

## THOMAS HARDING & HIS WIFE MARTYRED – 1532

**T**homas Harding and his wife were accused of heresy because they denied that the bread and wine turned into the actual body and blood of Christ when the priest prayed over them in the mass. The two were condemned to be burned alive by the bishop of Lincoln. They were taken to Chesham and chained to a stake. Fire was set to the dried wood that was piled around them. As the fire rose up, one of the enraged Catholic spectators struck Thomas on the head with a thick piece of firewood so savagely that his head split open and his brains fell out into the fire. The priests who attended the burning told the people that whoever brought bundles of wood to burn heretics would be given indulgences allowing them to sin for forty days.□

## RICHARD BYFIELD MARTYRED – 1532

**R**ichard Byfield was an English Catholic monk who was converted to the true faith of Christ by reading William Tyndale’s translation of the New Testament into English. He embraced wholeheartedly Reformation doctrine. When this was soon discovered, he was arrested and cast into prison.

Though the Roman clergy were savage in their cruelty to heretics, they were especially cruel to those who were members of the clergy but were against their superstitions and man-made doctrines. Because Byfield was a converted monk, he was tormented unmercifully by his accusers. To make him recant, he was often confined in the worst dungeon in the prison, where he would almost suffocate from the putrid odors of human waste and stagnant water that nearly covered the dirt floor. Rats and cockroaches were his only companions. At times his jailors would enter his cell, and tie his arms behind his back until his shoulders almost dislocated, and leave him in that position for days without food or toilet. Other times they would take him to a whipping post and scourge him until scarcely any flesh was left on his back. But still he refused to recant his newfound faith in Christ. So he was taken to Lollard’s Tower in Lambeth Palace,

where the archbishop had him chained to the wall by his neck and beaten severely once a day by his servants. Finally, he was condemned, degraded, and burned at Smithfield, the place where felons and other transgressors of the king’s laws were executed, just north of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London.□

## ANTHONY PARSONS MARTYRED – 1540

**A**nthony Parsons, and two others, were sent to Windsor in south-central England to be examined by the Catholic bishop of Salisbury. After hearing them speak of their faith in Christ, the bishop condemned all three to be burned alive. When they were chained to the stakes, Parsons asked for some water to drink, and when he received it he lifted the cup to his two companions, and said, “Cheer up my brothers, and lift up your hearts to God, for after this harsh breakfast, we shall have a good dinner in the kingdom of Christ our Lord and Redeemer.”

Dried wood, kindling and straw was piled around the stakes. Parsons took the straw in his hands and held it against his chest, and said to the many people who had gathered to watch them burn, “This is God’s armor, and now I am a Christian soldier prepared for battle. I look for no mercy, but through the merits of Christ. He is my only Savior, and I trust in Him for my salvation.” The fires were then lit, and their bodies were burned to ashes, but nothing could harm their precious and immortal souls. Their faithfulness triumphed over cruelty. That was man’s reward to the true believers in Christ, but their Lord’s reward to them was an everlasting crown of righteousness.□

## LAWRENCE SAUNDERS MARTYRED – 1555

**L**awrence Saunders, an exceptional student of King’s College in Cambridge, gave himself up to the study of the Holy Scriptures, Greek and Hebrew, to prepare himself to preach the gospel. He began to preach during the reign of King Edward VI, when Protestantism became the official religion of England. Saunders taught the Scriptures diligently in

the countryside of Leicestershire until being offered a church in London named Allhallows. Just as he was about to give up his position in the country to concentrate on his London parish, young King Edward died; and Queen Mary, known as “Bloody Mary,” took the throne. Seeing that Mary would bring hard times on all Protestants, Saunders kept both positions. If he had given one of them up, he would certainly have been replaced by a Catholic. So he traveled back and forth to serve both parishes until it became illegal to preach the gospel. Saunders continued to preach to his rural congregation until he was forcibly prevented from doing so. Since he couldn’t work there, he traveled back to London.

As Saunders entered the city on a Saturday, he was warned against preaching the next day. He ignored the advice and preached his morning sermon. As he prepared for his afternoon message, he was taken from his church and brought before Bishop John Mordant and some chaplains. Saunders was asked to write out his beliefs concerning transubstantiation. He did so, saying, “My lord, you seek my blood, and you shall have it. I pray God that you may be so baptized in it that you may ever after loathe blood-sucking, and become a better man.”

This good and faithful martyr was kept in prison for fifteen months, during which time he stayed loyal to his conscience. He was brought to trial before the lord chancellor on charges of treason, heresy, and sedition. He was excommunicated and turned over to the legal authorities, and again imprisoned. The bishop of London came to degrade him before he was carried to Coventry to be burned. When they arrived, a poor shoemaker, who used to serve him with shoes, came over to him, and said, “O my good master, God strengthen and comfort you.” “Good shoemaker,” Saunders replied, “I desire thee to pray for me, for I am the most unfit man for this high office, that ever was appointed to it; but my gracious God and Father is able to make me strong enough.”

The next day, February 8, 1555, Saunders was led to the place of execution. He went in an old gown and a shirt, barefooted, and often fell flat on the ground in fervent prayer. When he came near the place, the officer in charge of the execution said to Saunders that he was one of them who marred the queen’s realm,

but if he would recant, there was pardon for him. “Not I,” replied the holy martyr, “but such as you have injured the realm. The blessed gospel of Christ is what I hold; that do I believe, that have I taught, and that will I never revoke!” Coming to the stake, he sank to the earth in prayer. Rising up, Saunders embraced the stake, and said over and again, “Welcome, thou cross of Christ! Welcome everlasting life!” The fire was then lit, and he was overwhelmed by the dreadful flames, and sweetly slept in the Lord Jesus.□

## WILLIAM HUNTER MARTYRED – 1555

**W**illiam Hunter, a godly young man, was only nineteen years old when he died a martyr’s death on March 26, 1555. His story should be an example to all Christian parents who find their emotions at odds with their convictions, for William’s parents allowed their son to follow his beliefs, even though it led to his death.

William was apprenticed to a silk weaver in London. In the first year of Queen Mary’s reign, his parish priest ordered him to receive communion at the Easter mass, but he refused. His master, afraid he himself would be in danger if William remained in his house, asked the boy to move back to his father’s house in Brentwood for several weeks, which he did.

Five or six weeks later, William picked up a Bible he found in the chapel at Brentwood and began to read it aloud to himself. He was interrupted when Father Atwell came into the chapel. “Are you meddling with the Bible?” Atwell demanded. “Do you know what you’re reading? Can you expound the Scriptures?” “I don’t take it upon myself to expound the Scriptures,” William explained. “I found it here and was reading it to comfort myself.” Father Atwell commented, “It hasn’t been a happy world since the Bible was published in English.”

“Oh, don’t say that! It’s God’s book, from which we learn to know what pleases and displeases God.” “Didn’t we know that before?” Atwell asked. “Not as well as we do now with the Bible available,” William replied. “I pray we always have it with us.” Father Atwell fumed. “I know you! You’re one of

those who dislikes the queen's laws. That's why you left London. If you don't mend your ways, you and many other heretics will broil!" "God give me grace to believe His word and confess His name, no matter what happens," William retorted. Atwell rushed out of the chapel, calling back, "I can't reason with you, but I'll find someone who can, you heretic!"

William stayed in the chapel and continued to read until Atwell returned with the vicar of Southwell. "Who gave you permission to read and expound on the Bible?" the vicar demanded. "I don't expound on it, sir," William answered. "I only read it for comfort." "Why do you need to read it at all?" the vicar asked. "I'll read it as long as I live. You shouldn't discourage people from doing so. You should encourage them." "Oh, so you want to tell me what I should do?" the vicar muttered. "You're a heretic!" "I'm not a heretic just because I speak the truth," William replied.

More words passed between them concerning the sacrament of communion, on which William explained his point of view. Accused of being a heretic, he replied, "I wish you and I were both tied to the stake, to prove which of us would defend his faith the longest. I think you'd recant first." "We'll see about that!" the vicar replied, leaving to report the boy.

The vicar went directly to Master Brown, who called in William's father and the local policeman and demanded that Mr. Hunter go find his son, since William had wisely left town after his argument with the vicar. Mr. Hunter rode for two or three days to satisfy Brown, intending to go back and say he couldn't find the boy, when suddenly they met. Mr. Hunter told his son to hide; he would go back and say he couldn't find him.

"No, father," William said. "I'll go home with you so you don't get in trouble." As soon as they arrived in town, William was arrested and taken before Brown, who argued with him about the bread and wine being consecrated by a priest and becoming Christ's literal flesh and blood. William was so firm in his beliefs that he enraged Brown, who sent him to Bishop Bonner in London.

William was put in the stocks at London for two days, fed only a crust of brown bread and a cup of water before he defended himself to the bishop. Get-

ting nowhere with the boy, Bonner ordered him locked up in jail with as many chains as he could bear. "How old are you?" he asked William. "Nineteen." "Well, you'll be burned before you're twenty if you don't do better than you did today!"

William spent nine months in jail, appearing before the bishop six times, including the time he was condemned on February 9. That day the bishop made William his final offer: "If you recant, I'll make you a free man, and give you forty pounds to start up a business; or I'll make you the steward of my house. I like you. You're smart, and I'll take care of you if you recant." William replied, "Thank you, but if you can't change my mind through Scripture, I can't turn from God for love of the world. I count all worldly things but loss and dung, compared to the love of Christ." "If you die believing this way," the bishop said, "you'll be condemned forever." "God judges righteously, justifying those whom man condemns unjustly," the young martyr maintained.

William was sent back to Newgate Prison for a month, then taken home to Brentwood for burning. When his parents visited him there, they encouraged him to remain faithful, saying they were proud to have a son willing to die for Christ's sake.

At the stake, William asked the people to pray for him. Master Brown sneered, "Pray for you? I wouldn't pray for you any more than I would for a dog!" "I forgive you," William said. "I'm not asking for your forgiveness!" yelled Brown.

Seeing a priest approaching with a Bible, William called out, "Get away, you false prophet! Beware of them, people. Don't take part in their plagues." The priest replied, "As you burn here, so you will burn in hell." "You lie, you false prophet!" William cried. "Get out of here!" A man in the crowd spoke up, "I pray God will have mercy upon his soul." Then the crowd answered, "Amen."

As the fire was lit, William tossed his psalter to his brother. "William," his brother called, "think of the holy passion of Christ. Don't be afraid of death." "I'm not." William lifted up his hands, saying, "Lord, Lord, Lord, receive my spirit." Dropping his head into the smoke, William Hunter gave up his life for the truth, sealing it with his blood to the praise of God.□

## HUGH LAVERICK & JOHN APRICE MARTYRED - 1556

**H**ugh Laverick, a crippled painter, was sixty-eight years old. John Aprice was blind, dark indeed in his visual faculties, but intellectually illuminated with the radiance of the everlasting gospel of truth. But neither the impotence of age nor the affliction of blindness could turn aside the murdering fangs of the Babylonish Catholic monsters. Inoffensive objects like these were informed against by some of the sons of bigotry, and dragged before Bonner, that prelatial shark of London, where they were examined, and replied to the articles propounded to them, as other Christian martyrs had done before.

Upon their refusal to recant, they were sent to Fullham, where Bonner, by way of a dessert after dinner, condemned them to the agonies of the fire. May 15, 1556, they were taken in a cart to the place of execution, and fastened to the stake. When Hugh Laverick was secured by the chain, having no further occasion for his crutch, he threw it away saying to his fellow-martyr, while consoling him, "Be of good cheer, my brother, for my lord of London is our good physician; he will heal us both shortly - thee of thy blindness, and me of my lameness." They sank down in the fire, to rise to immortality!□

*"And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death" (Rev 12:11)*

**T**hese stories are actual and historical accounts of Christian suffering taken from the famous *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*. Born in 1516, John Foxe of England, professor of Oxford University, wrote his book to document the persecution against Christ's Church by pagans and by those who called themselves Christians but were not. It's a book about God's grace and Christian faithfulness. First published in English in 1563, Foxe's book has endured for over four-hundred years as a memorial to the martyrs, and a legacy of inspiration and courage to the true Church of Jesus Christ.□

## 9 ENGLISH MARTYRS

*"And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus" (Rev 17:6)*

## THOMAS BILNEY MARTYRED - 1531

**T**homas Bilney, a law professor at Cambridge University, was burned at the stake by the Roman Catholic Church under the reign of Henry VIII. Neither simple men, husbands and wives, parish priests, or university professors were safe from the fury of the Catholic clergy against those who denied their superstitions and papist doctrines. Bilney was arrested for heresy and brought before the bishop of London. He was threatened repeatedly with torture and burning, creating great fear in him, and upon the advice of his friends, Bilney recanted, and was absolved by the bishop.

Returning to Cambridge in 1528, Bilney fell into a deep depression that nothing could lift. His friends stayed with him day and night, afraid that he might kill himself if left alone. This depression stayed with him until 1531, at which time Bilney decided he could no longer deny God's truth, said good-bye to friends, and left to resume preaching in Norfolk. He urged everyone there to learn from his example and never trust their friends' advice when it came to matters of religion and conscience. He had denied God's truth once to save his life, but would never do it again.

Bilney was soon arrested and given to the city's sheriffs for execution, one of whom, Thomas Necton, was a close friend. Although Necton was powerless to stop Bilney's execution, he was able to make his waiting more comfortable than normal, even allowing his friends to visit him the night before he died.

When Bilney approached the stake, he was given permission to speak to the crowd and told them not to blame the priests present for his death. He then prayed privately. The officers put fire to the wood, which flared up rapidly, deforming Bilney's face as he held up his hands, and called out, "Jesus, I believe!" Then he went to meet Him in whom he believed.□