

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 5

Martyrs – Part Two

Last week, we looked at the earliest Christian martyrs set out in the New Testament. We also peered into history to try and discover what happened to other notable New Testament figures, namely the apostles.

This week, our lesson starts with examining the reasons for early Christian persecution. Next week, we hope to look into the mindset of an early martyr as we study seven letters Ignatius wrote weeks before his execution as well as an account of the execution of Polycarp.

WHY WERE CHRISTIANS PERSECUTED?

When examining the reasons behind the suffering and martyrdom of Christians in the early church, we must look into several different areas because the early Christians suffered death at the hands of multiple interests. Our examination will cover the Jewish persecution of the church, persecution arising from local interests, and government sponsored persecution. Each of these interests exacted a price of blood on the church.

As we look into these sources of persecution, we are reminded of Paul writing about the scandal of Christianity in 1 Corinthians. Paul explained that “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18). How was this true? Consider the question in light of history’s lessons on persecutions.

Jewish Persecution

The Jewish persecution of the early church arose not only in Jerusalem, but also in other cities around the Roman world. As we noted last week, Jerusalem was the site where first blood was spilled. The Jewish authorities and Temple cult adherents martyred Stephen for his faith. We also noted the other persecutions that came directly or indirectly out of the religious authorities in Jerusalem.

The persecutions of Judaism went beyond Jerusalem. Paul was subject to persecution and attempts on his life by the Jews in Thessalonica and other places as well. When Paul wrote Second Corinthians, he had already received 39 lashes from the Jews 5 times (2 Cor. 11:24). We can read of Paul’s beatings and persecutions in Acts 14 and Acts 17.

In the Corinthian passage quoted earlier, Paul went on to specify that “Christ crucified” was a “stumbling block to Jews” (1 Cor. 1:23). Why? What was it about Christianity that brought out such harsh judgments from some of the Jews? Many reasons! We isolate several of the more prominent ones for this lesson.

First, we note that Christianity’s teaching of justification by faith in a crucified savior was offensive to the prevailing legalism that pervaded much of Judaism.¹ A second source of great affront to the ruling Jews was the threat of Christianity to much of the power structure of New Testament Judaism. A third aspect of Christianity (related somewhat to the second) was the gentile inclusion in the kingdom. Ethnic pride of distinction as a Jew was diluted by a faith that treated Gentiles as full equals with no distinction. A fourth reason was simple jealousy (Acts 5:17). Christianity brought large numbers of Jews into a faith that reduced the ranks of normative Judaism, as people followed miracle-working apostles preaching a crucified savior. Similarly, there was great jealousy and fear arising from the popularity of Jesus himself. Jesus’ opponents were repeatedly described as “afraid of the people” (Lk 22:2).

From the normative Jewish perspective, Christianity was a cultic aberration of the faith handed down and followed for thousands of years. Rather than upholding the core Jewish doctrine of one God (Dt. 6:4), some taught Christianity seduced the people into believing there were three Gods, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. From this perspective, Christianity, in essence, was tantamount to the idolatry of Israel’s prior days that brought captivity and God’s harsh judgment on the people as a nation. What was worse (at least in a more earthly way) was the effect that Christianity was having on the masses. As people moved to faith, the community and social fabric was changing. This was the Jesus who taught worship in spirit and truth rather than location! (Jn 4:21-24) This was the Jesus who threw moneychangers from the temple courts (Jn 2:13-16). This was the Jesus who had thousands following him rather than the conventional Jewish hierarchy (Jn 6:5,10). For these reasons, Christ himself was delivered to death. This left the establishment a dilemma: allow a cultic interpretation that bred radical social change or figure out a way to stop it. Wasn’t it

¹ Oral rabbinic teaching was reduced to writing in the third century in *Pirke Aboth*. In the first chapter, Simeon Ha-tzadek (Simon the Just) taught the world stood on three things: The Law (Torah), Temple Worship, and showing kindness (1.2). Paul would agree with kindness (love) but would say we “stand” on the grace/gift of God which was Jesus Christ crucified, not the Torah or Temple.

more expedient for one man to die than for the masses that might from the hand of God's judgment or the hands of Rome? (Jn 11:49; 18:14)

Consider the speech Tertullus (the prosecuting lawyer presenting the case against Paul before the Roman Governor over Jerusalem) gave. In Acts 24:1-9, the lawyer speaks of the "long period of peace" under the Governor. But, Paul was accused of being a "troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world." In fact, "he even tried to desecrate the temple. So we seized him." The lawyer argued that arresting and eliminating Paul would best keep the Roman peace.

The Christian perspective offered no solution to the establishment's dilemma. For in fact, Jesus did bring a kingdom that would upset the religious order of the day. Brother would be set against brother; child would be turned against parent (Mt. 10:35-37; Lk 14:26). For the simple truth was that the one God Israel worshipped, the one true God, was more complicated than Israel supposed. His nature and composition was not one as an individual human is one. The one God was what we see and understand as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is not three Gods, but three essences of one God.

Similarly, the Christian faith would not budge from teaching against the temple as an endpoint. The sacrifices that paved the way for much of the temple revenue were past their time. Christ died as the real sacrifice for sins. This was one death for all sins, a one-time event that animal sacrifices forecasted. Since that reality had occurred, there was no further need for the foreshadowing (Heb 10:1-4). The effects of Christianity did not stop there. Much of the legalistic requirements Jewish law imposed, the Christian community saw as a lifestyle choice (for example, the dietary laws) rather than a requirement of holiness (see 1 Cor 8; Acts 10, etc.). Perhaps most egregiously, Christianity taught that God was interested directly in all peoples of all nations (Gal 3:28; Acts 10). The Jews were not elite before God as they had believed themselves to be. Moreover, Christianity taught that God would relate to others directly based on their faith in him rather than Gentiles first becoming Jews and THEN relating to God through the legalistic Jewish religious system (Rom 3:21-23).

And so it was that many Jews persecuted Christians. Eventually, the Jews even went so far as to rewrite their 18 prayers/benedictions to specifically exclude worshippers of "the Nazarene." (See lesson 1 or 2)

Local Interest's Persecution

As the church spread throughout the Mediterranean world, various local issues and personalities brought out persecution as well. In the New Testament, we read of the problems Paul faced from economic interests in Ephesus, as the growing faith was perceived to affect the trade in idols (Acts 19).

We have a number of accounts of public hostility and hatred toward the Christian faith and church. Some hostility was no doubt based upon false assumptions about what Christians were doing. Christians certainly did not worship the gods of the local areas. Any natural disasters were often blamed for that "atheism." Tertullian made note of this belief writing:

They think the Christians the cause of every public disaster, of every affliction with which the people are visited. If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not send its waters up over the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is famine or pestilence, straightway the cry is, "Away with the Christians to the lion!" (Tertullian, Apology, Ch 40).

Similarly, Christians had closed communion. So, no one knew "for sure" what was going on but the rumors were rife. "Eating flesh and drinking blood" was a common rumor. Without understanding the true nature of communion, the church was an alleged home for cannibalism. Whether such rumors were true or not,² however, the mere fact that Christians were a "secret society" with closed meetings was never too popular with the masses!

Christians were also accused of practicing incest, no doubt from the kiss of peace bestowed by the faithful to each other (Rom. 16:16), all while calling each other "brother" and "sister." The church at Lyons commented on the problems these perceptions played in the martyrdoms there.

²Certainly, we know that orthodox Christianity would never remotely be connected with such atrocious sins. But as we will learn a few lessons later, there a number of heretical groups that called themselves Christians, even though their doctrine and practices were far from Christ's teaching and the Apostolic message. There is some fairly compelling evidence that some Gnostic groups did partake in orgiastic and perhaps even cannibalistic practices. The orthodox church condemned such as heretical and Satanic, but the outside world was not always in a position to know the difference.

Outside the faith, others commented on these practices as well. Tacitus, a Roman who wrote history around 117 A.D., claimed that Christians were “hated for their abominations.”³ Toward the end of the second century, a Christian defender (“apologist”) named Minucius Felix wrote a defense of the faith entitled, “Octavius.” The book is a discussion between a pagan (Caecilius Natalis) and a Christian (Octavius Januarius) with Minucius arbitrating and recording the discussion. The pagan gives a long list of atrocities he believes Christians commit.⁴

Early Roman graffiti (now in Rome’s Kircher Museum) was discovered in the 19th century showing a crucified donkey with the inscription, “Alexamenos worships his God.” Although the exact meaning of the ridicule is debated (having been lost to the centuries), the occurrence itself is significant.

Government Sponsored Persecution

Of course, one of the most significant government persecutions of the early church was a “local issue” – the burning of Rome and Nero’s blaming of the church. This was a local issue with worldwide repercussions.

³ The passage is in the context of Tacitus explaining Nero’s blaming of Christians for the burning of Rome (*Annals* 15.44).

⁴ The list is appalling but insightful for the rumors about Christians and their secret activities. In chapter 9, he quotes the pagan: “They know one another by secret marks and insignia, and they love one another almost before they know one another. Everywhere also there is mingled among them a certain religion of lust, and they call one another promiscuously brothers and sisters.... I know not whether these things are false; certainly suspicion is applicable to secret and nocturnal rites; and he who explains their ceremonies by reference to a man punished by extreme suffering for his wickedness, and to the deadly wood of the cross, appropriates fitting altars for reprobate and wicked men, that they may worship what they deserve. Now the story about the initiation of young novices is as much to be detested as it is well known. An infant covered over with meal, that it may deceive the unwary, is placed before him who is to be stained with their rites: this infant is slain by the young pupil, who has been urged on as if to harmless blows on the surface of the meal, with dark and secret wounds. Thirstily--O horror!--they lick up its blood; eagerly they divide its limbs. By this victim they are pledged together; with this consciousness of wickedness they are covenanted to mutual silence. Such sacred rites as these are more foul than any sacrileges. And of their banqueting it is well known all men speak of it everywhere; even the speech of our Cirtensian testifies to it. On a solemn day they assemble at the feast, with all their children, sisters, mothers, people of every sex and of every age. There, after much feasting, when the fellowship has grown warm, and the fervor of incestuous lust has grown hot with drunkenness, a dog that has been tied to the chandelier is provoked, by throwing a small piece of offal beyond the length of a line by which he is bound, to rush and spring; and thus the conscious light being overturned and extinguished in the shameless darkness, the connections of abominable lust involve them in the uncertainty of fate.”

The events started on the night of July 18 in the year 64 A.D. The fire alarm was sounded in Rome, a city of some one million people. The fire broke out among the spice-booths and stalls around the Great Circus. No doubt fed by the oils and other combustible items for sale, the fire quickly spread to many of the timbered homes and buildings that were closely crowded together. The fire spread to the poorest corners of the city and burned for almost a full week. Rome had 15 districts; all but 4 were severely burned. The death and destruction produced a great stench. People were desolate (and uninsured!). Beyond homes, temples of great import to the people were burned to the ground.

These tragic events occurred at a critical point in the reign of Nero. Nero was never a popular Caesar among the citizenry or the Senate. Nero had recently seen to his mother's murder as well as his wife's, and the people's faith in his integrity was not too great! Then, the rumors flamed hot on the tale of the fire. Didn't people see Nero's servants running through the slums with torches carrying flames further? Nero had often said, "A ruler can do anything he wishes!" The Roman historians Suetonius and Tacitus record many more "reasons" offered that Nero was behind the conflagration. Nero did not help the public concern when he immediately announced a rebuilding plan, adding to the rumors of his guilt.

Nero needed a diversion, and he needed it fast. Christians provided the perfect scapegoat. With their secret meetings, the rumors of their atrocious activities, their teaching of another king, and the coming destruction of this world with fire (2 Thes. 1:7-9), they made a convincing scapegoat. Clement, Tacitus, and others recount the terrors inflicted on the Christians. In Nero's Circus (which was where St. Peter's stands today), Christians were tortured, beheaded, and crucified. One evening, Nero took out his chariot and road down an avenue lit with torches that were actually Christians coated with tar and pitch and set on fire hanging from posts. They were sown into animal skins and released to run before starving mastiffs that hunted and devoured them.

This persecution ultimately cost the lives of Peter and Paul among many others. Before his martyrdom, Peter wrote his epistle explaining the Christian "suffers grief in all kinds of trial" so that faith "may be proved genuine" and "result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Pet. 1:6-7). He added, "Do not repay evil with evil...but with blessing" (3:9). Finally, "do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering...but rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ" (4:12-13).

Nero was not the only Roman authority to persecute the church. With Nero, Christianity became a *prava religio* (an “evil religion”) and was no longer considered a *religio licita* (a “legal religion”). Another emperor arose toward the end of the first century, Domitian. Still in his 20’s Domitian took the throne after the death of his brother Titus in 81 A.D. History shows that Domitian was disliked by many and was suspicious of most. He reigned until 96 amidst great discord and political intrigue. By the time of his reign (a mere 27 years since Nero had passed) Christianity had grown rampantly into the highest ranks of the Roman Empire. Most scholars are convinced that a number of members of the aristocracy and even the house of Domitian had converted to the faith. Domitian set about to punish and execute Christians as he willed.⁵

Domitian went after Christian and Jew for “ritual taxes” to be paid in homage to the pagan god Jupiter. Of course, some Christians found this an outrageous form of idolatry to be avoided. Domitian used the charge of atheism to punish the faithful. Atheism, in the criminal sense of Rome, meant a refusal to acknowledge the official gods.

By 112, we have a clear indication of the Empire’s quandary regarding persecution of Christians. Trajan was emperor at the time. Pliny the Younger was the official in what is now Turkey (although he was born on Lake Como where George Clooney keeps a home!) on the southern coast of the Black Sea. His letters indicate that Pliny was a good ruler who was concerned about justice and fairness. Similarly, the Emperor Trajan was clearly a solid leader who cared about right and wrong. We maintain in our 21st century legal system an idea Trajan first espoused, “it is better to let a guilty man go unpunished than to sentence someone who is innocent” (Trajan to Frontonus, Dig. L. XLVIII, Tit. 19, 1. 5. a).

Yet, for all this goodness and fairness in these men, we have an interesting exchange of correspondence that tells us much about the persecution of the church. Pliny spent a year trying to get things organized for the government in Pontus and Bithynia. In the process, Pliny wrote the

⁵ While some scholars question whether Domitian persecuted the church, the evidence of such persecution is strong. The letter of Clement covered in earlier lessons was written in the midst of persecution during Domitian. Similarly, the book of Revelation was composed at this time and refers to the persecution of the churches in Asia Minor (Rev 1:9; 2:3-13). Eusebius and other church historians record the persecutions as well (*Church History* 3.18.4).

Emperor with questions on handling certain matters⁶. One of those matters was Christians. Pliny had already been sentencing those who embraced Christianity, but he had a difficult time seeing what they did as wrong. Certainly, the Christians taught a faith that changed the social order. People were leaving the temples with the corresponding loss in trade associated with the temples and their sacrifices. But, the Christians were not engaged in any offensive behavior that Pliny could identify. Pliny asked if the situation was more fully understood in Rome.

Pliny followed what some scholars believe to have been a Neronian law and made decisions that “No one is allowed to be a Christian.”⁷ When Christians were identified, Pliny had a three-prong procedure. First, he would question the individual if they were Christians having first warned them if they answered “yes” they would be executed. Pliny was in the practice of asking this question a second and third time. If they continued to admit to Pliny that they were in fact Christians, then Pliny had them executed (except for the Roman citizens that would be sent for appeal to Caesar). Those who would not admit to being Christians were then given a test. Pliny would have them brought before statues of the emperor⁸ and certain other gods. Pliny would have them offer incense, make an offertory prayer and then curse the name of Jesus.

In spite of Pliny’s aggressive actions, the numbers of Christians were not subsiding. Pliny was getting mass numbers, including men, women, and children of all ages and social classes. Pliny was not about to kill them all without thoroughly examining the facts that made these folks criminals. As Pliny attempted to discern the truth of the various rumors about the “vile practices” of the faithful, he could find no real crime. The best he could

⁶ Pliny was quite a letter writer. We have his letters today that allow us to follow his own career in almost biographical form. He was born in 62 and appointed to his task in Turkey in 109 or 110. He was coming off a good job as head of the Roman sewer system! (Technically, “President of the Curators of the Tiber” – his job included maintaining the riverbanks of the Tiber as well as the sewer system.)

⁷ There is a good indication that the actual crime that incited Trajan and Pliny against the Christians was the mere gathering together into a club or secret society. Trajan had banned clubs and societies as a source of disloyalties in the empire. Had Christians not been incessant about meeting together, they might have avoided some of the persecution. But, the faithful took their fellowship seriously and would “not give up meeting together” (Heb 10:25).

⁸ Emperor worship was in full bloom by the late first century. The Emperor was to be worship and proclaimed Lord, something Christians would not do. Pliny inserted a requirement of calling the Emperor Lord in his verification test to prove a person was not a Christian.

come up with was that the Christians were meeting together before daybreak, singing songs to the glory of Christ, swearing never to steal, murder or commit adultery, eating a common meal together, and assembling together regularly. For this they were criminals? It made no sense to Pliny.⁹

So Pliny asked, is the mere name “Christian” a punishable crime? Trajan responds briefly with three simple lines. Trajan says it is not necessary to seek Christians out. But, when they are found out, if they admit to being Christians, then they are to be punished. If the Christian will recant and pay homage to the Roman gods, then the crime is pardoned.¹⁰

It was under Trajan that we have the arrest and execution of Ignatius of Antioch. While going to Rome for his execution, Ignatius wrote seven letters that we have today. Those letters are not just profound in what they say, but in how they say it. The letters give us insight into the mind and heart of a Christian on his way to his martyrdom. One of the holy ones that saw Ignatius while headed to Rome for execution was a man named Polycarp. Polycarp would himself suffer martyrdom 50 years later. The martyrdom of Polycarp was reported to the faithful communities in a letter

⁹ In the Fall of 112, Pliny wrote: “To the Emperor Trajan: It is my invariable rule, Sir, to refer to you in all matters where I feel doubtful; for who is more capable of removing my scruples, or informing my ignorance? Having never been present at any trials concerning those who profess Christianity, I am unacquainted not only with the nature of their crimes, or the measure of their punishment, but how far it is proper to enter into an examination concerning them. Whether, it is possible to restrain its progress. The temples, at least, which were once almost deserted, begin now to be frequented; and the sacred rites, after a long intermission, are again revived; while there is a general demand for the victims, which till lately found very few purchasers. From all this it is easy to conjecture what numbers might be reclaimed if a general pardon were granted to those who shall repent of their error” (Pliny Epistles 10.7).

¹⁰ Trajan’s response was quite short. It read: “Trajan to Pliny: You have adopted the right course, my dearest Secundus, in investigating the charges against the Christians who were brought before you. It is not possible to lay down any general rule for all such cases. Do not go out of your way to look for them. If indeed they should be brought before you, and the crime is proved, they must be punished; with the restriction, however, that where the party denies he is a Christian, and shall make it evident that he is not, by invoking our gods, let him (notwithstanding any former suspicion) be pardoned upon his repentance. Anonymous information ought not to be received in any sort of prosecution. It is introducing a very dangerous precedent, and is quite foreign to the spirit of our age.”

we still have today. Both of these martyrdoms deserve a closer examination. We will examine those next week.¹¹

We stop short if our discussion of governmental persecution ends with Nero, Domitian and Trajan. There were numerous other Roman rulers who persisted in persecuting the church throughout the 100's, 200's, and early 300's. During this time period, a number of Christians began writing defenses of the faith, often sending them to the actual Roman Emperors. These defenses were designed to help stop the state persecution. We plan to discuss them in future classes, so we will not go into more detail at this point.

Similarly, the official persecution was supported by thought leaders outside the structure of the government itself. So, we will read in 170-80 where Celsus took on the Christian faith, attacking it intellectually. Likewise, Lucian of Samosata wrote of Christians as the cult de jour, taking them to task for their practices. These writers were similarly addressed by Christians in written defenses of the faith that we will study later.

POINTS FOR HOME

Shortly before his martyrdom, Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:12, "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." It is fact, not possibility. The persecution might be literal martyrdom, but more likely it will be less costly in mortal terms. It might be mockery; it might be shunning; it might be economic.

The truth of the gospel is not convenient. And when folks are confronted with Jesus as the truth, and the way (not merely an option!) to God, it demands a response. For some, the response might be faith; for others, something more visceral.

1. Following God will win many to Christ.
2. It will also annoy and offend others.
3. Persecution should not surprise us.
4. Neither should it stop us.
5. The question is, if we are NOT persecuted, why not?

¹¹ For any who want to "read ahead," check out The Letters of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch and The Martyrdom of Polycarp. Both are accessible in book form as part of the writings of the Apostolic Fathers. Both are also available for reading online at: www.ccel.org/fathers2/.