

THE LEAGUE OF FAR-FROM-EXTRAORDINARY GENTLEMEN

A STUDY OF THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

WEEK 8 – The Long and Winding Road – Acts 17-20

*22 “And now I am bound by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. I don’t know what awaits me,²³ except that the Holy Spirit tells me in city after city that jail and suffering lie ahead. ²⁴ But my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing **the work** assigned me by the Lord Jesus—**the work** of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God. – Acts 20:22-24 NLT*

- **Finishing well**

- The NLT translates two different words as “work” in verse 24.
 - *dromos* – refers to the course of his life
 - *diakonia* – refers to the ministry or office assigned to him
 - The same word from which we get “deacon” – a servant
- Both words constitute the calling on his life
- His life and ministry were one and the same – inseparable
- If Paul failed to end his life and ministry well, his life would have been in vain

*Yes, **everything else is worthless** when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him. – Philippians 3:8-9 NLT*

***I do everything** to spread the Good News and share in its blessings. – 1 Corinthians 9:23 NLT*

***So I run with purpose in every step.** I am not just shadowboxing. **I discipline my body** like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified. – 1 Corinthians 9:26-27 NLT*

- **Paul had been chosen and appointed for a purpose**

- Paul had been **chosen** by Jesus
*Saul is **my chosen instrument** to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. – Acts 9:15 NLT*
- Paul and Barnabas had been **appointed** by the church
*...the Holy Spirit said, “**Appoint Barnabas and Saul for the special work** to which I have **called them.**” – Acts 13:2 NLT*

- His would be a long and winding road
- It wouldn't be smooth or easy
- It would be a marathon, not a sprint
- And it would be filled with peaks and valleys
- Take chapter 16 as an example
 - Lystra – met Timothy (104)
 - Troas – had a vision (6-10)
 - Philippi – led Lydia to the Lord (11-15)
 - exorcised a demon-possessed girl (16-21)
 - were thrown in prison (22-30)
 - led the jailer to Christ (31-34)
 - set free for being Romans (35-39)
 - This passage deals with several important issues
Answers the question: What must I do to be saved?
Raises the question regarding infant baptism

²⁹ *The jailer called for lights and ran to the dungeon and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"*

³¹ *They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with everyone in your household." ³² And they shared the word of the Lord with him and **with all who lived in his household.** ³³ Even at that hour of the night, the jailer cared for them and washed their wounds. **Then he and everyone in his household were immediately baptized.** ³⁴ He brought them into his house and set a meal before them, and he and **his entire household rejoiced** because they all believed in God. – Acts 16:29-34 NLT*

panoikei – with all his house or family

- This passage is often used to defend infant baptism
- There are 12 descriptions of conversions in the Book of Acts
- All of them include the baptism of **believing adults**
- Four mention **households** being baptized
 1. Corneilius' household – Acts 10:46-48
 - The Holy Spirit fell on those who heard the gospel
 - They spoke in tongues
 - As a result, they were baptized
 2. Lydia's household – Acts 16:15
 - Nowhere in the passage is Lydia referred to as a mother of infant children
 - Lydia **heard** the gospel message and believed
 - She and those in her household were baptized **as a result of believing**
 3. Philippian jailer's household – Acts 16:33
 - The entire household heard the gospel (vs 32)
 - Salvation was tied to belief, not baptism (vs 32)
 - They all believed in God (vs 34)

- As a result, they were all baptized (vs 33)

I think it's a sin—you can quote me—not to baptize your children. God was going to kill Moses for not circumcising his son. It was a very serious matter to administer the sign of the covenant to believers and to their infants. And nowhere is there in biblical content that principle of solidarity ever, ever abrogated. And so I think we're making a huge mistake when we exclude the children of believers from the sign of the covenant. Alright? And so I think it's a serious matter. Because I want to make sure with the administration of the sacraments that we're doing what's pleasing to God. So I think it's pleasing to God to baptize infants of believers.

...there's not an explicit teaching in the New Testament that says that "you must baptize children of believers." Nor is there an explicit prohibition in the New Testament that says, "No, you may not baptize the children of believers." And so you have to rest your case on inferences drawn from narratives and other texts of the Bible.

– R. C. Sproul, *Infant Baptism, Sin, and Patience*

- Infant baptism
 - Involves someone incapable of choice
 - Exhibits no faith (on the part of the one baptized)
 - Not taught in the rest of the New Testament
 - Incorrectly tied to the covenant sign of circumcision
 - Inconsistent application of covenant membership (i.e. baptized children cannot take communion)
- **The Speed-bump on the road to redemption**

*Paul and Silas then traveled through the towns of Amphipolis and Apollonia and came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. ² As was Paul's custom, he went to the synagogue service, and for three Sabbaths in a row he used the Scriptures to reason with the people. ³ He explained the prophecies and **proved that the Messiah must suffer and rise from the dead**. He said, "This Jesus I'm telling you about is the Messiah." ⁴ Some of the Jews who listened were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with many God-fearing Greek men and quite a few prominent women. – Acts 17:1-4 NLT*

- The resurrection of Jesus was key to Paul's message

*For if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised either. **And if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless.** And we apostles would all be lying about God—for we have said that God raised Christ from the grave. But that can't be true if there is no resurrection of the dead. – 1 Corinthians 15:13-15 NLT*

- Jesus = Messiah
 - This would prove to be a stumbling block for many

⁴ *Some of the Jews who listened were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with many God-fearing Greek men and quite a few prominent women.*

⁵ ***But some of the Jews were jealous, so they gathered some troublemakers from the marketplace to form a mob and start a riot. They attacked the home of Jason, searching for Paul and Silas so they could drag them out to the crowd. – Acts 17:4-5 NLT***

- The resurrection of Jesus is central to the theme of the gospel
- It is key to any hope we have of eternal life

- **On the road again**

¹⁰ *That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas to Berea. When they arrived there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. ¹¹ And the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul’s message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth. ¹² As a result, many Jews believed, as did many of the prominent Greek women and men.*

¹³ *But when some Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God in Berea, they went there and stirred up trouble. ¹⁴ The believers acted at once, sending Paul on to the coast, while Silas and Timothy remained behind. ¹⁵ Those escorting Paul went with him all the way to Athens; then they returned to Berea with instructions for Silas and Timothy to hurry and join him. – Acts 17:10-15 NLT*

- Paul and Barnabas are forced to get out of Thessalonica
- They head to Berea
 - They make a beeline to the synagogue
 - This time many Jews believed
 - But the Jews from Thessalonica stirred up trouble
 - Paul and Barnabas are forced to flee again
- They end up in Athens
 - The road is leading them into enemy territory
 - The spiritual climate is getting darker and more dangerous
 - The proof of Satan’s influence is everywhere

- **The road to hell**

¹⁶ *While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, **he was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw everywhere in the city.** ¹⁷ He went to the synagogue to reason with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and he spoke daily in the public square to all who happened to be there.*

¹⁸ *He also had a debate with some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. When he told them about Jesus and his resurrection, they said, “What’s this babbler trying to say with*

these strange ideas he's picked up?" Others said, "He seems to be preaching about some foreign gods."

- Paul found himself in the belly of the beast
- He was surrounded by idolatry of all kinds
- He was a fish out of water
- But his message remained the same

*When he told them about **Jesus and his resurrection...** – vs 18*

- They described his message as "strange"

*So where does this leave the philosophers, the scholars, and the world's brilliant debaters? God has made the wisdom of this world look foolish. Since God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom, he has used our foolish preaching to save those who believe. **It is foolish to the Jews**, who ask for signs from heaven. **And it is foolish to the Greeks**, who seek human wisdom. So when we preach that Christ was crucified, **the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense.** – 1 Corinthians 1:20-23 NLT*

- Paul takes advantage of the opportunity
- He uses their interest to explain his message

²² So Paul, standing before the council, addressed them as follows: "Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious in every way, ²³ for as I was walking along I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it: 'To an Unknown God.' This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I'm telling you about.

*²⁴ "He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn't live in man-made temples, ²⁵ and human hands can't serve his needs—for he has no needs. **He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need.** – Acts 17:22-25 NLT*

- Paul explained to them the nature of the one God they were missing
- They were ignorant of the truth
- And God had overlooked their ignorance, showing them grace
- But the day had come for a decision to be made

*³⁰ "God overlooked people's ignorance about these things in earlier times, but now he commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him. ³¹ For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and **he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead.**"*

*³² When they heard Paul speak about the resurrection of the dead, **some laughed in contempt, but others said, "We want to hear more about this later."** ³³ That ended Paul's discussion with them, ³⁴ but **some joined him and became believers.** Among them were*

Dionysius, a member of the council, a woman named Damaris, and others with them. – Acts 17:30-34 NLT

- The gospel elicits 3 responses:
 - Rejection
 - Curiosity
 - Belief

- **Raising up our replacements**

*¹ Then Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² There he became acquainted with a Jew named **Aquila**, born in Pontus, who had recently arrived from Italy with his wife, **Priscilla**. They had left Italy when Claudius Caesar deported all Jews from Rome. ³ Paul lived and worked with them, for they were tentmakers just as he was. – Acts 18:1-3 NLT*

- Paul was raising up his replacements
- He has already added Silas and Timothy
- Paul's calling is moving closer to its end
- But God's redemptive work is far from done

*²⁴ Meanwhile, a Jew named **Apollos**, an eloquent speaker who knew the Scriptures well, had arrived in Ephesus from Alexandria in Egypt. ²⁵ He had been taught the way of the Lord, and he taught others about Jesus with an enthusiastic spirit and **with accuracy**. However, he knew only about John's baptism. ²⁶ When Priscilla and Aquila heard him preaching boldly in the synagogue, they took him aside and explained the way of God even **more accurately**.*

- Aquila and Priscilla disciple Apollos
- The network was expanding
- We should be raising up our replacements
- We have a responsibility to train the next generation
- Paul told Timothy:

*You have heard me teach things that have been confirmed by many reliable witnesses. **Now teach these truths to other trustworthy people** who will be able to pass them on to others. – 2 Timothy 2:2 NLT*

- The seven sons of Saul (Paul)

*⁴ Several men were traveling with him. They were **Sopater** son of Pyrrhus from Berea; **Aristarchus** and **Secundus** from Thessalonica; **Gaius** from Derbe; **Timothy**; and **Tychicus** and **Trophimus** from the province of Asia. ⁵ They went on ahead and waited for us at Troas. – Acts 20:4-5 NLT*

The Sevens Sons of Saul

- Seven Gentile believers
- Spiritual sons of Paul
- Mentored by Paul
- Equipped with the truth
- Relied on Jesus

VS

The Seven Sons of Sceva

- Seven Jewish exorcists
- Biological sons of Sceva
- Mentored by Sceva
- Operated based on falsehood
- Depended upon themselves

- Trusted companions

- Ineffective exorcists

- **The need for leaders**

²⁸ ***“So guard yourselves and God’s people. Feed and shepherd God’s flock—his church, purchased with his own blood—over which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as leaders. ²⁹ I know that false teachers, like vicious wolves, will come in among you after I leave, not sparing the flock. ³⁰ Even some men from your own group will rise up and distort the truth in order to draw a following. ³¹ Watch out! Remember the three years I was with you—my constant watch and care over you night and day, and my many tears for you.***

³² ***“And now I entrust you to God and the message of his grace that is able to build you up and give you an inheritance with all those he has set apart for himself. – Acts 20:28-32 NLT***

- The church needs leaders
- My job is to raise up new leaders
- Paul was passing the baton on to others
- He would finish his leg of the race, but there were more laps to run



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HOMEWORK

WEEK 9: FELLOW APOSTLES, FALSE ACCUSATIONS, AND FURIOUS ADVERSARIES – Acts 21-23

As usual, be sure and read through the entirety of Acts 21-23 sometime this week. Take note of any verses, words or phrases that jump out at you. Consider what events or circumstances are significant in these chapters. Use the space below to record your thoughts:

Go back and read Acts 9:1-16. What does this passage tell us about the future ministry of Saul?

Read 2 Corinthians 11:21-29. Make a list of all the things Paul suffered as a result of his missionary endeavors: _____

In chapter 22 of Acts, immediately after his arrest, Paul shares the story of his conversion to a crowd of Jews gathered at the Temple in Jerusalem. Then in chapter 23, he addressed a gathering of the Jewish religious leaders, including the high priest and the members of the Sanhedrin. Read verses 1:11. What does Paul do and say in the time he has before these men who held his fate in their hands? _____

Look at verses 12-22 of chapter 23. What is the outcome of Paul's faithful representation of Christ and his bold presentation of the Gospel? _____

According to Acts 23:6, what does Paul give as the reason for his treatment by the religious leaders?

Should we expect the same kind of treatment from the world when we share the good news regarding Jesus Christ? If so, what form(s) might our persecution take? _____

Read Matthew 10:16-23. What does Jesus promise will happen to His disciples and us? How does that make you feel? _____

Take some time to read the attached article, called, "Persecution in the Early Church" by Rick Wade.

Persecution in the Early Church – How Persecution Strengthens the Church.

By Rick Wade

Background

Things are a bit tougher for Christians in our society today than a few decades ago, aren't they? At times like this, it's probably good to get some perspective. I think any of us, once we knew what the early church experienced—and, indeed, what Christians in other parts of the world are experiencing now—would find ourselves looking a bit sheepish if caught complaining about our lot.

In this article, we'll look at the persecution our brothers and sisters faced in the fledgling church in the first few centuries after Christ. We'll talk about some of the reasons for persecution, and identify some of the emperors under whom Christians suffered.

Reasons for Persecution

There are several important and interrelated reasons for the persecution of the early church.

First was the problem of identity. Christianity was identified at first with Judaism, but people quickly came to see it as a different religion. Jews were left alone for the most part; it seemed best to Rome to just confine them and leave them alone. Christianity, however, was a strange, new cult, and it began to spread across people groups and geographical boundaries.^{1} People felt threatened by this oddball new religion.

The next problem was with the religious activities of the Christians, with what they *did* do and *didn't* do.

In the days of the Roman empire, the worship of pagan gods and the emperor was a part of everyone's life. Two problems arose because of this. First, because they didn't participate in pagan rituals but tended to keep to themselves, Christians were considered anti-social. When the imperial police took an interest in them, they became more secretive which added fuel to the fire. They became associated with the *collegia*—clubs or secret societies—and leaders were suspicious of these groups because of the threat of sedition.^{2} Second, since Christians wouldn't join in with the religious activities which were believed to placate the gods, they became a threat to the very well-being of the community. Writing in about A.D. 196, Tertullian said, "The Christians are to blame for every public disaster and every misfortune that befalls the people. If the Tiber rises to the walls, if the Nile fails to rise and flood the fields, if the sky withholds its rain, if there is earthquake or famine or plague, straightway the cry arises: 'The Christians to the lions!'"^{3}

With respect to what they *did* do in their own religious practices, talk of eating the body and blood of Jesus, and the customary greeting with a kiss, brought charges of cannibalism and incest.^{4}

The third problem was the nature or content of Christians' beliefs. The historian Tacitus spoke of Christians as a "class hated for their abominations" who held to a "deadly superstition."^{5} A drawing found in Rome of a man with a donkey's head hanging on a cross gives an idea of what pagans thought of Christian beliefs.^{6}

Finally, Christians' reluctance to offer worship to the emperor and the gods was considered madness, considering what would happen to them if they didn't. Why not just offer a pinch of incense to the image of the emperor? In a pluralistic society, the narrowness of Christian beliefs seemed absurd, especially considering what would happen to Christians who *wouldn't* go along. In the opinion of the general populace, says F. F. Bruce, "such a crowd of wretches were plainly worthy of extermination, and any repressive measures that were taken against them by authority could be sure of popular approval."^{7}

Emperors

Let's turn now to a brief survey of some of the emperors under whom the church suffered persecution.

Nero

Claudius Nero was named emperor at age 16 and reigned from A.D. 54-68. He had about five good years under the guidance of such men as Seneca, the Roman poet and philosopher.^{8} But that all changed when he had his mother killed in A.D. 59. She was too powerful. Her "insanity and her fury at seeing her son slip out of her control" led Nero to believe she was a threat to his power.^{9} In A.D. 62 he had his wife killed so he could marry another woman. He later killed a brother and his teacher, Seneca.

Christians became the object of his ire following the Great Fire of Rome in A.D. 64. Some people suspected that Nero started the fire himself, so he pointed the accusing finger at Christians. The fact that he felt confident in doing this indicates the low regard in which people held Christians already.^{10} Historian Philip Schaff says that "Their Jewish origin, their indifference to politics and public affairs, their abhorrence of heathen customs, were construed into an '*odium generis humani*' (hatred of the human race), and this made an attempt on their part to destroy the city sufficiently plausible to justify a verdict of guilty."^{11} Schaff says that "there began a carnival of blood such as even heathen Rome never saw before or since....A 'vast multitude' of Christians was put to death in the most shocking manner."^{12} Some were crucified, some sewn up in animal skins and thrown to the dogs, some were covered in pitch, nailed to wooden posts, and burned as torches.^{13} It was in the fallout of this that Peter and Paul gave their lives for their Savior, probably within a year of each other.^{14}

Nero apparently took his own life in A.D. 68 when the Senate and the patricians turned against him.^{15}

Trajan

Emperor Trajan ruled from A.D. 98-117. One of his governors, a man called Pliny the Younger, wrote to Trajan seeking advice on what to do with the Christians. They were becoming very numerous, and Pliny thought the pagan religions were being neglected. He began sentencing Christians who refused to honor the gods and the emperor to death. Pliny believed that, even if the Christians' practices weren't too bad, just their obstinacy was enough to be rid of them.^{16} Should he sentence them for carrying the name *Christian* only, or did they have to commit specific criminal acts?^{17}

Trajan responded with a kind of "don't ask, don't tell" policy. "They must not be ferreted out," he said. But if someone made a credible charge against a Christian, the Christian should be sentenced unless he or she recanted and gave proof by invoking pagan gods.^{18}

Persecution was especially bad in Syria and Palestine during Trajan's reign. In 107 he went to Antioch and demanded that everyone sacrifice to the gods. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch and pupil of the apostle John, refused and was martyred by being thrown to wild animals.^{19} Ignatius wrote this to Polycarp, another disciple of John, on his way to Rome: "Let the fire, the gallows, the wild beasts, the breaking of bones, the pulling asunder of members, the bruising of my whole body, and the torments of the devil and hell itself come upon me, so that I may win Christ Jesus."^{20}

Hadrian

Trajan's ruling was carried on by the next few emperors. Emperor Hadrian, "the most brilliant of the Roman emperors," says Will Durant,^{21} required specific charges against Christians as well. He didn't allow governors "to use mere clamorous demands and outcries" as a basis for judgment. Furthermore, if anyone brings a charge against Christians "merely for the sake of libelling [*sic*] them," the governor was to "proceed against that man with heavier penalties, in accordance with his heinous guilt."^{22} There were to be no frivolous lawsuits.

However, Christians still needed to prove loyalty to the state and the pagan religions. Hadrian hated Jews, and was somewhat "indifferent to Christianity from ignorance of it."^{23} Philip Schaff tells us that "he insulted the Jews and the Christians alike by erecting temples of Jupiter and Venus over the site of the temple and the supposed spot of the crucifixion."^{24} Not all officials required Christians to denounce Christ. All they wanted was homage to the divine character of the emperor ("the personal embodiment of the sovereign state"^{25}). "It was beside the point for Christians to argue that the malicious tales circulated about them were false,...Deeds, not words, were required by the state; and if they were in fact loyal citizens, as they protested, there was a simple way of demonstrating their loyalty; let them offer a pinch of incense in honour of the Emperor, let them swear by his divinity, let them invoke him as 'Lord.'"^{26}

Antonius Pius

The policy of not actively pursuing Christians was continued under Antonius Pius who ruled from A.D. 138-161. During the reigns of emperors such as Hadrian and Antonius, however, Christians sometimes suffered persecution at the hands of the local townspeople without any direct encouragement from government officials. During Antonius' reign, Polycarp, a pupil of the apostle John, was martyred in Asia during one such outburst of violence.^{27} After this persecution settled down somewhat. The execution of this 86 year old man seemed to turn the tide against persecution for a time.^{28}

Marcus Aurelius

In A.D. 161 Marcus Aurelius took power and reigned until 180. It was during his reign that Justin Martyr met his death.^{29}

Although he didn't directly lead persecutions against Christians, he had no sympathy for them because he saw them as being disgustingly superstitious. We're told that "a law was passed under his reign, punishing every one with exile who should endeavor to influence people's mind by fear of the Divinity, and this law was, no doubt, aimed at the Christians."^{30} F. F. Bruce says that the Christians' "very resoluteness in the face of suffering and death, which might in itself have won respect from a Stoic, was explained not as commendable fortitude but as perverse obstinacy.... Marcus despised what seemed to him the crass superstition of the Christian beliefs, which disqualified them from the respect due to others who maintained their principles at the cost of life itself."^{31} For Aurelius, it was good to die for something significant, but not for something as silly as what the Christians believed. Furthermore, Christians went to their executions with a show of willingness that he considered theatrical display which was anathema to the calm spirit appreciated by the Stoics.

During Aurelius' reign Christians were blamed for a number of natural disasters because they wouldn't sacrifice to the gods.^{32} In A.D. 177, in Gaul, horrible persecution broke out in a wave of mob violence. Slaves were tortured to give testimony against their masters.^{33} "The corpses of the martyrs, which covered the streets," says Philip Schaff, "were shamefully mutilated, then burned, and the ashes cast into the Rhone, lest any remnants of the enemies of the gods might desecrate the soil."^{34} It is said that the courage of a slave girl named Blandina "strengthened all the others; her tormentors exhausted themselves in their attempts to make her renounce Christ."^{35} "At last," Schaff tells us, "the people grew weary of slaughter," and the persecutions died down.^{36}

Septimius Severus

Another emperor under whom Christians suffered terribly was Septimius Severus who ruled from 193-211. Writing during his reign, Clement of Alexandria said, "Many martyrs are daily burned, confined, or beheaded, before our eyes."^{37}

In 202 Septimius enacted a law prohibiting the spread of Christianity and Judaism. This was the first universal decree forbidding conversion to Christianity.^{38} Violent persecutions broke out in Egypt and North Africa.^{39} Leonides, the father of Origen, a Christian apologist, was beheaded. Origen himself was spared because his mother hid his clothes.^{40} A young girl was cruelly tortured, then burned in a kettle of burning pitch with her mother.^{41} A poignant story of the breaking down of class distinctions in the suffering church comes out of the persecution in Carthage. It is reported that Perpetua, a young noblewoman, and Felicitas, a slave girl, held hands and exchanged a kiss before being thrown to wild animals at a public festival.^{42}

Persecutions abated somewhat soon after Septimius died, but resumed with a vengeance under Decius Trajan.

Decius Trajan

In his few short years on the throne, Emperor Decius Trajan undertook to restore the old Roman spirit. In A.D. 250 he published an edict calling for a return to the pagan state religion. Local commissioners were appointed to enforce the ruling. According to Philip Schaff, "This was the signal for a persecution which, in extent, consistency, and cruelty, exceeded all before it." It was the first to extend over the whole empire, so it produced more martyrs than any other persecution.^{43}

When people were suspected of being Christians, they were given the opportunity of offering sacrifice to the gods before the commissioners. Certificates were issued to prove a person's loyalty to the pagan religions.^{44} Many Christians gave in to the pressure. Those who didn't were put in prison and repeatedly questioned. Rulers weren't looking for martyrs; they wanted to see the Christians conform.^{45} Christians who stood their ground were subject to confiscation, exile, torture, imprisonment, and death.^{46} Some rushed forward "to obtain the confessor's or martyr's crown."^{47} Some, however, obtained certificates through bribery or forgery. Those who offered sacrifices were excommunicated.

In 251 Decius died, but persecution continued as Christians were blamed for invasions by the Goths and for natural disasters.

Diocletian

During the years 303-311, the church endured persecutions so terrible that all before were forgotten.^{48} Historian Philip Schaff saw this as the final struggle between the pagan Roman Empire and the rule of Christ in the West. The primary sources of persecution were Diocletian and Galerius.

Diocletian came to power in 284, and for twenty years upheld edicts of toleration made by a previous emperor. His wife and daughter were Christians, as were most of his court officers and eunuchs.^{49}

But Diocletian allowed himself to be persuaded by two of his co-regents to turn on the Christians. Four edicts were issued in A.D. 303 and 304. "Christian churches were to be burned," Schaff tells us, "all copies of the Bible were to be burned; all Christians were to be deprived of public office and civil rights; and last, all, without exception, were to sacrifice to the gods upon pain of death."^{50} A fifth edict was issued by co-regent Galerius in 308 ordering that all men, with wives, children, and servants, were to offer sacrifice to the gods, "and that all provisions in the markets should be sprinkled with sacrificial wine."^{51} As a result, Christians either had to commit apostasy or starve. Says Schaff: "All the pains, which iron and steel, fire and sword, rack and cross, wild beasts and beastly men could inflict, were employed"^{52} against the church. Executioners grew tired with all the work they had to do.

The tide finally turned in the terrible struggle between paganism and Christianity in 311 when Galerius admitted defeat in trying to bring Christians back to the pagan religions. He gave Christians permission to meet as long as they didn't disturb the order of the state. He even requested that they pray to their God for the welfare of the state.

Some persecution followed under a few other emperors, but the fire was almost out on the old Roman Empire. In 313 Constantine, the emperor in the west, issued the Edict of Milan which moved from hostile neutrality to friendly neutrality toward Christians.^{53} He declared himself a follower of the God of Christianity. In 324 he became emperor of the whole Roman world, and published a new edict of toleration which was to cover the entire empire.

Reflections

In his work called *Apology*, the Latin apologist Tertullian made this now-famous comment: "The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed."^{54} Somehow, the suffering of some Christians spurred others to more faithful living. The apostle Paul noted that "most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear" (Phil. 1:14). Through all the terrible persecutions of the early centuries the church continued to grow.

This hasn't been as significant a principle for Christians in America because Christianity was for most of our history the religion of the land. Of course, that doesn't mean that even most Americans have been Christians at any given time. Nonetheless, our worldview was grounded in Christian beliefs, and Christianity had a prominent place in our cultural life.

But that's changed now. Far from holding a privileged place in our cultural life, Christianity now is often portrayed as an oppressive bully out to make people's lives miserable. No matter what issue is raised, any view which has its roots in Christian theology arouses suspicion.

In the first century A.D. it was easy for the general populace to believe Nero when he accused Christians of causing the Great Fire in Rome because Christians were thought of as haters of the human race (*odium generis humani*). Theologian Harold O. J. Brown sees similarities between that attitude and the attitude of people toward Christians today in America.^{55} So, for example,

objections to homosexuality draw charges of hate mongering. When a homosexual is murdered, the finger of blame is pointed at Christians for creating a “climate of hate.” Attempts at saving the lives of the unborn are portrayed as attempts to make life difficult for women in crisis. Of course, over-zealous Christians don’t help any when they blow up an abortion clinic or shoot an abortionist.

The general secular attitude today seems to be that it’s okay for Christians to have their beliefs, as long as they at least give lip service to certain trendy ideals: gay rights, abortion rights, and religious pluralism, to name a few. Not much different than the attitude in the early church, is it? “Believe in your God if you want, but be sure to worship ours, too.” By God’s grace we don’t endure serious suffering, at least not yet. But Christians in other nations are experiencing it. In Sudan, people are forced to become Muslims or pay for their resistance with low paying jobs, slavery, rape, and even death. This is not the only country where Christians suffer severely for their faith.^{56}

In my opinion, the negative attitude in our country is likely to get worse before it gets better. But history has shown that persecution ultimately strengthens the church. It removes the nominal Christians, and it emboldens others to both stand firm when persecuted and become more aggressive in proclamation. If persecution comes to us, the church will remain, although church membership rolls will probably become shorter.

Are we prepared to truly suffer for our faith? Do we *really* believe what we say we believe? If persecution ever comes, God grant us the faithfulness to stand firm. And let’s not forget to pray and work to help our brothers and sisters who are suffering for the name of Jesus Christ.

Notes

1. F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame: The Rise and Progress of Christianity from its First Beginnings to the Conversion of the English* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973),165. 2. *Ibid.*, 169.

3. *Ibid.*, 180.

4. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity, 2nd ed.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 559

5. *Ibid.*, 556. See also Bruce, 165.

6. *Ibid.*, 559-61.

7. Bruce, 165.

8. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. 1, Apostolic Christianity: A.D. 1-100* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 378.

9. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “Nero,” by Jean- Charles Pichon.

10. Bruce, 165.

11. Schaff, 381. Harold O. J. Brown sees a similar attitude developing today. See his "Odium Humani Generis," *The Religion and Society Report*, 16, no. 3 (March, 1999): 1-4.
12. Ibid., 381.
13. Ibid., 381-82.
14. Ibid., 252, 329-330.
15. *EB*, "Nero."
16. Bruce, 171.
17. Oxford Dictionary, "Pliny."
18. Bruce, 171.
19. John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, trans. Marie Gentert King (Old Tappan, NJ: Spire Books, 1968), 16.
20. Foxe, 17.
21. Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization: Pt. III, Caesar and Christ: A history of Roman Civilization and of Christianity from their beginnings to A.D. 325* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), 413.
22. Ferguson, 569.
23. Schaff, Vol. II, 49-50.
24. Ibid., II:50.
25. Bruce, 173.
26. Ibid., 173.
27. Ibid., 174.
28. Ibid., 174.
29. Schaff, 56.
30. Ibid., II:54.
31. Bruce, 178.
32. Schaff, 55.
33. Ibid., 55.
34. Ibid., 56.
35. Bruce, 178-79.

36. Schaff, 56.

37. Ibid., 57.

38. Bruce, 179.

39. Schaff, 57.

40. Bruce, 179.

41. Schaff, 58.

42. Ibid., 58; Bruce, 180.

43. Ibid., 60.

44. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Vol.1, Beginnings to 1500*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 87-88.

45. Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 455-56.

46. Schaff, II:60; Fox, 457; Latourette, 88.

47. Ibid., II:60-61.

48. Ibid., II:64-65.

49. Ibid., II:65.

50. Ibid., II:66.

51. Ibid., II:68.

52. Ibid., II:68.

53. Ibid., II:72.

54. Tertullian, *Apology*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., (Albany, Ore.: AGES Software, 1997), 102.

55. Harold O. J. Brown, "Odium Humani Generis," *The Religion and Society Report*, 16, no. 3 (March, 1999): 1-4.

56. If you'd like to know more you can contact Voice of the Martyrs at 1-800-747-0085, or find their web site at www.persecution.com.

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