and another Bacius a child of nine. These Christians were not only experiencing the hardship of persecution for the faith; they were having to deal with the suffering common to all humanity as well.

A People Who Had Faith in the Word of God

The inscriptions often describe the spiritual condition of those who were buried there. Some were students of the gospel preparing for baptism. One young man of 23 was described as "having gone out of this world a virgin and a neophyte" (i.e. a new convert). Some were designated as having died "in Christ"; and one man, had words inscribed that indicated that he had died in the faith without regrets, writing, "If I have served Thee

[O Lord], I have not repented, and I will give thanks to Thy name." And one man named Cornelius, is described with only two words: "Martyr. Overseer." This elder had died for the cause of Christ. Such epithets reveal the importance the early church attached to the faithful life of those who passed from their midst.

A People Who Had Great Hope in Christ

Though the Christians who wrote these words had lived undoubtedly difficult lives, there was a bright hope shining through the clouds of persecution and death. To the departed they expressed their hopes for a better life: "May you live in the Holy Spirit"; "May your spirit rest well in God"; "May you live in God". "You will live forever!" Others simply affirmed the condition they believed their departed loved ones to be enjoying: "In peace" and "In Christ".

A People Affirming the Promises of the Gospel

As I reflected on these lines my heart was touched by the tenderness of those who were saying farewell to loved ones. I was stirred by the living faith that they possessed and the hope that they expressed. I remembered the words of the apostle Paul, "*But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.*" (1 Thes. 4:13-14). What a comfort these words must have been to the early disciples. The hope that Paul had penned in papyrus they inscribed in the soft rock of the Roman underground and made their own. Such is the hope of every Christian in death. —

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