

CHAPTER 3 : PERSECUTION BEFORE REDEMPTION

Christianity was born in persecution with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem. And the followers of Jesus Christ must follow in the footsteps of their Master and Savior. Thus, the book of Acts chronicles the many persecutions suffered by Christians, in great measure emanating from Jerusalem at the instigation of the unbelieving Jews. Thus we read how the Apostles Peter and John were imprisoned by the Jews for their faithful witness. And thus we read of the martyrdom of Stephen in Jerusalem by stoning. And thus we read of the scattering of many of the Christian brethren from Jerusalem, owing to the awful persecutions. And thus we read of Jews like Saul who traveled great distances to persecute the Christians. And thus we read of Paul (formerly Saul) who was turned over to the Roman authorities by the Jews, due to their resentment of him.

But persecution did not hinder the spread of the gospel. As the Christians would scatter, they would take their gospel with them. In this way, first the Samaritans and then the Gentiles became part of the church of Jesus Christ. Even her greatest persecutor- Saul of Tarsus- was converted by the power of Jesus Christ to become her greatest missionary.

So the gospel spread throughout the Roman empire and even beyond before 70 AD. Not surprisingly, the gospel reached the capital of the empire- Rome. The preaching of Paul and Peter in Rome was an epoch in the history of the church. It gave an impulse to the growth of Christianity. Their martyrdom was even more effective in the end: it cemented the bond of union between the Jewish and Gentile converts, and consecrated the soil of the heathen metropolis. Jerusalem crucified the Lord, Rome beheaded and crucified his chief Apostles and plunged the whole Roman church into a baptism of blood. Rome would become, for good and for evil, the Jerusalem of Christendom, and the Vatican hill the Golgotha of the West. Peter and Paul, like a new Romulus and Remus, laid the foundation of a spiritual empire vaster and more enduring than that of the Caesars. The cross was substituted for the sword as the symbol of conquest and power.

But the change was effected at the sacrifice of precious blood. The Roman empire was at first, by its laws of justice, the protector of Christianity, without knowing its true character, and came to the rescue of Paul on several critical occasions, as in Corinth through the Proconsul Annaeus Gallio, in Jerusalem through the Captain Lysias, and in Caesarea through the Procurator Festus. But now pagan Rome rushed into deadly conflict with the new religion, and opened, in the name of idolatry and patriotism, a series of intermittent persecutions, which ended at last at the Milvian bridge, where the Roman emperor Constantine declared himself a Christian.

The first of these imperial persecutions with which the Martyrdom of Peter and Paul is connected by ecclesiastical tradition, took place in the tenth year of Nero's reign, A.D. 64, and by the instigation of that very emperor to whom Paul, as a Roman citizen, had appealed from the Jewish tribunal. It was, however, not a strictly religious persecution, like those under the later emperors; it originated in a public calamity which was wantonly charged upon the innocent Christians.

A greater contrast can hardly be imagined than that between Paul, one of the purest and noblest of men, and Nero, one of the basest and vilest of tyrants. The admirable first five years of Nero's reign (54–59 AD), under the guidance of Seneca and Burrhus, make the other nine (59–68 AD) only more hideous by contrast. We read his life with mingled feelings of contempt for his folly, and horror of his wickedness. The world was to him a comedy and a tragedy, in which he was to be the chief actor. He had an insane passion for popular applause; he played on the lyre; he sung his odes at supper; he drove his chariots in the circus; he appeared as a mimic on the stage, and compelled men of the highest rank to represent in dramas or in tableaux the obscenest of the Greek myths. But the comedian was surpassed by the tragedian. He heaped crime upon crime until he became a proverbial monster of iniquity. The murder of his brother (Britannicus), his mother (Agrippina), his wives (Octavia and Poppaea), his teacher (Seneca), and many eminent Romans, was fitly followed by his suicide in the thirty-second year of his age. With him the family of Julius Caesar ignominiously perished, and the empire became the prize of successful soldiers and adventurers.

For such a demon in human shape, the murder of a crowd of innocent Christians was pleasant sport. The occasion of the hellish spectacle was a fearful conflagration of Rome, the most destructive and disastrous that ever occurred in history. It broke out in the night between the 18th and 19th of July, among the wooden shops in the south-eastern end of the Great Circus, near the Palatine hill. Lashed by the wind, it defied all exertions of the firemen and soldiers, and raged with unabated fury for seven nights and six days. Then it burst out again in another part, near the field of Mars, and in three days more laid waste two other districts of the city.

The calamity was incalculable. Only four of the fourteen regions into which the city was divided remained uninjured. Three regions, including the whole interior city from the Circus to the Esquiline hill, were a shapeless mass of ruins. The remaining seven were more or less destroyed. Temples, monumental buildings of the royal, republican, and imperial times, the creations of Greek art which had been collected for centuries, were turned into dust and ashes. Men and beasts perished in the flames, and the metropolis of the world assumed the aspect of a graveyard with a million of mourners over the loss of treasures.

The cause of the conflagration is involved in mystery. Public rumor traced it to Nero, who wished to enjoy the lurid spectacle of burning Troy, and to gratify his ambition to rebuild Rome on a more magnificent scale, and to call it Neropolis. When the fire broke out he was on the seashore at Antium, his birthplace. He returned when the devouring element reached his own palace, and made extraordinary efforts to stay and then to repair the disaster by a reconstruction which continued till after his death, not forgetting to replace his partially destroyed temporary residence as a standing wonder of architectural magnificence and extravagance.

To divert from himself the general suspicion of incendiarism, and at the same time to furnish new entertainment for his diabolical cruelty, Nero wickedly cast the blame upon the hated Christians. Especially since the public trial of Paul and his successful labors in Rome, Christians had come to be distinguished from the Jews. They were certainly

despisers of the Roman gods and loyal subjects of a higher king than Caesar, and they were falsely suspected of secret crimes. The police and people, under the influence of the panic created by the awful calamity, were ready to believe the worst slanders, and demanded victims. What could be expected of the ignorant multitude, when even such cultivated Romans as Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny, stigmatized Christianity as a vulgar and pestiferous superstition. It appeared to them even worse than Judaism, which was at least an ancient national religion, while Christianity was novel, detached from any particular nationality, and aiming at universal dominion. Some Christians were arrested, confessed their faith, and were "convicted not so much," says Tacitus, "of the crime of incendiarism as of hating the human race." Their Jewish origin, their indifference to politics and public affairs, and their abhorrence of heathen customs, made an attempt on their part to destroy the city sufficiently plausible to justify a verdict of guilty. An infuriated mob does not stop to reason, and is as apt to run mad as an individual.

Under this wanton charge of incendiarism, backed by the equally groundless charge of misanthropy and unnatural vice, there began a carnival of blood such as even heathen Rome never saw before or since. It was the answer of the powers of hell to the mighty preaching of the two chief Apostles, which had shaken heathenism to its center. A vast multitude of Christians was put to death in the most shocking manner. Some were crucified, probably in mockery of the punishment of Christ, some sewed up in the skins of wild beasts and exposed to the voracity of mad dogs in the arena. The satanic tragedy reached its climax at night in the imperial gardens on the slope of the Vatican (which embraced, it is supposed, the present site of the place and church of St. Peter): Christian men and women, covered with pitch or oil or resin, and nailed to posts of pine, were lighted and burned as torches for the amusement of the mob; while Nero, in fantastical dress, figured in a horse race, and displayed his art as charioteer. Burning alive was the ordinary punishment of incendiaries; but only the cruel ingenuity of this imperial monster, under the inspiration of the devil, could invent such a horrible system of illumination.

This is the account of the greatest heathen historian, the fullest we have—as the best description of the destruction of Jerusalem is from the pen of the learned Jewish historian. Thus enemies bear witness to the truth of Christianity. Tacitus incidentally mentions in this connection the crucifixion of Christ under Pontius Pilate, in the reign of Tiberius. With all his haughty Roman contempt for the Christians whom he knew only from rumor and reading, he was convinced of their innocence of incendiarism, and notwithstanding his cold stoicism, he could not suppress a feeling of pity for them because they were sacrificed not to the public good, but to the ferocity of a wicked tyrant. Both Tacitus and Suetonius distinguish the sect of Christianity from Judaism, although they knew very little of either; and the former expressly derives the name Christians from Christ, as the founder of the new religion. Moreover Nero, as previously remarked, was not averse to the Jews, and his second wife, Poppaea Sabina, a year before the conflagration, had shown special favor to Josephus, and loaded him with presents. Josephus speaks of the crimes of Nero, but says not a word of any persecution of his fellow-religionists. It is not unlikely that in this (as in all previous persecutions, and often afterwards) the fanatical Jews, enraged by the rapid progress of Christianity, and anxious to avert suspicion from themselves, stirred up the people against the hated

Galilaeans, and that the heathen Romans fell with double fury on these supposed half Jews, disowned by their own strange brethren.

The heathen historians, if we are to judge from their silence, seem to confine the persecution to the city of Rome, but later Christian writers extend it to the provinces. The example set by the emperor in the capital could hardly be without influence in the provinces, and would justify the outbreak of popular hatred. If the Apocalypse (also known as the book of Revelation) was written under Nero, or shortly after his death, John's exile to Patmos must be connected with this persecution. It mentions imprisonments in Smyrna, the martyrdom of Antipas in Pergamus, and speaks of the murder of prophets and saints and all that have been slain on the earth. The Epistle to the Hebrews 10:32–34, which was written in Italy, probably in the year 64, likewise alludes to bloody persecutions, and to the release of Timothy from prison (Hebrews 13:23). And Peter, in his first Epistle, which may be assigned to the same year, immediately after the outbreak of the persecution, and shortly before his death, warns the Christians in Asia Minor of a fiery trial which is to try them, and of sufferings already endured or to be endured, not for any crime, but for the name of "Christians."

Christianity seemed annihilated in Rome. With Peter and Paul the first generation of Christians was buried. Darkness must have overshadowed the trembling disciples, and a despondency seized them almost as deep as on the evening of the crucifixion, thirty-four years before. But the morning of a deliverance was not far distant.

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Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Logos Research Systems, Inc.: Oak Harbor, WA, 1997). (see electronic version at <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/About.htm>)

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