

Module: The New Testament

Session 28 – Persecution and Triumph (NT Era and Beyond)

Jesus (and the New Testament writers) taught that his followers would be persecuted.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:10-12)

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.” (John 15:18-20)

“You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.” (2 Timothy 3:10-13)

“Dear friends, don’t be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. Instead, be very glad - for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world. If you are insulted because you bear the name of Christ, you will be blessed, for the glorious Spirit of God rests upon you. If you suffer, however, it must not be for murder, stealing, making trouble, or prying into other people’s affairs. But it is no shame to suffer for being a Christian. Praise God for the privilege of being called by his name!” (1 Peter 4:12-16)

The early Christian community proclaimed God’s command to all nations to believe in Christ and live blameless lives, in preparation for His return. This message challenged people and social systems and inevitably led to confrontation. The first wave of persecution started with the stoning of Stephen in Jerusalem (see Acts 7). It continued sporadically until 313, when Emperor Constantine signed the Edict of Milan. In 380 Emperor Theodosius made Christianity the religion of the empire. After this, the focus shifted to persecution of alleged heretics within the church.



Depiction of Christians in the Colosseum

Persecution of Christians has continued in every century. For the purposes of this course, we will focus on persecution as Christianity and the New Testament were being rolled out.

Reasons for Persecution of Christians in New Testament Times:

- spiritual opposition (Ephesians 6:12)
- Jewish leaders continued opposition that flowed from the deaths of Stephen, James and others; this continued in Hellenic cities (Acts 7:54-60; 9:23-25; 14:1-7; 18:12-17; 24:27)
- fear of the unknown, of new exclusive teachings
 - Roman religion was polytheistic (many gods, temples, myths, ceremonies and sacrifices); Rome had accepted into its pantheon deities from the Italian tribes and from Asia Minor; in the provinces, the great territorial gods - such as Saturn in North Africa - were accepted as “legal religion”, on the grounds that their rites, even if barbarous, were sanctified by ancient traditions and could benefit the broader community; countless local gods and goddesses, worshiped by the ordinary inhabitants of the Greco-Roman world, were provided with classical equivalent names and worshiped as “Roman” deities; by contrast, many Romans thought that monotheism (ie one God, without idols) was akin to atheism = having no gods at all; the Greek poet Hesiod wrote that there were as many as 30,000 gods, so the absence of images in Christian communities made them objects of curiosity, or even seen as hostile to public order and divine favour
 - Jews were monotheistic, but were exempted for political reasons
 - opponents feared they would be punished by their gods for allowing a new religion to compete; in 111AD Pliny the Younger, Governor of Bithynia wrote to Emperor Trajan asking what to do with local Christians; there were so many of them that revered pagan temples were being abandoned entirely; Christians were blamed for natural disasters (including disease, famine and plague) and military defeats (the more the empire was Christianized, the more it lost territory; followers of the old deities claimed Rome was being punished for permitting the growth of Christianity)
 - Trajan confirmed that they were to be executed if identified



- persecution of Christians was popular (and was often officially encouraged/ sanctioned at the highest levels of government, including emperors; Christians were easy to pick out of the crowd, as the streets of ancient cities were littered with gods and it was impossible for them (when asked to prove that they believed in the gods) to refuse to offer sacrifices or incense or swear by the gods without being noticed; in addition to personal dangers facing individual followers of Jesus, meeting for corporate Christian worship was forbidden and Christian texts were destroyed
- ethnic divisions; rejection of a “foreign” religion; Roman religions were deemed to be superior/authentic to those of tribes in more remote parts of the empire
- persecution as a Jewish sect; while their monotheism was tolerated, the Jews were persecuted because of their history of rebellions against Rome and the political needs of the Flavian emperors; Roman authorities did not initially distinguish between Christianity and Judaism; once the two came to be recognized as distinct, Christianity was targeted as a “superstition” founded on the teachings of someone the Roman administration actually regarded as a convicted criminal
 - in 115AD, Tacitus wrote that “Christus, from whom the name Christians had its origin was executed by one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate,” Tacitus described the Christians as a “class hated for their abominations” and guilty of “hatred of the human race”. Theirs was not a “religion” but a “deadly superstition,” worthy of repression. There was no way their practice could be recognized as “legal religion” (*religio licita*)
- special interests protected religious and economic systems of their own; as Christians penetrated every level of society, throughout the empire, gaining in power, prestige and materially they were bound to attract opponents
- rulers were jealous of Christian allegiance to Christ; rulers in Rome were often cult figures in their own right; refusal to honour Caesar as God amounted to rebellion, or treason; Jesus, not Caesar, was now “kurios”, or Lord; allegiance to Christ alone set the scene for a great showdown

- Christians did not believe in the ultimate supremacy of citizenship of Rome
 - *“But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Savior. He will take our weak mortal bodies and change them into glorious bodies like his own, using the same power with which he will bring everything under his control.”* This was written to the church in Philippi (3:20, 21), a Roman city; it would have sounded like treason.
- rulers asserted the belief systems of the majority, for political and public security reasons; Christians were viewed as disturbing the peace; Christians opposed war, violence, common immoral practices
 - In 202 AD Septimus Severus sought to unite Rome under one religion, the worship of the Unconquered Sun; Jews and Christians refused to join in

“The blood of
 the martyrs
 is the seed
 of the Church”
 -Tertullian

- Christian teaching was misunderstood, eg allegations of cannibalism in connection with the Lord’s Supper (this continued throughout the Middle Ages)
- negative views about Christian exclusivism (John 14:6); Christians would not join in ceremonies/events worshipping pagan gods; this was seen as undermining social unity, order and established values, attracting the jealousy and anger of the gods (and their human agents) who were now being neglected
- fear of Christian prophecies about coming judgement
- the need for scapegoats, eg Nero’s persecution in 64AD because he needed people to blame for the fire of Rome (which many historians believe he started, to enable him to re-design the city); it was strategic and easy to blame the Christian community; after all, they talked about a fiery end to the world; it is believed that Paul was executed during this period of reprisals
- Christianity was often seen as a religion that appealed to slaves, uneducated, and the poor, it was therefore an inferior belief system; any systemic religion that gave hope to slaves (who could rebel) ultimately became a threat to public security

- Roman authorities were deeply suspicious of anything that looked like a secret society
- martyrdom was seen by some Christians as a sign confirming their devotion to Christ.

Roman Imperial Persecutions

- Nero (r. 54-68)
- Domitian (r. 81-96)
- Trajan (r. 98-117)
- Marcus Aurelius (r. 161-180)
- Decius Trajan (r. 249-251)
- Valerian (r. 253-260)
- Diocletian (r. 284-305)

What Forms Did Persecution Take?

Christians (from all social classes) were subject to violent suffering/death because of their testimony. (Depending on social status) forms of suffering included being:

- beheaded
- given to wild beasts in places of entertainment such as the Colosseum
- skinned alive
- stoned
- shot with arrows
- beaten to death
- burned alive
- boiled in oil
- dipped in oil and used as candles (under Nero)
- scourged, flogged to death
- starved to death
- crucified
- being dragged through the city (eg by horses) until death
- subjected to prolonged, difficult imprisonment in unhealthy conditions





Diocletian

Records from the early church tell of Christians who embraced martyrdom because they knew this was the short step to the presence of Christ. The word “witness” (eg Acts 1:8) comes from the Greek word for martyr. Christians expected suffering. Christ had died on the cross, so there was no higher honor than to imitate that death through accepting martyrdom (ie witness by shedding one’s own blood). “If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.” (1 Peter 4:16).

There are many accounts of believers who reported extra strength from the Holy Spirit as they faced persecution. Opposition spurred a generation of apologists who sought to explain Christianity in a way that could be broadly understood. For latter generations it also sparked a cult of Christian “saints”, the term being taken to mean “exceptional” Christians, rather than ordinary believers as inferred in the New Testament.

What about those who renounced their faith?

The records of early Christianity show that believers facing execution were often called on to renounce their faith, and to prove their return to true religion by sacrificing to the gods, declaring their devotion orally/visibly; those who refused were put to death; those who recanted and escaped reprisals were often shunned by the Christian community. Debates arose as to whether lapsed Christians (especially Christian leaders) could ever genuinely repent and be forgiven. Donatus (a Bishop of Carthage, died 355AD) taught that the validity of the sacraments depended on the moral character of the minister involved, and that those who had committed apostasy (fallen away) in the face of persecution, or betrayed fellow-Christians, had disqualified themselves from ministry.

Lessons for us

There was always a risk that the growth of the church, the decay in power of the ancient gods and diminution of persecution would ultimately lead to a drop-off in faith on the part of those who had, until then, been forced to choose for or against Christ in the face of suffering and death. Christianity became a religion, with a form and creed, not an active personal faith in Christ. False teaching and practice began to spring up. One of these was the emergence of clericalism, rigid systems of clergy, hierarchies and traditions in the church; forms of governance (even language) of the empire began to take hold in an increasingly organized (=respectable) church.

Cyprian (in the West) and Origen (in the East) spoke of a secular spirit that was creeping into the Christian community; of pride, materialism, luxury and covetousness of the clergy. Much of the church history that followed showed the worldliness into which a church not led by Godly men or women, or the Holy Spirit, could easily slip.

⇒ The same challenges exist today; Christians facing persecution know where they stand; Christians in the West are often oblivious to the compromises they make and the indifference into which they can easily fall.

The miracle is that, in the face of centuries of persecution, the Holy Spirit has kept alive men and women profoundly committed to Jesus Christ.

Examples of Documentation of Persecution in the First Centuries

Letter to Diognetus, AD 80

Christians ... love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonored, and yet in their very dishonor are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honor; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life. They are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred. (ch. 5)

Don't you see them exposed to wild beasts for the purpose of persuading them to deny the Lord, yet they are not overcome? Don't you see that the more of them that are punished, the greater the number of the rest becomes? This does not seem to be the work of man. This is the power of God. These are the evidences of his appearance. (ch. 7)

When you despise that which is considered to be death here, then you shall fear what is truly death, which is reserved for those who shall be condemned to the eternal fire, which shall afflict to the end those that are committed to it. Then shall you admire those who for righteousness' sake endure the fire that is but for a moment, and you shall count them happy when you understand that fire. (ch. 10)

Ignatius of Antioch, AD 110

The believing have, in love, the character of God the Father by Jesus Christ, by whom, if we are not in readiness to die into his suffering, his life is not in us. (Letter to the Magnesians 5)

May I enjoy the wild beasts that are prepared for me. I pray that they would be found eager to rush at me, and I will also entice them to devour me speedily and not deal with me as some, whom out of fear they have not touched. If they are unwilling to assail me, I will compel them to do so. Pardon me; I know what is to my benefit. Now I begin to be a disciple. Let no one, of things visible or invisible, prevent me from attaining to Jesus Christ. Let fire and the cross; let wild beasts; let tearings, breakings, and dislocation of bones; let cutting off of limbs; let shatterings of the whole body; and let all the evil torments of the devil come upon me; only let me attain to Jesus Christ. (Letter to the Romans 5)

Justin Martyr, c. AD 150

And when you hear that we look for a kingdom, you suppose, without making any inquiry, that we speak of a human kingdom. Instead, we speak of that which is with God, as can be shown from the confession of their faith made by those who are charged with being Christians, even though they know that death is the punishment awarded to those who so confess. For if we looked for a human kingdom, we would deny our Christ, so that we might not be killed. We would try to escape detection, so that we might obtain what we hope for. But since our thoughts are not fixed on the present, we are not concerned when men cut us off; since death is a debt which must at all events be paid. (First Apology 11)

The men mentioned in this next quote are all Gnostics. Simon (mentioned in Acts 8) is considered by early Christians to be the inventor of Gnosticism after he was sternly rebuked by Peter and John. Justin is pointing out that these Gnostics are not persecuted by Rome like the Christians are.

After Christ's ascension into heaven, the devils put forward certain men who claimed they were gods. They were not only not persecuted by you [addressed to Marcus Aurelius, the Roman emperor], but even deemed worthy of honors. There was a Samaritan, Simon, a native of the village called Gitto, who, in the reign of Claudius Caesar, and in your royal city of Rome, did mighty acts of magic by virtue of the art of the devils operating in him. ...

Almost all the Samaritans, and a few even of other nations, worship him ... A man, Menander, also a Samaritan, ... a disciple of Simon and inspired by devils, we know to have deceived many while he was in Antioch by his magical art. ... And there is Marcion, a man of Pontus, who is even at this day alive and teaching his disciples to believe in some other god greater than the Creator. He, by the aid of the devils, has caused many of every nation to speak blasphemies, and to deny that God is the maker of this universe ...

All who take their opinions from these men, as we have said, are called Christians, just as there are those who do not agree with the philosophers in their doctrines, yet the name of philosophers is given to them as well. And whether [the Gnostics] perpetrate those fabulous and shameful deeds [that are rumored about Christians]—the knocking over of the lamp, promiscuous intercourse, and eating human flesh—we do not know, but we do know that they are neither persecuted nor put to death by you, at least on account of their opinions. But I have a treatise against all the heresies that have existed already composed, which, if you wish to read it, I will give you. (First Apology 26)

Though death is decreed against those who teach or at all confess the name of Christ, we everywhere both embrace and teach it. And if you also read these words in a hostile spirit, you can do no more, as I said before, than kill us; which indeed does no harm to us, but to you and all who unjustly hate us and do not repent, brings eternal punishment by fire. (First Apology 45)

We pray for you [Jews] and all other men who hate us, so that you may repent along with us and not blaspheme the One who by his works, by the mighty deeds done through his name, by the words he taught, by the prophecies announced concerning him, is the blameless and irreproachable-in-all-things Christ Jesus. We pray that, believing on him, you may be saved in his second glorious coming and may not be condemned to fire by him. (Dialogue with Trypho 35)

You [Jews] hesitate to confess that he is Christ, as the Scriptures and the events witnessed and done in his name prove, perhaps for this reason: that you may be persecuted by the rulers, who, under the influence of the wicked and deceitful spirit, the serpent, will not stop putting to death and persecuting those who confess the name of Christ until [Christ] comes again and destroys them all and gives each what they deserve. (Dialogue with Trypho 39)

Now it is evident that no one can terrify or subdue us who have believed in Jesus over all the world. For it is plain that, though beheaded, crucified, thrown to wild beasts, chains, and fire, and all other kinds of torture, we do not give up our confession; instead, the more such things happen, the more others—in even larger numbers—become faithful and worshippers of God through the name of Jesus. For if someone were to cut away the fruit-

bearing parts of a vine, it would grow up again and yield other branches, flourishing and fruitful. Even so, the same thing happens with us. (*Dialogue with Trypho* 110)

Minucius Felix, AD 160-230

It's a beautiful thing to God when a Christian does battle with pain. When he faces threats, punishments and tortures by mocking death and treading underfoot the horror of the executioner; when he raises up his freedom in Christ as a standard before kings and princes; when he yields to God alone, and—triumphant and victorious—he tramples upon the very man who has pronounced the sentence upon him ... God finds all these things beautiful. (*The Octavius* 37)

How many of our people have borne that not their right hand only, but their whole body, should be burned—burned up without any cries of pain ... Do I compare men with [your Roman heroes]? Boys and young women among us treat with contempt crosses and tortures, wild beasts, and all the bugbears of punishment with the inspired patience of suffering. And do you not perceive, O wretched men, that there is nobody who either is willing without reason to undergo punishment, or is able without God to bear tortures? (*ibid.*)

Tertullian, c. AD 210

The Christian, even when he is condemned, gives thanks. (*Apology* 46)

Here we call your own [*i.e., the Roman emperor's*] acts to witness, you who are daily presiding at the trials of prisoners and passing sentence upon crimes. In your long lists of those accused of many and various atrocities, has any assassin, any pickpocket, or any man guilty of sacrilege, seduction, or stealing bathers' clothes had his name entered as being a Christian too?

When Christians are brought before you simply because of their name, is there ever found a criminal of any sort? It is always with your people that the prisons are streaming, the mines are sighing, and the wild beasts are fed. It is from you that the exhibitors of gladiator shows always get their herds of criminals to feed up for the occasion. You will find no Christian there except for simply being one. Or, if one is there as something else, he is a Christian no longer. (*Apology* 44)

But what is the real authority of human laws, when it is in man's power both to evade them, by generally managing to hide himself out of the sight of his crimes, and to despise them sometimes, if inclination or necessity leads him to offend? Think of these things, too, in the light of the brevity of any punishment you can inflict—never to last longer than till death. On this ground Epicurus makes light of all suffering and pain, maintaining that if it is small, it is contemptible, and if it is great, it is not long continued. No doubt about it, we, who receive our awards under the judgment of an all-seeing God, and who look forward to eternal punishment from him for sin—we alone make real effort to attain a blameless life, under the influence of our ampler knowledge, the impossibility of concealment, and the greatness of the threatened torment, not merely long-enduring, but everlasting. We fear him, whom he too should fear who is judged by the fearing, even God, I mean, and not the proconsul. (*Apology* 45)

It is quite true that it is our desire to suffer, but it is in the way that a soldier longs for war. Indeed, no one suffers willingly, since suffering implies fear and danger. Yet the man

who objected to the conflict both fights with all his strength, and, once victorious, he rejoices in battle because he reaps from its glory and spoil. It is our battle to be summoned to your tribunals that there, under fear of execution, we may battle for the truth. The day is won when the object of the struggle is gained. This victory of ours gives us the glory of pleasing God and the spoil of eternal life. (Apology 50)

Go zealously on, good presidents! You will stand higher with the people if you sacrifice the Christians at their wish. Kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust. Your injustice is the proof that we are innocent.

Therefore, God suffers that we suffer like this. For lately, in condemning a Christian woman to the *leno* [*pimp or seducer*] rather than to the *leo* [*lion*], you confess that a taint on our purity is considered among us something more terrible than any punishment and any death.

Nor does your cruelty, however exquisite, do you any good. It's just a temptation to us. The more often we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed. (Apology 50)

It is our battle to be summoned to your tribunals that there, under fear of execution, we may battle for the truth. But the day is won when the object of the struggle is gained. This victory of ours gives us the glory of pleasing God, and the spoil of life eternal. (Apology 50)

But the very desperation and recklessness you object to in us, among yourselves lift high the standard of virtue in the cause of glory and of fame. Mucius of his own will left his right hand on the altar: what sublimity of mind! Empedocles gave his whole body at Catana to the fires of Ætna: what mental resolution! A certain foundress of Carthage gave herself away in second marriage to the funeral pile: what a noble witness of her chastity! Regulus, not wishing that his one life should count for the lives of many enemies, endured these crosses over all his frame: how brave a man—even in captivity a conqueror! Anaxarchus, when he was being beaten to death by a barley-pounder, cried out, “Beat on, beat on at the case of Anaxarchus; no stroke falls on Anaxarchus himself.” O magnanimity of the philosopher, who even in such an end had jokes upon his lips! I omit all reference to those who with their own sword, or with any other milder form of death, have bargained for glory. Nay, see how even torture contests are crowned by you. The Athenian courtesan, having wearied out the executioner, at last bit off her tongue and spat it in the face of the raging tyrant, that she might at the same time spit away her power of speech, nor be longer able to confess her fellow-conspirators, if even overcome, that might be her inclination. (Apology 50)

Commodianus, c. AD 240

I admonish the faithful not to hold their brothers and sisters in hatred. Hatred is considered ungodly even in martyrs for the flame. The martyr is destroyed whose confession is of such a kind, nor is it taught that this evil is expiated by the shedding of blood. A law is given to the unrighteous man so that he may restrain himself. Therefore, he ought to be free from ill will; you ought to as well! You sin twice against God, if your strife reaches your brother. You will not avoid sin following your former way of life. Thou hast once been washed [i.e., baptized]: shall you be able to be immersed again? (Instructions of Commodianus 47)

Since, O son, you desire martyrdom, hear. Be like Abel was, or like Isaac himself, or Stephen, who chose for himself on the way the righteous life. You indeed desire something suited for the blessed. First of all, overcome the evil one with your good deeds by living well. Then, when he who is your King sees you, be secure. ... Even now, if you have conquered by good deeds, you are [already] a martyr in him. You, therefore, who seek to extoll martyrdom with your word, clothe yourself during this time of peace with good deeds, and be secure. (*Instructions of Commodianus 62*)

Cyprian, c. AD 250

And, as the Eucharist is appointed for this very purpose, that it may be a safeguard to the receivers, it is necessary that we may arm those whom we wish to be safe against the adversary with the protection of the Lord's abundance. For how do we teach or provoke them to shed their blood in confession of his name, if we deny to those who are about to enter warfare the blood of Christ? Or how do we make them fit for the cup of martyrdom, if we do not first admit them to drink, in the church, the cup of the Lord by the right of communion? (*Letters of Cyprian 53:2*)

Eusebius, 323

"The servants of Christ residing at Vienne and Lyons, in Gaul, to the brethren in Asia and Phrygia ... The greatness of the tribulation in this region, the fury of the heathen against the saints, and the sufferings of the blessed witnesses, we cannot recount accurately, nor indeed could they possibly be recorded. For with all his might the adversary fell upon us, giving us a foretaste of his unbridled activity at his future coming. He endeavored in every manner to practice and exercise his servants against the servants of God, not only shutting us out from houses and baths and markets, but forbidding any of us to be seen in any place whatever. But the grace of God led the conflict against him, and delivered the weak, and set them as firm pillars, able through patience to endure all the wrath of the evil one. They joined battle with him, undergoing all kinds of shame and injury. Regarding their great sufferings as little, they hastened to Christ, revealing truly that 'the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us.'" (*Church History. Book V. Chapter I. Par. 3-6.*)

Then the others were examined, and the prime witnesses were obviously ready and finished their confessing with all eagerness. But some appeared unprepared and untrained, weak as yet, and unable to endure so great a conflict. About ten of these proved abortions, causing us great grief and sorrow beyond measure and impairing the zeal of the others who had not yet been seized. These, though, suffered all kinds of affliction, continued constantly with the witnesses, and did not forsake them. Then all of us feared greatly on account of uncertainty as to their confession; not because we dreaded the sufferings to be endured, but because we looked to the end and were afraid that some of them might fall away. But those who were worthy were seized day by day, filling up the number [of the witnesses], so that all the zealous persons, and those through whom especially our affairs had been established, were collected together out of the two churches [Vienne and Lyons]." (*Church History. Book V. Chapter I. Par. 11-13.*)