

A Testimony of the Faithful

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The Martyr's Mirror as we have it is a history book first published in the Dutch language. The book contains chronicles, memorials and testimonies of Christians persecuted for their faith in Jesus. The aim of the book was to preserve in writing, accounts of Christians who were faithful to death. The book was not an attempt to glorify these men. It was written and compiled as encouragement to faithfulness. It is the story of suffering people who esteemed the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in "Egypt" and who held respect unto the recompense of the reward of Christ. It is the story of men, women, youth and brides-to-be, who had they been careful concerning the "country" from whence they came out, they would have had opportunity to have returned. Its story is a sequel to Hebrews, the eleventh Chapter.

The Martyr's Mirror or The Bloody Theater, documents stories and testimonies of martyrs, especially the Anabaptists. Its full title, The Bloody Theater or Martyr's Mirror of the Defenseless Christians who baptized only upon confession of faith, and who suffered and died for the testimony of Jesus, their Saviour, from the time of Christ to the year A.D. 1660 can be found on the cover pages just inside the binding. The use of the word defenseless in this case refers to the Anabaptist belief in nonresistance. The book also includes accounts of the martyrdom of Jesus' apostles and stories of martyrs from previous centuries with beliefs similar to the Anabaptists. Next to the Bible, the Martyr's Mirror held the most significant and prominent place in post immigrant Amish and Mennonite homes. Sadly its use and testimony is dying to the younger generation of American disciples.

The Martyr's Mirror is a collection of writings. early on, the persecuted church wrote and produced many small writings—sometimes single pages, sometimes small leaflets of a few pages. These writings recorded and told of the faith of those recently executed. They were written by prisoners to their families, and by the faithful to faithful fellow men. Many of the writings were handwritten in secret using makeshift means onto makeshift materials. Messages here and messages there were written to encourage and record the faithful testimony of Christ. These letters were cherished by the faithful and their families. Many wanted their children to read these accounts to spur them to faithfulness. Letters were hidden, passed between fellow men and used to communicate between members in prison to those without.

Probably many smaller bits and pieces were lost by the way but in 1562, the first collection of these writings appeared in the Netherlands. They have no known editor or printer, but it is apparent that someone saw the need to compile these fleeting writings into a book called the Het Offer des Heeren (The Sacrifice of the Lord). This first edition was small enough to be carried around hidden in clothing. Eleven editions of this small book appeared between the years 1562 and 1599. From there the contents grew and each new edition contained added materials. The present edition contains all the original writings of The Sacrifice of the Lord plus those that were added as the years rolled by. by 1660, the Martyr's Mirror appeared in its full size, largely as we have it today, compiled by Thielemann J. Van Braght. The 1685 edition of the book was illustrated with 104 copper etchings by Jan Luyken. Thirty of these plates survive and are part of the mirror of the martyrs exhibit supported by The Martyr's Mirror Trust; Goshen College, Goshen, IN.

In 1745, Jacob Gottschalk arranged with the Ephrata Cloisters to have them translate and print the Martyrs' Mirror from Dutch into German. The work took fifteen men three years to finish. In 1749, at 1512 pages, it was the largest book printed in America before the Revolutionary War. One of the original volumes is now on display at the Ephrata Cloister. One ironic side note is that during the Revolutionary War an officer demanded of the Cloisters that stored Martyrs' Mirror paper be used for musket wads.

Two centuries later Mennonites found themselves in the wake of the English language becoming nominally used. With a burden to strengthen the doctrine of nonresistance and to equip the younger generation, they again banded together to translate and print the Martrys' Mirror in English.

This book should still be read by us and to our children. Thieleman J. Van Braght wrote in 1659, in the invocation/introduction to the Martyrs' Mirror stating that danger was greater under freedom than it had been during the bloody days of persecution. How much more this is true today. He writes of the devil whose chief design was formerly to destroy the body... now comes as a thief in the night... or in twilight... in strange but pleasing forms to destroy the soul... "oh that Satan would show himself as he really is, and that the world too, might come forth without disguise or mask... but oh how lamentable! All this is hid under a beautiful appearance. Satan appears to be a prince or king, and the world a noble princess or queen. The servants and maid-servants who follow them as pages and maids of honor, appear as cavaliers and ladies reveling, in joy and delight; though as regards the soul, they are poor and deformed, yea meaner than beggars, and without the true joy which delights the upright soul in God. There is therefore greater danger of being deceived. Oh ye upright children of God, be on your guard."

This book is a timeless treasure for the Christian faith. It can be easily purchased for less than what a typical family might spend for a night out dining and its message of ten thousands times more value.

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