



Lesson 3: TRIAL

Persecution and Perseverance

Rejection, Hatred & Persecution in the Roman Empire

- In Week 1, we considered persecution and martyrdom (i.e. **James, Stephen**), that the church experienced from the start, at the hands of Jewish officials and zealots like Saul.
- For most of the early church period in the Roman Empire, the body of believers was subject to persecution—often severe—and were a reviled fringe movement in the much larger society. They were, in fact, long regarded as one of many “cults” in Rome, counter to the polytheistic religion of the Roman Empire. While Rome had quite a mix of spiritual practices, these “cults” (*“superstitio”*) were regarded with suspicion.
- While undoubtedly hard, this persecution should not have been surprising, as Christ had warned his followers of such hatred by the world and persecution many times, as did the disciples in other New Testament writings as they witnessed it first-hand:
 - **Matthew 5:11-12**
 - **Mark 13:9-13**
 - **John 15:18-21**
 - **2 Timothy 3:12-13**
 - **1 Peter 4:12-13**

Waves of Persecution

- In all, there were 10 great waves of persecution in the Roman Empire before the rule of Constantine. We will examine each of them this morning, in terms of key events and developments, and connections to recorded martyrs, particularly as recorded by the notable Church historian **Eusebius** (c. 260-340 A.D.)
- **Nero, 64-68:**
 - Probably the most infamous in terms of what is recorded in the Bible, and to many secular historians as well.
 - Nero's great persecutions began in 64 A.D. when he blamed Christians for the Great Fire of Rome.
 - Christians were aggressively persecuted and martyred in many ways, including being dressed in animal skins and thrown to wild dogs, crucifixion, and even being burned alive—including being covered in pitch and used as garden torches for Nero's parties.
 - **Peter, Paul**, Erastus, Aristarchus, Trophimus, Barsabas, Ananias the bishop of Damascus, and hundreds of other Christians in Rome were martyred under Nero.



Waves of Persecution

- **Domitian, 81-96:**

- After a brief abatement from persecution following the rule of Nero, Domitian renews persecution when he introduces emperor worship and Christians refuse to worship him.
- Many Christians are charged with “atheism” and executed or exiled from the Empire.
- Simeon, the bishop of Jerusalem, Dionysius the Areopagite, Nicodemus, and Timothy were martyred under Domitian. The Apostle **John** (after being boiled in oil) was exiled to the island of Patmos, where he later died of natural causes. (The second generation church father Clement of Rome MAY have been martyred under Domitian, but the date of his martyrdom is disputed, so this may have occurred under Trajan).

- **Trajan, 98-117**

- Trajan’s policy was that Christians were to be executed when found, but not to be sought out. Anonymous sources were to be rejected as unreliable and unsound.
- Ignatius the bishop of Antioch, Alexander the bishop of Rome, Symeon, Zozimus, Rufus, and, possibly, Clement of Rome were martyred under Trajan’s reign.

Waves of Persecution

- **Hadrian, 117-138:**

- Persecution continued along the lines of Trajan, but these purges were more sporadic
- Telesphorus the bishop of Rome was martyred.

- **Marcus Aurelius, 161-180:**

- Christians were unfairly blamed for natural disasters and other calamities, similarly to how the great persecution under Nero had started with the Great Fire.
- Germanicus, Justin Martyr, Pothinus the bishop of Lyon, and Blandina are martyred,
- Various means were used—i.e. crucifixion, wild beasts, burning.
- Polycarp was martyred either early in his reign, or shortly before under Antoninus Pius.



The Martyrdom of Polycarp

This account is from a letter written by an eyewitness to Polycarp's martyrdom, written in the early 160s A.D. It is the earliest written account of the martyrdom of a Christian after the writing of the New Testament.

"As Polycarp was being taken into the arena, a voice came to him from heaven: 'Be strong, Polycarp and play the man!' No one saw who had spoken, but our brothers who were there heard the voice. When the crowd heard that Polycarp had been captured, there was an uproar. The Proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp. On hearing that he was, he tried to persuade him to apostatize, saying, 'Have respect for your old age, swear by the fortune of Caesar. Repent, and say, "Down with the Atheists!"' Polycarp looked grimly at the wicked heathen multitude in the stadium, and gesturing towards them, he said, 'Down with the Atheists!' 'Swear,' urged the Proconsul, 'reproach Christ, and I will set you free.' '86 years have I have served him,' Polycarp declared, 'and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?'

The Martyrdom of Polycarp

'I have wild animals here,' the Proconsul said. 'I will throw you to them if you do not repent.' 'Call them,' Polycarp replied. 'It is unthinkable for me to repent from what is good to turn to what is evil. I will be glad though to be changed from evil to righteousness.' 'If you despise the animals, I will have you burned.' 'You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and is then extinguished, but you know nothing of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. Why are you waiting? Bring on whatever you want.'

It was all done in the time it takes to tell. The crowd collected wood and bundles of sticks from the shops and public baths. The Jews, as usual, were keen to help. When the pile was ready, Polycarp took off his outer clothes, undid his belt, and tried to take off his sandals – something he was not used to, as the faithful always raced to do it for him, each wanting to be the one to touch his skin – this is how good his life was. But when they went to fix him with nails, he said, 'Leave me as I am, for he that gives me strength to endure the fire, will enable me not to struggle, without the help of your nails.'

The Martyrdom of Polycarp

So they simply bound him with his hands behind him like a distinguished ram chosen from a great flock for sacrifice. Ready to be an acceptable burnt-offering to God, he looked up to heaven, and said, 'O Lord God Almighty, the Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, by whom we have received the knowledge of you, the God of angels, powers and every creature, and of all the righteous who live before you, I give you thanks that you count me worthy to be numbered among your martyrs, sharing the cup of Christ and the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and body, through the immortality of the Holy Spirit. May I be received this day as an acceptable sacrifice, as you, the true God, have predestined, revealed to me, and now fulfilled. I praise you for all these things, I bless you and glorify you, along with the everlasting Jesus Christ, your beloved Son. To you, with him, through the Holy Ghost, be glory both now and forever. Amen.'

The Martyrdom of Polycarp

Then the fire was lit, and the flame blazed furiously. We who were privileged to witness it saw a great miracle, and this is why we have been preserved, to tell the story. The fire shaped itself into the form of an arch, like the sail of a ship when filled with the wind, and formed a circle around the body of the martyr. Inside it, he looked not like flesh that is burnt, but like bread that is baked, or gold and silver glowing in a furnace. And we smelt a sweet scent, like frankincense or some such precious spices.

*Eventually, when those wicked men saw that his body could not be consumed by the fire, they commanded an executioner to pierce him with a dagger. When he did this [a dove flew out and] [***this may well be a later interpolation or transcription error**] such a great quantity of blood flowed that the fire was extinguished. The crowd were amazed at the difference between the unbelievers and the elect – of whom the great Polycarp was surely one, having in our own times been an apostolic and prophetic teacher, and bishop of the Catholic Church in Smyrna. For every word he spoke either has been or shall be accomplished.*

The Martyrdom of Polycarp

When the Enemy saw the wonder of his martyrdom, his blameless life and now his crowning with immortality, he did his utmost to stop us keeping any memorial of him or taking possession of his holy body. He inspired Nicetes, the father of Herod, along with the Jews to ask the governor not to hand over his body for burial. 'They might turn from worshipping the crucified one,' he said, 'only to start worshipping this one.' They did not realize that it is impossible for us to abandon Christ who suffered for the salvation of the world, or to worship any other....

The centurion then, seeing the disturbance caused by the Jews, took the body and publicly burnt it. Later, we collected up his bones, more precious than jewels and better purified than gold, and put them in an appropriate place where, the Lord willing, we shall celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom each year with joy and rejoicing, both to remember those who have run their race and to prepare those yet to walk in their steps.

The Martyrdom of Polycarp

This is the story of the blessed Polycarp, the twelfth martyr in Smyrna, though he has a unique place memory of all people, being remembered even by all the heathen. He was not merely an illustrious teacher, but also a pre-eminent martyr, whose death all desire to imitate, being altogether consistent with the Gospel of Christ. Having overcome the unjust governor with patience and acquired the crown of immortality, he now, with the apostles and all the righteous, glorifies God the Father with joy, and blesses our Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of our souls, the Ruler of our bodies, and the Shepherd of the Catholic Church throughout the world.

- **Thoughts on what we read in this account?**
- **How does this connect with the teachings of Christ and the disciples about persevering in the faith and facing persecution?**
- **How would this account been regarded by the churches it was written to at the time?**
- **How may this account be seen as an inspiration and encouragement to the church today and in the future when we consider persecution?**

Waves of Persecution

- **Septimius Severus, AD 202-211:**

- Victor the bishop of Rome, Leonidas, Irenaeus the bishop of Lyon, Asclepiades the bishop of Antioch, Perpetua and Felicitus are martyred.
- *“When Severus began to persecute the churches, glorious testimonies were given everywhere by the athletes of religion. This was especially the case in Alexandria, to which city, as to a most prominent theater, athletes of God were brought from Egypt and all Thebais according to their merit, and won crowns from God through their great patience under many tortures and every mode of death. Among these was Leonides, who was called the father of Origen, and who was beheaded while his son was still young. How remarkable the predilection of this son was for the Divine Word, in consequence of his father's instruction, it will not be amiss to state briefly, as his fame has been very greatly celebrated by many.”* - Eusebius Pamphilius, Church History
- **Note Eusebius's term “athletes”--reminiscent of Paul's references to runners disciplining their bodies, competing for the prize, and persevering in the faith.**

Waves of Persecution

- **Maximinus the Thracian, 235-238:**

- A very short period, but during this time countless Christians were executed, with some being slain and buried in mass graves, and others being cast into the Tyber River. Among the martyred were Pontianus the bishop of Rome, Pammachius and Quiritus (Roman Senators), Ursula and Hippolitus (not the church father)

- **Decius, 249-251:**

- The Decian persecution was very severe. Decius believed instability in the empire when he came to power was being caused by lapsing from traditional religious practices, therefore he attacked those who he saw in opposition to this—including Christians.
- He brought in *libellus*—a proof that one had made sacrifices to Roman gods and the Emperor; those who did not (which included faithful Christians) would be targeted). Due to this edict, it truly an empire-wide persecution (whereas many earlier waves had been more localized to in and around Rome itself).

Waves of Persecution

- **Decius, 249-251 (*Continued*):**

- Fabianus the bishop of Rome, Alexander of Jerusalem, Nichomachus, Denisa, Julian, Trypho, Respicius, Agatha, Cyril the bishop of Gortyna, Babylas the bishop of Antioch, and Theodora are martyred. Origen the celebrated presbyter of Alexandria was imprisoned and tortured, and later died from his injuries.

- **Valerian, 257-260:**

- After a brief respite following the death of Decius in 251, persecution returned in 257 under Valerian.
- Like Decius, he demanded that all Romans sacrifice to Roman gods, which Christians could not and would not comply with.
- In addition to personal suffering and martyrdom, many were stripped of their property.
- Rufina, Secunda, Stephen the bishop of Rome, Sixtus the bishop of Rome, and Fructuosis bishop of Tarragon were martyred; Cyprian the bishop of Carthage was exiled and then later martyred.

“The Great Persecution”

- **Diocletian, 303-311**

- This was the tenth and final significant wave of persecution before the significant changes coming during the reign of Constantine (*which we will examine more next week!*), but it was an immensely destructive period, sometimes referred to by historians as “The Great Persecution”
- Diocletian did not originally go after the church early in his reign (which started in 280), but was pushed by his junior co-emperor, Galerius, to increase attacks on it in 303.
- A 303 edict led to widespread destruction of churches and burning of Christian books
- Christian gatherings for worship were outlawed
- Christian government officials were removed from positions, and Christians were stripped of status and rights, including the right of appeal to courts
- Thousands of Christians were expelled from their homes and many more were imprisoned, tortured, and/or executed for refusing to comply with edicts

“The Great Persecution”

- **Diocletian, 303-311 (CONTINUED)**

“Eusebius of Caesarea, a church historian who lived through these events in the eastern Mediterranean, provides a harrowing eyewitness account. He describes how, in city squares, Christian scriptures were consigned to bonfires, and how many believers chose to die rather than hand over holy writings or bow to idols. Eusebius recounts that many brave Christians were subjected to terrible tortures, from scourging, racking, and burning, to being mutilated, yet they refused to recant. At the same time, he honestly notes that “countless others succumbed at the first assault, cowardice having numbed their souls,” meaning a great number did give in and sacrificed under fear of pain.

The ferocity of the persecution was not enforced equally across the empire. For instance, in the Western provinces, which were ruled by Constantius under Diocletian’s direction, the enforcement was milder. Constantius, it was said, disliked extreme measures and in Gaul and Britain he limited himself largely to destroying a few church buildings. He did not execute Christians en masse or pursue the later edicts rigorously...in places like Gaul, many Christians were spared the worst.

“The Great Persecution”

In Italy and Africa, where the other Western Augustus Maximian held sway, enforcement was somewhat firmer but still less bloody than in the East.

In the Eastern provinces under Diocletian and Galerius, however, the persecution was relentlessly harsh. For instance, in Phrygia in Asia Minor, an entire town of Christians was reportedly burnt to the ground.

In Egypt and Palestine, arrests and executions were frequent. Some martyrs like Saint Catherine (in Alexandria) and Saint George became legendary for their sufferings around this time, although some of these legends are hard to verify historically.

Estimates of the death toll vary. One scholarly estimate is that about 3,000–3,500 Christians were killed in the Great Persecution, based on records and martyrologies, but other researchers argue the number could be in the tens of thousands across the empire over those years. “

- “Christian Martyrdom in the Roman Empire in the 2nd–4th Centuries”, History Skills -

Responses and Reactions of the Early Church to Persecution

- The early church was called to stand firm in their faith, and to endure during persecution, but this does not mean they eagerly ran towards martyrdom.
- The thinking was that they should not deny their faith, or turn away from the truth, but that they should not also actively seek suffering and death.
- At times, particularly during bans on meeting together on worship and destruction of their places of worship, early Christians met in secret—i.e. in the catacombs. But wherever they met, the truth endured, the teaching continued, and the church grew.
- In localized persecutions, some with means to move elsewhere did, to where persecution was not as aggressive, which caused further spreading of the Gospel message throughout Europe, Africa, and Asia, and ultimately growth of the church.
- Some also did not endure in the face of persecution, denied their faith, gave in to Roman edicts, and even betrayed others. (The issue of repentance by these, and seeking restoration and return to the church was a contentious one, theologically, as we learned last week).
- **However, the reality is, during this era, countless Christians did endure harsh persecution, experiencing loss, suffering, and martyrdom in many ways for centuries!**

Lesson 3 Takeaways–The Persecuted Early Church & Us

- The words of Christ are true, and the teachings of His disciples are true, and persecution and suffering of the church has unfolded in history, particularly in the early church era.
- Those who were called to follow Christ and claimed Him as Lord and Saviour were truly called to count the cost during the era of persecution experienced by the early church.
- Openly declaring Christ during this era and resolving to live a life in obedience to Him and the teachings of the disciples and early church fathers meant being willing to suffer for the sake of the Gospel—in loss of property, friends, or family, imprisonment, pain, and even death—enduring to the end, reminiscent of **2 Timothy 4:7-8** and **James 1:12**.
- This merits constant, sober reflection and remembrance when presuming to compare our calling and any hardship, suffering, and claimed persecution we experience today and in the future to what the church has realistically experienced throughout history.
- These accounts were recorded and preserved by early church writers and leaders, and endure for us to read, learn from, and be inspired and encouraged by in our times.
- **NEXT WEEK: TRANSITION: Change is coming—for the church in the Rome...and beyond!**