

# Life Notes

## THE HISTORY OF CHRIST'S CHURCH PART 2 Key Moments and Personalities

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### #25. The Persecution

#### 70 AD until 312 AD

"Eighty and six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong." "How then can I blaspheme my King and Savior? You threaten me with a fire that burns for a season, and after a little while is quenched; but you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment that is prepared for the wicked." - **Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna; burned at the stake, February 23, 155 AD**

During the second and third centuries, a persecution against Believers was unleashed that most Americans do not have perspective or experience to understand. Polycarp's familiar story sets the attack in a frame of reference that helps us understand the nature of what the church faced in the 250 years after the Apostolic Age came to an end. According to both Irenaeus and Tertullian, Polycarp was a disciple of the Apostle John, who ordained him as Bishop of Smyrna early in Polycarp's life. Since he was an old man, the magistrates considered mercy. "Simply swear allegiance to Caesar, and you can go home and die in peace." When the authorities appealed to the crowd, they shouted something like, "This is the father of the Christians. He is the destroyer of our gods!" So he was burned. Some accounts say the fire didn't affect him, so he was actually stabbed to death. Polycarp was one of the earlier martyrs to die under the hand of Rome during this period.

To understand the period of Roman persecution, we need to understand something about the Empire and its policies. We need to focus on eight factors.

1. Not every Emperor was a committed persecutor of Christians. If possible, the Romans made attempts to be tolerant of most religions that were in place at the time of their conquests. Though Israel was ultimately shattered by Rome nearly half a century after the destruction of the Temple, the Empire had labored long to work out a solution with the Jewish religious leaders. The Jews and the Christians had the same problem - they could not simply add Caesar to their list of gods in order to

live at peace. Such an action was beyond possibility because of the first and second commandments, both of which were observed by Jews and Christians.

2. The big problem for Christians came when it became obvious that they were not a sect of Judaism. Because of their unique customs and worship practices, the Jews were not seen as a threat to Rome. They were not active proselytizers. However, the Christians were determined to make Believers out of everyone they met. Like the Jews, they did not want to worship Caesar. Unlike the Jews, they also want everyone else to refuse to worship him.
3. The Christians were seen as counter-culture to Rome in a way that the Jews were not. Judaism was separate, but it was a separateness that kept them "unto themselves." Christians were separate, but in a way designed to bring others into their own distinctive light. Because of obedience to Christ's commands, the light of Christianity was seen as the opposite of pagan darkness. Christians could not partake in heathen blessings before meals. The gladiatorial games were seen as indecent and inhumane. Christians were required by Tertullian to not teach in schools if they were required to teach stories of Greek and Roman gods. Trade guilds often required allegiance to gods whom the Christians saw as demons. Life in the Roman era almost required Christians to separate themselves socially and economically from mainstream society.
4. Christians developed views regarding sex, slavery, and the treatment of children that ran counter to the Roman mindset. Slavery existed throughout the Empire, and many Believers were themselves slaves. But treatment was different in the home of a Christian. Thankfully, slavery would become unallowable in Christian homes, though the process took centuries. But in the days of Rome, slaves in Christian homes were to be treated as equals. Children preserved from the ravages of infanticide. Because of their Jewish roots, Christians were always cognizant of moral and sexual appropriateness. Simply put, the morality of Christians set them at odds with Rome in a drastic sense.
5. The first instance of Imperial persecution occurred under Nero's rule. In AD 64, Rome burned for six days and nights. Rumors circulated that Nero was responsible, possibly to facilitate a public housing renovation project. Nero's response was to blame the Christians. The result was a horrific persecution of Roman Believers. Some were used as human torches for the

Emperor's evening parties. Some were crucified. Others were sewn into skins of wild beasts, and fed to ravenous dogs. Women and children were tied to bulls and dragged to death. Christians died in cruel ways in various arenas and theaters throughout the domain of Rome.

6. While persecution under Nero (54-68 AD) and Domitian (84-96 AD) was more or less regional, in the middle of the third century, Decius and Valerian persecuted Christians on an Empire-wide basis, requiring sacrifices to the god Jupiter. Diocletian instituted the worst general persecution in 303, which lasted for 10 years, until Constantine came to power.
7. It should be noted that the primary charges against Christians were (1) incest, (2) atheism, and (3) cannibalism.
  - They were accused of incest simply because since they referred to each other as "brother and sister." Also, the Christian worship service was called "The Love Feast," and imaginations ran wild. The "Kiss of Peace," which was a Christian tradition established by Jesus that was virtually abandoned by churches because of the rumors that resulted.
  - Cannibalism was the result of the Lord's Table being observed and allowable only among Believers. The Christians freely admitted to eating flesh and drinking blood (of Christ - through the Communion elements). The Christians were also known for rescuing unwanted babies, and the accusation was that the infants were used for these cannibalistic feasts.
  - Strangely enough the charge of atheism was leveled not because they didn't believe God existed, but rather that they didn't believe *any other* God existed. The Roman mindset simply could not understand an "imageless god."
  - Another problem is that unlike Church services today, the persecution drove Christians to have gatherings that were private and often secret. This created wild imaginings that hounded Christians every step of the way. Tertullian wrote: **"If the Tiber floods the city, or if the Nile refuses to rise, or if the sky withholds its rain, if there is an earthquake, a famine, a pestilence, at once the cry is raised: 'Christians to the lion.'"**
8. The supreme cause of persecution was the requirement of emperor worship. This began as a simple act of appreciation for

the *pax Romana*, the societal stability that was a genuinely beneficent by-product of Roman occupation. By 29 BC, the first temple built specifically for Emperor Worship was built in Pergamum in Asia Minor. Early emperors were hesitant, if not resistant to the practice. Claudius (49-59 AD) refused, but by the time of Revelation, Pergamum was considered to be "Satan's Seat," probably a reference to Emperor Trajan's Temple. In 249, Decius made the worship of Caesar mandatory, with the single exception of the Jews (the Romans knew this was a battle that couldn't be won). The Christians were required to offer a pinch of incense and declare that "Caesar is Lord." Though the Believers would pray for Caesar, they would not pray to him.

In his excellent book, ***Church History in Plain Language***, Bruce Shelley writes: *"To the Christian, Jesus Christ, and He alone was Lord. That is why Rome regarded them as a band of potential revolutionaries threatening the very existence of the empire. In one sense Rome was right because many Christians considered this conflict of loyalties a cosmic struggle. The Revelation of John in the New Testament reflects the Christian response to the Imperial Cult in Asia Minor toward the end of the first century. John traces the oppression of Believers to the devil himself, to the great red dragon, who wages war against the saints through two agents, the beasts of Revelation 13. The first beast is from the sea, the imperial power. The second beast is from the land (the false prophet) or imperial worship. And what was the Christian defense against this attack from Rome? They conquered the dragon, John says, 'by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.'* Revelation 12:11

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