

Lecture 3-Martyrs Who Have Lived: The Persecutions

No living creature, except for a man, is able to take a risk, and even the risk of death, for the sake of truth. Thousands of martyrs who have lived are a unique phenomenon in the history of our solar system.
Aleksandr Menn

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Matthew 5:10

Assigned Reading

The Story of Christianity—chapters 5, 6, 10, 12

Key Terms

Persecution, Nero, Diocletian, martyr

Objectives

- Classify the history of the persecutions in the early church
- Identify reasons that Christians were persecuted by emperors for over two and a half centuries
- Identify the misconceptions that the culture of this time period had about Christians

Class Prayer

“Thou God and Father of Thy beloved and blessed Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have received knowledge of Thee, O God of the angels and of all creation and of all just men who live in Thy presence, I thank Thee that Thou hast graciously granted me a portion among Thy people [Polycarp prayed, “... Thou hast graciously granted this day and this hour to allot me a portion among the number of martyrs”], among the people of Christ, unto the resurrection of everlasting life: may I be received in Thy sight, as a fruitful and acceptable sacrifice, wherefore, for all this, I praise Thee, I bless Thee, I glorify Thee through the eternal High Priest, Jesus Christ, Thy beloved Son; to whom, with Thee and the Holy Spirit, be all glory, world without end. Amen.”

Polycarp (when he was martyred)

Martyrs Who Have Lived: The Persecutions

I. Jewish Persecution

II. Roman Persecution

A. The duration: from the 60s to the 320s

1. Nero (60s)

a. Peter and Paul

b. *Quo Vadis?* by Henryk Sienkiewicz

2. Domitian, Trajan, Hadrian (late first, early second century)

a. Martyrdom of Ignatius (c. 110)—Letter to the Trallians, Letter to the Romans

3. Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius (mid second century)

a. Martyrdom of Polycarp (155) (*Perpetua & Polycarp: Two Heroic Martyrs*)

b. Martyrdom of Justin Martyr (163)

4. Septimius Severus (early third century)

a. Martyrdom of Leonidas, Origen’s father

b. Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas (*Perpetua & Polycarp: Two Heroic Martyrs*)

5. First _____

6. Decius, Valerian (mid third century)

- a. First empire-wide, systematic persecution (250)
- b. Origen tortured; Cyprian martyred
- 7. Second _____
- 8. Diocletian (early fourth century)
 - a. *The Forty Martyrs of Sebaste*
 - b. “The last round between Christianity and Roman paganism had been the most desperate of all; but it ended with the acknowledgment that Christianity had won.” F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, p. 187
- B. The reasons
 - 1. Charges of incest, cannibalism, lack of patriotism, hatred of the human race, causes of disaster, etc.
Tertullian: “If the Tiber reaches the walls, if the Nile does not rise to the fields, if the sky does not move [rain], or the earth does [earthquake], if there is famine, if there is plague, the cry is at once, ‘The Christians to the lions!’”
 - 2. Refusal to worship _____
 - 3. The fact of being a Christian
 - a. “The very name” (I Peter 4: 16)
 - b. The death of Ptolemaeus during the reign of Emperor Antoninus Pius
- C. The purpose
 - 1. Apostasy of Christians
 - 2. Martyrdom of the obstinate
- D. The results
 - 1. Persecution purified the church
 - 2. Persecution extended the church
But not always! “Sharp persecution breaks off only the tips of the branches. It produces martyrs and the tree still grows. Never-ending social and political repression, on the other hand, starves the roots; it stifles evangelism and the church declines.” Samuel Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*

Question for Consideration

What exactly were the cards that were obtained after one had sacrificed to the emperor?

For Further Study

Maier, Paul L. *The Flames of Rome: A Documentary Novel*.

An excellent historical novel (with 50 pages of notes) about the time “when society was at its worst and Christians were at their best.” By a professor of history at Western Michigan University.

Read *Perpetua & Polycarp: Two Heroic Martyrs*. Note Perpetua’s illustration of the vase. What were the real causes of her suffering in prison? What do you think of Perpetua’s vision? Notice that she sang a Psalm as she was being prepared for death. The Psalms throughout history will often be used by martyrs. How does this story affect you? Susan Bergman in *Martyrs: Contemporary Writers on Modern Lives of Faith* writes: “To be a martyr you have to believe that something matters more than life.” The story of Polycarp’s martyrdom is often told. Note his vision three days before his arrest. What similarities do you find between the faith of the old bishop and the young woman? These two accounts obviously serve an apologetic purpose. What is it?

Read *The Forty Martyrs of Sebaste*. This is one of my favorite stories from the period of persecution. There are several different accounts of this event. Legendary elements undoubtedly were added over time, but the Cambridge Ancient History (12:695) acknowledges its basic historicity.