

Where Should We Look for Hope: Faithful Christians or a Faithful Christ?

I. A Faithful Witness — but Not the Foundation of Hope

- The martyrdom of **Polycarp**, bishop of **Smyrna**, shows extraordinary courage and faith.
- Polycarp's prayer reveals hope rooted not in escape or personal strength, but in Christ and the resurrection.
- His example inspires the Church, but it also raises a difficult question: *What about Christians who fail under pressure?*

II. The Church's Crisis: Human Failure and God's Grace

- After persecution, the Church wrestled with whether pastors who failed could still administer valid sacraments.
- The **Donatists** claimed God's grace depended on the moral purity of ministers.
- The Lutheran Reformers rejected this view in **Augsburg Confession Article VIII**, teaching that Word and Sacraments work because of Christ's command—not human worthiness.

III. Living Among Wheat and Weeds

- Jesus' parable in **Matthew 13** teaches that good and evil coexist until the final judgment.
- God alone sees perfectly and will judge rightly on the Last Day.
- This frees Christians from despair, judgmentalism, and revenge.

IV. Hope in God's Final Justice

- **Augsburg Confession Article XVII** teaches that Christ will return to judge the living and the dead.
- This promise gives hope when evil appears unchecked and injustice seems to prevail.
- **Romans 12** calls Christians to resist revenge and overcome evil with good.

V. Hope for Daily Life in an Imperfect World

- **Augsburg Confession Article XVI** affirms that everyday callings—family, work, citizenship—are God-given and holy.
- Christians are called to live in the world, not withdraw from it, trusting Christ's protection (John 17:15).
- We do not wait for a perfect world to serve; we serve because Christ has already overcome the world (John 16:33).

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out most to you about Polycarp's prayer and his understanding of hope?
2. Why is it dangerous to base our faith on the faithfulness of pastors or other Christians?
3. Read Matthew 13:24-30. How does the parable of the wheat and the weeds help you deal with disappointment in the Church or society?
4. Read Romans 12:17-21. In what ways does the promise of Christ's final judgment bring comfort rather than fear?
5. Read John 17:14-17. Where are you tempted to withdraw from the world because of sin or imperfection—and how does Christ's victory call you back into faithful service?