

THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

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The One Thought: Persecution is one of the truest evidences of spiritual prosperity. The idea of persecution is intrinsic to the gospel.

Acts 5:38-42—"So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; 39 but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" So they took his advice, 40 and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. 41 Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. 42 And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ."

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\*μαρτυρέω [martureo]-where we get our word martyr-translated "witness" English.

\*It is estimated that more than 50 million Christians died for their faith in the Dark Ages. It is estimated that a million Christians died for their faith when the Communists seized China.

\*It is said that when the knights of King Arthur's court returned from the field of battle, if they did not bear in their bodies some scar of the battle, they were thrust forth by the king, with the command, "Go, get your scar!"

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The Early History of The Church is Marked by Persecution:

Keep in mind that Jesus was crucified between 33 and 34 AD. For the first 20 years, the Jewish leaders were the primary source of persecution.

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## Nero

Nero was the first great Roman persecutor of the church. He was Emperor and persecuted the church between 54 and 68 AD. The Romans allowed any religion and its citizens were allowed to worship any god as long as Caesar was worshipped as the god over all. Rome required its people to worship Caesar once a year. This obviously violates the Christian faith because God forbids having any other gods becoming the object of our worship. In AD 64, Nero was blamed for the great fire that destroyed over 70% of the Imperial City. Nero found his scapegoat in the Christian community. At the time, Christians were only a small sect in the city and an easy target for the wrath of the Romans. Nero accused this sect of being the cause of this fire. When the citizens responded favorably, he made it into a public spectacle by feeding Christians to the lions in the surviving amphitheater.

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Domitian A.D. 81-96.

He continued the persecution and is infamous for his banishment of John the apostle. John was exiled to the isle of Patmos in ad A.D. 95. John returned and died peacefully around 100 AD.

Trajan A. D. 98-117.

One of the early theologians Ignatius was condemned to die by Trajan. Ignatius was a disciple of the apostle John. When Ignatius was on his way to Rome to be crucified, he wrote seven epistles. These are not a part of scripture, but they offer a lot of clear evidence as to what the churches closest to the apostles believed. This will be examined later in this series.

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In 155 AD, Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna stood before a packed stadium. Just before he was martyred, out of respect for his age, the Proconsul offered leniency by saying, "Swear, and I will release thee; curse the Christ." Polycarp responded, "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he hath done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my king who saved me?"

Marcus Aurelius also became known as one of the greatest persecutors of the church in AD 161-180.

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## Local persecutions

Local persecutions continued against the church even though there was not an active emperor trying to stamp out the church. One of the early church theologians named Tertullian wrote around 210 AD, "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!'"



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There were many Christians who denied their faith to save their own lives during these years. However, as Christians began to see the courage, dignity and joy that empowered those who were martyred, Christians began to draw their strength from the martyrs and martyrdom became something to be desired. Instead of stamping out the church, Christianity flourished and becoming a martyr was considered the highest honor in Christianity.

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## Decius

After seventy years, a new emperor declared war on the church. In the year A. D. 250, the emperor Decius commanded all Romans to perform sacrifices before the magistrate. When sacrifices were complete they would receive a certificate to present as evidence of their loyalty to Rome. Many professing Christians obtained certificates through performing these sacrifices, bribing officials, or obtaining forged certificates. This created divisions in the church with those who stood loyal to scripture in spite of the persecutions that followed. Three bishops, Fabian, Babylas, and Alexander were martyred for refusing to sacrifice for the emperor. One year later, Decius died and the persecution ended.

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## Valerian

Valerian began new persecutions in A. D. 257. He banished ministers and prominent laymen. He also confiscated property and forbade Christian assemblies and reinstated death penalties for Christians. Cyprian of Carthage and Sixtus II of Rome were prominent martyrs. The persecution ended in A. D. 260 when the Persians captured Valerian and his son Gallienus revoked the persecution. Under Gallienus, Christianity became a legal religion for the first time.

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## Diocletian and Galerius

The last great Roman persecution against the church came in 303 and ended in 311 under the western emperor Diocletian and Galerius, Augustus of the east. For unknown reasons, Galerius ordered his army purged of all Christians. Soon after, he prohibited Christian worship and he ordered churches to be destroyed and scriptures burned. He ordered bishops to be captured, tortured and killed and ordered the community to be purged of Christians by blood. In 305, Diocletian ended his persecution while Galerius continued until 311 when he issued an edict to tolerate the Christian religion. It was a reluctant acknowledgment that he failed in his attempt to wipe out Christianity.

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## Constantine

Constantine was proclaimed western emperor around 312 AD. Soon after, he found himself battling the eastern kingdom of Rome, which was led by Maxentius. It was just before this battle that Constantine had a dream where he saw the chi-rho. This was often used as the sign of the cross in Christianity during the early years. It was the Greek symbols of 'X' and the 'P' put together. 'X' makes the 'ch' sound in Greek and 'P' makes the 'r' sound. The chi-rho combines these two symbols to form a monogram representing Christ's name. When Constantine saw this symbol in his dream, he also saw the words, "In hoc signo vinces", which means, "by this sign conquer." Constantine won a great victory and united the kingdom again. Constantine granted religious liberty for Christians and issued the 'Edict of Milan', which restored confiscated property back to Christian owners.

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## Four Things The Early Persecution Brought to The Church

1. Persecutions kept away all who were not sincere in their profession; the half-hearted and weak left it.

\* Jesus taught that many believers would forsake Him when trouble or persecution comes - because of a superficial commitment. Those with no roots in God's Word would quickly fall away.

Matt. 24:9-10-"Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. 10 And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another."

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## 2. Persecution Clarified beliefs.

Matt. 13:20-21-“ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, 21 yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away”

\*The most dangerous enemy is the one having lost the appearance of being an enemy. Thus, the most dangerous enemy of the church can be bad theology.

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3. Made the church bond and unify

4. Caused The Church to Grow.

\* 1/10 of population was estimated to be Christian by A.D. 313

The idea of persecution is intrinsic to the gospel

The persecuted receive the most favorable blessing from God! Persecution is prosperity.

\* CAA has received reports of intensified religious persecution in Beijing, Heilongjiang, Yunnan and Shandong provinces. In Beijing, Pastor "Bike" Zhang Mingxuan and his family members have been evicted from their home, beaten and arrested. In Heilongjiang province, one city called Yichun recently banned all house churches, CAA reported. In Yunnan province, some house church members were attacked right after the Olympics. In Shandong province, Pastor Zhang Zhongxin was sentenced to two years of re-education through labor, and after the Olympics his appeal was denied, according to CAA.

Meanwhile, CAA has learned that 29 house church leaders have been serving time in labor camps and prisons in Henan province since July 2007.



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## What Do You Do?

1. Pray for your faith to be strong that it would pass a persecution test.

2. Pray for those being persecuted.

\*Hebrews 13:3 "Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering."

3. Pray for the unreached people groups

\*Joshua project

4. Go visit a people group under persecution and provide them aid and comfort.

\*Eradia Romania