

DEVOTION

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The Battle of Avarayr

read

“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

reflect

I, for one, can’t find Armenia on a map, but the small country in Western Asia holds the distinction of being the first nation to adopt Christianity as its official religion.

The Armenians adopted Christianity in 301 A.D., and their faith was tested after coming under Persian rule about 100 years later.

In 451, the Persian king issued an edict compelling the Armenians to give up Christianity and convert to Zoroastrianism, a false religion that worshiped fire.

The Armenians issued this reply: “From this belief (Christianity) no one can move us; neither fire, nor sword, nor water, nor any other horrid tortures. All our goods and our possessions are in your hands, our bodies are before you; dispose of them as you will. If you leave us to our belief, we will here on earth choose no other lord in your place, and in heaven choose no other god in place of Jesus Christ,

for there is no other God but Him.”

The response angered the Persian king, and he dispatched an army of 200,000 men to destroy churches and force the Armenians to comply with his edict.

General Vardan Mamikonian raised an army of 66,000 men to defend the Armenian homeland.

On May 26, 451, the two armies met in the Battle of Avarayr.

Before heading out to fight, the Armenian soldiers prayed, took communion and recited Psalm 23.

The Armenians fought bravely and pushed back the Persian army until it sent in war elephants to crush the advance. Vardan was killed as he led a cavalry charge on the Persian frontline.

The Persians won the battle, but it was a hollow victory. Persian dead outnumbered Ar-

menian dead 3-to-1.

The battle sent a strong message to the Persian king, and though it took 30 more years of resistance, Persia eventually signed a treaty that gave Armenians freedom of religion.

Living in the United States, it’s easy to take religious freedom for granted. It’s all most of us have ever known.

The Founding Fathers thought religious freedom was so important that they protected it in the First Amendment to the Constitution, yet it’s a right that many people around the world do not have.

As we’ve seen lately, Christians in Syria have been tortured and killed for their faith.

With that in mind, take a moment to thank God for the freedom of religion you enjoy, and be sure to exercise it: attend church each week, read the Bible wherever you choose and pray without shame or fear of reprisals.

respond

- ▶ Has anyone ever impeded your religious freedom? What did you do?
- ▶ Why do you think the Founding Fathers included freedom of religion in the First Amendment?
- ▶ How can you express your appreciation for freedom of religion?

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