

The Theban Legion – A Story of Courage

Diocletian became emperor in 284. His persecution was so terrible that all former persecutions seemed to the Christians as nothing in comparison with it. They called the date of Diocletian's accession "the Era of Martyrs".

The remarkable affair occurred in 286. A legion of soldiers, consisting of 6,666 men, contained none but Christians. This was called the Theban Legion, because the men had been raised in Thebais. They were quartered in the East till the Emperor Maximian ordered them to march to Gaul, to assist him against the rebels of Burgundy. About this time Maximian ordered a general sacrifice, at which the whole army were to assist; and he commanded that they should take oaths of allegiance, and swear, at the same time, to assist him in the extermination of Christianity from Gaul. Terrified at these orders, each individual of the Theban Legion absolutely refused either to sacrifice or take the oaths prescribed. This so enraged Maximian, that he ordered the legion to be decimated—that is, every tenth man to be selected from the rest, and put to the sword. This cruel order having been put into execution, those who remained alive were still inflexible, when a second decimation took place, and every tenth man if those living were again put to the sword.

The second severity made no more impression than the first; the soldiers preserved their fortitude and their principles, but, on the advice of their officers, drew up a remonstrance to the emperor, in which they told him that they were his subjects and his soldiers, but could not, at the same time, forget the Almighty; that they received their pay from him, and their existence from God.

“While your commands,” they said, “are not contradictory to those of our common Master, we shall always be ready to obey, as we have been hitherto; but when the orders of our prince and those of the Almighty differ, we must always obey the latter. Our arms are devoted to the emperor's use, and shall be directed against his enemies; but we cannot submit to stain our hands with Christian blood; and how, indeed, could you, O Emperor, be sure of our allegiance and fidelity, should we violate our obligation to our God, in whose service we are solemnly engaged before we entered the army? You command us to search out and to destroy the Christians: it is not necessary to look any farther for people of that denomination; we ourselves are such, and we glory in the name. We saw our companions fall without the least opposition or murmuring, and thought them happy in dying for the sake of Christ. Nothing shall make us lift up our hands against our sovereign; we had rather die wrongfully, and by that means preserve our innocence, than live under a load of guilt: whatever you command we are ready to suffer; we confess ourselves to be Christians, and therefore cannot persecute Christians, nor sacrifice to idols.”

Such a declaration, it might be presumed would have prevailed with the emperor, but it had the opposite effect; for, enraged at the perseverance and unanimity, he commanded that the whole legion should be put to death, which was then executed by the other troops, who cut them to pieces with their swords. This barbarous transaction occurred on the 22nd of September 286.

John Foxe, The Book of Martyrs, revised with notes and an appendix by W. Bramely-Moore, London, 1869, pp 27-28

