

**Palisades Community Bible Church**

**Online Sunday School**

**Who Were The Famous “Forty Wrestlers?”**

April 25, 2021

By: Brent Briggs

What follows is a true story of some of the most courageous soldiers in the early church’s history. It should inspire every Christian to stand firm in their faith. If you serve/d in the military, or are close to someone who has, you may readily identify with the concept of a “chain of command” and the fact that orders are obeyed. Recall the faith of the Roman Centurion who had sent word to Jesus asking Him to heal his dying servant. Jesus agreed to go.

**Luke 7: 6 So Jesus went with them. But when He was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends with the message: “Lord, do not trouble Yourself, for I am not worthy to have You come under my roof. 7 That is why I did not consider myself worthy to come to You. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. 8 For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell one to go, and he goes; and another to come, and he comes. I tell my servant to do something, and he does it.”**

**9 When Jesus heard this, He marveled at the centurion. Turning to the crowd following Him, He said, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith.” 10 And when the messengers returned to the house, they found the servant in good health.**

The Holy Bible contains a great deal of history; primarily from the perspective of the Jews and Christians. Most universities offer Ancient History courses which study the vast amounts of records from the perspectives of other civilizations, such as Egypt, Babylon, Rome, etc. Perhaps most relevant to the New Testament and the first century Christian movement, is the history of the Roman empire in the first century.

For instance, Caesar Augustus was the first emperor of Rome, and he is credited with bringing peace and stability to the empire prior to Jesus’ birth. King Herod,

under Augustus, ordered the killing of all male babies under two years old when he learned of the promised birth of a new “king.”

Following the reign of Augustus, were Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, then Nero, who reigned during the years 54-68. This was during some of the most explosive growth of the early Christian Church (see Bible Study: “They Were Scattered”).

Nero’s infamous reign is associated with extremes of tyranny, extravagance and debauchery. His mother, Agrippina, tried to influence his decisions, but Nero had her killed only five years into his reign. Most Roman sources offer overwhelmingly negative assessments of his personality and tranny. He reportedly had caused the “Great Fire of Rome” to clear a path for his own opulent palace complex. He then seized Christians as scapegoats for the fire and burned them alive in order to improve his public support. Nero’s hatred for Christians was so great that he would have them arrested and publicly inflicted with unimaginable cruelties, such as covering them with tar and burning them alive as torch lights for his evening parties.

**Matthew 10:22 “And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.”**

Concomitant with (naturally following) Nero’s increase in power was his commissioning of an elite band of soldiers known as **“The Emperor’s Wrestlers.”** They were hand-picked from the most skillful and heroic fighting men in the land, and recruited from the great athletes of the Roman amphitheater. They were well-known for their prowess in battle and relentless devotion to their emperor. When going into battle they would chant: "We, the wrestlers, wrestling for thee, O emperor, to win for thee the victory and from thee the victor's crown!"

Nero’s campaign to conquer “Gaul” sent the Roman army into this massive region encompassing modern day France, Luxembourg, Belgium, most of Switzerland, parts of Northern Italy, the Netherlands, and Germany. Through their many battles, no soldiers proved braver or more loyal than this elite band of wrestlers. They were led by their respected centurion, Vespasian. However, the greatest blow to this legendary group was about to be dealt. News had reached Nero that the Christian faith had come among the wrestlers and some had accepted it.

In Nero's Rome, to be a Christian meant death, even to those who served their emperor with the greatest of honor. Nero dispatched a decree to Vespasian: "If there be any among the soldiers who cling to the faith of the Christians, they must die!"

The decree was received in the dead of winter, while the soldiers were camped on the shore of a frozen lake. The winter was brutal, but the hardships the men had endured together had only served to unite them more closely. So, it was with much regret that Vespasian read the emperor's message. He called the soldiers together and asked, "Are there any among you who cling to the faith of the Christians? If so, let him step forward!" Forty wrestlers instantly stepped forward two paces, respectfully saluted, and stood at attention. Vespasian paused; his heart stricken with dread.

He had not expected so many. "The decree has come from your emperor," he said, "that any who cling to the faith of the Christians must die! For the sake of your country, your comrades, your loved ones, renounce this false faith!" Not one of the forty moved. Not wanting to hasten into a decision, he decided to be as lenient as possible. "Until sundown I shall await your answer," said Vespasian. Sundown came. Again, the question was asked, "Are there any among you who cling to the faith of the Christians? If so let them step forward!"

Again, the forty wrestlers stepped forward and stood at attention. Vespasian pleaded with them long and earnestly without prevailing upon a single man to deny his Lord. Finally, he said, "The decree of the Emperor must be obeyed, but I am not willing that your blood be upon your comrades.

I am going to order you to march out on the lake of ice and I shall leave you there to the mercy of the elements. Fires, however, will be burning on the shore, and at the largest, I will be waiting to welcome any willing to renounce this false faith."

The forty wrestlers were stripped and then, without a word they wheeled, and falling into columns of four, marched out toward the lake of ice. As they marched, they broke into a chorus with the old chant of battle, "Forty wrestlers, wrestling for thee, O Christ, to win for thee the victory and from thee, the victor's crown!"

All through the long hours of the night Vespasian stood by his campfire and waited. All through the long night came back to him fainter and fainter the wrestlers' song. As it neared morning, one figure, overcome by exposure, crept quietly toward the fire. In the extremity of his suffering, he renounced his Lord. Faintly, but clearly, from out of the darkness came the song;

"Thirty-nine wrestlers, wrestling for thee, O Christ, to win for thee the victory and from thee, the victor's crown!"

Vespasian looked at the figure drawing close to the fire and then out into the darkness whence came the song of faith. Once again, he looked. Perhaps he saw the greater light shining there in the Darkness! Off came his helmet, down went his shield and he sprang upon the ice crying, "FORTY WRESTLERS! Wrestling for thee, O Christ, to win for thee the victory and from thee, the victor's crown!"

**Matthew 10: 28 "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Instead, fear the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. 30 And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.**

**32 Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father in heaven. 33 But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father in heaven.**

**34 Do not assume that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I have come to turn 'a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. 36 A man's enemies will be the members of his own household.'**

**37 Anyone who loves his father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me; 38 and anyone who does not take up his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me. 39 Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. 40 He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives the One who sent Me.**