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Introduction:

The word martyr “comes from the Greek, ‘to bear witness,’”¹ and Christianity Today defines martyrdom as “witness by one’s blood.”² As we will see, the early church bore witness to their faith in Christ with their blood. Throughout this overview of the persecution that the early church faced during the first three centuries of its existence, there will be several details that will be taken into account. We will highlight some of the more prominent emperors in each century under whom the church faced various degrees of persecution while considering the reasons for being persecuted and the ways that this persecution was carried out. We will remember some of the more prominent names of Christian martyrs during that time, as well as learn the extent of persecution that the church is facing today and where it is currently most severe.

Persecution during the first century:

Justo Gonzalez points out that at the onset of Christianity in the first century, “in most of the New Testament it is Jews who persecute Christians.”³ Dr. Everett Ferguson, writing on persecution in the early church points out, like Gonzalez, that

Persecution did not begin with the Roman authorities. The New Testament writings tell of fratricidal strife between Jews and Christians... In the early chapters of Acts, Stephen (7:57) and James, the brother of John the disciple (12:2), became victims of the Jerusalem mob and of King Herod Agrippa, respectively.⁴

One of the reasons for this is that Jews viewed Christianity “as a new heresy going from town to town tempting good Jews to become heretics.”⁵ Others, who may not have necessarily been so

¹ Michael Collins and Matthew A. Price, *The Story of Christianity: A Celebration of 2,000 Years of Faith* (New York: DK Publishing, 1999), 44.

² Everett Ferguson, “Persecution in the Early Church: Did You Know?” *Christianity Today*, 1990, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-27/persecution-in-early-church-did-you-know.html>.

³ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Present Day* (Massachusetts: Prince Press, 1999), 32.

⁴ Ferguson, “Persecution in the Early Church.”

⁵ Gonzalez, 32.

concerned with issues of doctrine and morality, opposed Christians for the way their teaching interfered with their way of life as Collins and Price explain:

Many of those who denounced Christians to the authorities seem to have had a vested interest in pagan religions. Power, prestige, and money were involved in pagan ritual. The priesthood, the preserve of the upper class, was exercised largely for financial gain, and those who made a living from animal sacrifices, or who made idols, would not give in easily to a new cult that opposed these activities.⁶

Luke records evidence of this in Acts chapter sixteen when Paul and Silas were in Philippi and cast out a demon from a slave girl who followed them and who would announce through a spirit of divination what their intentions were in the city. Luke describes that the girl “brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling”⁷ and goes on to share how the girl’s masters responded to Paul casting the spirit out of her:

But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, “These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.” The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.⁸

Later, in Acts chapter 19, Luke notes another incident where Paul’s ministry affected the income of those who profited from pagan worship, thus provoking discontentment and violent protest, this time in Ephesus:

About that time there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way. For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. These he gathered together, with the workmen in similar trades, and said, “Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed

⁶ Collins and Price, 45.

⁷ Acts 16:16 (English Standard Version)

⁸ Acts 16:19-24

from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship.” When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” So the city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed together into the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel.⁹

Even though persecution of Christians started with the Jews, it did not take long before the governing authorities became involved and consequently became primary agents of persecution. Diarmaid MacCulloch in his *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* explains why the Romans were able to make exceptions for the Jews but not for Christians once the two groups became distinguishable:

It took the Romans some time to distinguish between Christians and the other quarrelling segments of Judaism, but once Jews and Christians had separated, Christianity could not hope for any sort of official recognition. Normally the Roman authorities were tolerant of the religions in their conquered territories; as long as a religion had a tradition behind it, they could accept it as having some vague relationship to the official gods of Rome. All that they demanded was that subjects of the empire accept in turn some sort of allegiance to the official cult of the emperors, alive and dead. Even Judaism, an exceptionally exclusive religion which refused to make this concession, with an awkward insistence on regarding every other religion as untrue, could be accepted because it had a long pedigree... Christianity had no such tradition to excuse it, despite the claim by many of its exponents that it could share the antiquity of the Hebrew prophets.¹⁰

Christian History Institute notes that Suetonius was a Roman historian who wrote around 52 A.D. stating that “since the Jews were continually making disturbances at the instigations of Chrestus, he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome...”¹¹ This Claudius is referring to Emperor Claudius who ruled from 41-54 A.D. Gonzalez explains that “Most historians agree that ‘Chrestus’ is none other than ‘Christus,’ and that what actually took place in Rome is that Christian proclamation caused so many riots among the Jews that the emperor decided to expel

⁹ Acts 19:23-29

¹⁰ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Viking, 2009), 155.

¹¹ Mark Galli. “Persecution in the Early Church: A Gallery of the Persecuting Emperors.” *Christian History Institute*, 1990. <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/persecution-in-early-church-gallery>.

the lot.”¹² Consequently, “Claudius likely and inadvertently was the first emperor, then, to persecute Christians (who were perceived as a Jewish sect).”¹³

Under Nero (54-68)

Nero became emperor of Rome in 54 A.D. but “ten years after his ascension to the throne, he was despised by the people...soon the rumor began circulating that he was mad.”¹⁴ It was then, in 64 A.D., that Rome suffered a terribly destructive fire, and rather than allow the people to suspect that the emperor may have been at fault, Nero blamed the Christians.¹⁵

Although they were blamed for arson, Father Matthew Collins and Matthew Price share that “Roman historian Tacitus, writing in c.115, describes Christians as ‘a class of men loathed for their vices’ and says that after the fire of Rome in 64 they were ‘convicted, not so much for the crime of arson, as for hatred of mankind.’”¹⁶ Sadly, “this ‘hatred of the human race’ was attributed to Christians throughout the period of the persecutions.”¹⁷ As a consequence of this grave accusation, “Though there was no immediate sequel to Nero’s persecution, the fire forfeited any chance Christians might have had of being recognized as “legal religion” (*religio licita*) separate from Judaism.”¹⁸ Quoting Tacitus, Gonzalez shares Nero’s dealings with Christians:

Before killing the Christians, Nero used them to amuse the people. Some were dressed in furs, to be killed by dogs. Others were crucified. Still others were set on fire early in the night, so that they might illumine it. Nero opened his own gardens for these shows, and in the circus he himself became a spectacle, for he mingled with the people dressed as a charioteer, or he rode around in his chariot. All of this aroused the mercy of the people, even against these culprits who deserved an exemplary punishment, for it was clear that

¹² Gonzalez, 32.

¹³ Galli, “Persecution in the Early Church.”

¹⁴ Gonzalez, 33.

¹⁵ Gonzalez, 34.

¹⁶ Collins and Price, 44.

¹⁷ Bruce Eastwood, “Causes of the Early Persecutions.” *History Today* 16, no. 8 (August 1966), <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/causes-early-persecutions>.

¹⁸ Ferguson, “Persecution in the Early Church.”

they were not being destroyed for the common good, but rather to satisfy the cruelty of one person.¹⁹

Under Domitian (81-96)

Gonzalez explains that Domitian “loved and respected Roman traditions, and that he sought to restore them. Christians, in their rejection of Roman gods and of many Roman traditions, stood in the way of Domitian’s dreams, and this may have been one of the causes of persecution.”²⁰ In the fourth century historian Eusebius’ account of *The History of the Church*, he goes on to describe:

Many were the victims of Domitian's appalling cruelty. At Rome great numbers of men distinguished by birth and attainments were executed without a fair trial, and countless other eminent men were for no reason at all banished from the country and their property confiscated. Finally, he showed himself the successor of Nero in enmity and hostility to God. He was, in fact, the second to organize persecution against us, though his father Vespasian had had no mischievous designs against us. There is ample evidence that at that time the apostle and evangelist John was still alive, and because of his testimony to the word of God was sentenced to confinement on the island of Patmos.²¹

Eastwood explains: “While the Jews were looked upon with distaste, yet generally tolerated as a nation of ancient origin, the Christians were considered revolutionaries, showing no respect for traditional values and mores.”²² This must have been especially triggering for the emperor and as Eastwood continues:

It was not the novelty, organization, or theology of Christianity that irritated the pagans, but rather the pretension to live apart, to break with traditional piety, even gradually to overcome all that was not Christian.²³

Persecution during the second century:

Under Trajan (98-117)

¹⁹ Gonzalez, 35.

²⁰ Gonzalez, 36.

²¹ Eusebius, *The History of The Church*. Translated with an introduction by G.A. Williamson (New York: Dorset Press, 1965), 125.

²² Eastwood, “Causes for the Early Persecutions.”

²³ Eastwood, “Causes for the Early Persecutions.”

Charles Harold Dodd, in his *The Founder of Christianity*, describes some of the challenges that Roman officials faced when determining their course of action towards this new religious group:

Early in the second century the Roman governor of the province of Bithynia in Asia Minor, Gaius Plinius Secundus, commonly called the Younger Pliny, wrote to the Emperor Trajan about some of his problems. He had on his hands strikes, municipal scandals, and political disaffection. There was also some religious unrest. Many temples, he reported, were practically deserted, and in some, services had been discontinued. There was a slump in agricultural markets, because people were no longer buying beasts for sacrifice as they should. It was all the fault, so his informants said, of some people called "Christians," who formed a secret society which could be up to no good, and who were certainly disloyal to the empire, since they refused to offer sacrifice to the god-emperor. So a number of Christians were arrested and brought to trial. The examination (according to the governor's report) failed to find evidence against the accused of any criminal activities. At worst, it pointed to "a degraded and extravagant superstition." But they did refuse sacrifice to the emperor, and anyhow they deserved to be punished for their "inflexible obstinacy."²⁴

This was in 112 A.D. In the following text, one is able to see what Pliny is known to have written to Trajan as he outlines his proceedings with "Christians who were denounced to him as unfaithful subjects of the emperor"²⁵ and what specific instructions he received from Emperor Trajan moving forward:

"Meanwhile this is the course I have taken with those who were accused before me as Christians. I asked them whether they were Christians, and, if they confessed, I asked them a second or third time with threats of punishment. If they kept to it, I ordered their execution; as for Roman citizens, I noted these down to be sent to Rome." The emperor replied, approving of Pliny's tactics, while urging that the Christians be not hunted, but punished only when denounced by informers.²⁶

Mark Galli, writing on the persecution that the early church faced, provides greater detail of

Trajan's response to Pliny:

They are not to be hunted out. [Although] any who are accused and convicted should be punished, with the proviso that if a man says he is not a Christian and makes it obvious

²⁴ C.H. Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1970), 3.

²⁵ Collins and Price, 45.

²⁶ Collins and Price, 45.

by his actual conduct—namely, by worshiping our gods—then, however suspect he may have been with regard to the past, he should gain pardon from his repentance.²⁷

It is interesting to note, that although Christians had been facing persecution already for nearly a century, “the great Trajan became the first emperor known to persecute Christians as fully distinct from the Jews.”²⁸ To be clear, “Trajan did not institute persecution; he simply allowed it on a restricted scale. The reason was preservation of order.”²⁹

The persecutions in the second century were sporadic, local, and intermittent. One notable piece of evidence is a letter of Hadrian (117-138) to Minucius Fundanus, proconsul of Asia. In this letter (of about 124) the Emperor menaced false accusers and forbade any sizeable persecution of Christians. Punishment was to be awarded ‘according to the seriousness of the crime’; the implication was that crimes other than the profession of Christianity were involved. Hadrian was following the advice set by Trajan...³⁰

The crimes for which Christians were accused would have primarily been the refusal to comply with the authorities in the way or ritual sacrifices, or provoking disorder in some way more so than the “invariable act of profession of Christianity.”³¹ Eastwood goes on to share that “Between 125 and 160, Christians enjoyed a precarious toleration. Few martyrdoms are recorded in this era.”³²

Under Marcus Aurelius (161-180)

Still, the peace did not last long:

With the accession of Marcus Aurelius as emperor in 161, however, the situation changed. First, the Christians were becoming exceedingly unpopular; they were blamed for causing natural disasters by refusing to worship the deities that protected communities. Christians were also accused of immorality, unnatural vice, and black magic, all calculated to bring the rest of the population into peril.³³

²⁷ Galli, “Persecution in the Early Church.”

²⁸ Galli, “Persecution in the Early Church.”

²⁹ Eastwood, “Causes for the Early Persecutions.”

³⁰ Eastwood, “Causes for the Early Persecutions.”

³¹ Eastwood, “Causes for the Early Persecutions.”

³² Ferguson, “Persecution in the Early Church.”

³³ Ferguson, “Persecution in the Early Church.”

Mark Galli notes that while Marcus Aurelius was more inclined to deal with Christians in the same way that Trajan had opted, “his philosophical mentors convinced him that Christianity was a dangerous revolutionary force, preaching gross immoralities.”³⁴ Simultaneously,

under Marcus, anti-Christian literature flourished for the first time, most notably Celsus’s *The True Doctrine*. More regrettably, Marcus allowed anti-Christian informers to proceed more easily than in the past, with the result that fierce persecutions broke out in various regions. In Lyons in 177, the local bishop was martyred, bringing Irenaeus to the office.³⁵

During the time of Emperor Marcus Aurelius’ reign,

Christians would be accused by groups demanding their execution. The Governors would seek what seemed a simple solution, the denial of their religion by those accused in order to save their lives. In the face of aloofness and obstinacy on the part of the accused, the Governor, frustrated and often suspicious, gave way to the demands of the people.³⁶

Bruce Eastwood states that “Obstinacy and refusal to recant were seen as *cohaerens scelus*, which in its extreme form was treason and eventually led, because of repeated occurrences and the worsening political situation of the Empire, to the ban of the *nomen Christiani* itself.”³⁷

Persecution during the third century:

At the beginning of the third century, we read that

Though it remained illegal, the church was now much stronger than in the previous century. Christians were consolidated around urban communities governed by bishops, who were in frequent contact by letter with one another. The church had its own liturgy, its own sacred writings separate from those of the Jews, and established rules of faith on which orthodox doctrines could be built. It also had begun to acquire property (the *Areae*, or cemeteries; and in Rome, the earliest catacombs date to c. 200). Most important, the church had recovered its missionary urge, which after St. Paul and his disciples seems to have diminished through much of the second century. The result was great tension between Christians and pagans in provinces where the church was strong.³⁸

³⁴ Galli, “Persecution in the Early Church.”

³⁵ Galli, “Persecution in the Early Church.”

³⁶ Eastwood, “Causes for the Early Persecutions.”

³⁷ Eastwood, “Causes for the Early Persecutions.”

³⁸ Ferguson, “Persecution in the Early Church.”

Eastwood notes that it was during the third century that “persecutions ...took place in more trying times and were encouraged by imperial decrees.”³⁹

Under Septimius Severus (193-211)

in 202 Severus issued an edict that forbade further conversions to Judaism and Christianity. A persecution followed, especially in North Africa and Egypt. The North African theologian Tertullian penned his famous apologetic works during this period, but to no avail.⁴⁰

In his “Causes for the Early Persecution,” Eastwood explains that “The edict of Septimius Severus against conversion to Christianity was the first imperial initiative against Christians *per se*,”⁴¹ which also resulted in a greater number of persecutions and a greater intensity of persecutions “aimed directly at new converts and their teachers.”⁴² Everett Ferguson goes on to say that “The end of the Severan Dynasty in 235 brought another brief period of persecution under its supplanter, Maximinus Thrax (235–238), aimed, according to Eusebius, against the ‘leaders of the Church.’”⁴³

Under Decius (249-251)

It is interesting to note, however that “not until Decius (249–251) did any deliberately attempt an Empire-wide persecution.”⁴⁴ It is believed that prior to Decius “no emperor regarded [Christians] as enough of a threat to institute a systematic, empire-wide campaign against them until 249.”⁴⁵ It is said that Decius “was concerned that traditional polytheism was weakening, and thought a resurrection of devotion to the deified Roman rulers of the past would help restore Roman strength...monotheistic Christians stood in the way.”⁴⁶

³⁹ Eastwood, “Causes for the Early Persecutions.”

⁴⁰ Galli, “Persecution in the Early Church.”

⁴¹ Eastwood, “Causes for the Early Persecutions.”

⁴² Gonzalez, 83.

⁴³ Ferguson, “Persecution in the Early Church.”

⁴⁴ Galli, “Persecution in the Early Church.”

⁴⁵ Collins and Price, 44.

⁴⁶ Galli, “Persecution in the Early Church.”

Decius had come to power at a moment of grave military threat from the Goths, and economic and social decline in the cities. He blamed his predecessor, Philip, for military incompetence and the Christians, whom he believed Philip had favored, for the breakdown of morale in the Empire. His remedy was an explicit return to former Republican virtues (Roman *mores*) and the association of all inhabitants of the Empire with the emperor's yearly sacrifice to the gods of Rome on the Capitol. Decius combined this move, evidently, with an order (probably in December 249) to seize leading Christians. By January 20, 250, Pope Fabian had been tried before the emperor himself and sentenced to be executed.⁴⁷

Regarding Decius sentiments towards Christians: "Although they still constituted a small minority, their efficient and self-contained organization, with no need of the state, irritated him."⁴⁸ It is said that

Although he did not actually order Christians to give up their faith, he did expect them to perform one pagan religious observance. When undertaken, Christians would receive a Certificate of Sacrifice (*libellus*) from the local Sacrificial Commission and so be cleared of suspicion of undermining the religious unity of the Empire. As expected, many Christians succumbed to this pressure; others paid bribes to receive the certificate. But many refused to compromise and died as a result.⁴⁹

Under Valerian (253-260)

Everett Ferguson shares that under Valerian's reign, "In some parts of the Empire this persecution of 258- 259 was the bloodiest the church endured."⁵⁰ Not unlike emperors before him who used the Christians as a scapegoat, Valerian accused this group of the empire's troubles:

To divert attention from the troubles that beset the Empire, Valerian blamed the Christians. In August 257 he intensified Decius's policies by ordering clergy to sacrifice to the gods of the state (although, with usual Roman pragmatism, they were not prohibited from worshipping Jesus Christ in private.) A year later clergy became liable to capital punishment. Pope Sixtus II and St. Lawrence were subsequently burned to death in Rome, and Cyprian was executed at Carthage. In addition, the property of Christian laity, especially that of senators and equites (a class immediately below senators) was confiscated, and Christian tenants of imperial estates were condemned to the mines.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Ferguson, "Persecution in the Early Church."

⁴⁸ Galli, "Persecution in the Early Church."

⁴⁹ Galli, "Persecution in the Early Church."

⁵⁰ Ferguson, "Persecution in the Early Church."

⁵¹ Galli, "Persecution in the Early Church."

The reasons given for persecuting believers and the crimes of which they were accused, were harsh and punishable by death, noted here:

In words that summed up the authorities' case against the Christians, the proconsul said, "You have lived a sacrilegious life, and you have gathered around yourself many vicious men in a conspiracy. You have set yourself up as an enemy of the Roman gods and of their sacred rites. And the pious and most religious emperors Valerian and Gallienus Augusti, and Valerian, the most noble Caesar, have been unable to bring you back to the observance of their own sacred rituals. Therefore, having been apprehended as the instigator and ringleader of a criminal conspiracy ... you will be executed." Conspiracy, illegal association, enmity toward the gods of Rome—these charges formed the basis for the persecutions during the first three centuries.⁵²

Thankfully, Valerian's edicts against Christians only lasted until his capture when "in an attempt to win the favor of eastern Christians against the Persians, Gallienus lifted the edicts."⁵³

Under Diocletian (284-305)

Diocletian was the last of the Roman rulers under which Christians suffered empire-wide persecutions, though that was not his original intent, since the ruler had family members who were part of the faith. Ferguson observes:

Persecutions might not have occurred, however, but for the fortunes of war. In 296 Caesar Galerius, who was strongly anti-Christian, won a decisive victory over the Persians. With his victory his influence over Diocletian increased. Diocletian's family contained some who were pro-Christian, and he was unwilling to act against the Christians. But his hand was forced, partly by Galerius's steady pressure and partly by anti-Christian propaganda from some provincial governors.⁵⁴

As a result, "Churches were destroyed, Christian services banned, and the Scriptures seized and burned. Christians in high places lost civil rights, and 'those in households' (perhaps meaning, 'private citizens') were deprived of their liberty. One concession Diocletian secured: no bloodshed."⁵⁵ Mark Galli goes on to describe that

the motive of this Great Persecution was the total extinction of Christianity. It was, it seems, the final struggle between the old and new orders, and therefore the fiercest. The

⁵² Ferguson, "Persecution in the Early Church."

⁵³ Galli, "Persecution in the Early Church."

⁵⁴ Ferguson, "Persecution in the Early Church."

⁵⁵ Ferguson, "Persecution in the Early Church."

first of Diocletian's edicts prohibited all Christian worship and commanded that churches and Christian books be destroyed. Two further edicts, required in the eastern provinces, ordered clergy to be arrested unless they sacrificed to pagan deities. By 304 this edict was extended to all Christians and was particularly vicious in Africa, under Diocletian co-Augustus Maximian...The persecutions continued under Galerius, now promoted to Augustus. But falling seriously ill in 311, Galerius and his fellow emperors issued an edict canceling the persecution of Christians. The following year, Constantine emerged triumphant in the West after the battle at the Milvian Bridge. In 313 he and Licinius, soon to control the Eastern Empire, issued the Edict of Milan, which decreed full legal toleration of Christianity. For all intents and purposes, no Roman emperor harassed Christians again.⁵⁶

Although believers were able to experience rest from persecution after Diocletian, it was not without first suffering great pain and great loss.

In 304, with Diocletian ill in Rome, Galerius seized his chance and imposed a universal obligation to sacrifice on pain of death. Up to then only the clergy had been involved directly; now the pressure was on every Christian. The number of martyrs increased, as did the defiance of the Christians. One inscription from a North African church lists 34 men and women who "suffered under the laws of the divine emperors Diocletian and Maximian." In Phrygia a whole community was wiped out, and Egypt saw eight years of ruthless repression, which among the Coptic Christians earned the reign of Diocletian the title "The era of the martyrs."⁵⁷

Eastwood concludes:

Roman citizens found time and time again specific aspects of Christian behaviour to be suspicious and apparently criminal. In this way especially the pagans attacked Christians, continually blaming them for natural and political troubles and bringing charges of specific crimes. Thus we find one list of crimes held against the Christians with forty-two entries. The key to the causes of the early persecutions lies primarily in the pagan mobs rather than in the imperial or proconsular attitudes.⁵⁸

Throughout all three centuries of persecution, "Christianity had never lost its martyr spirit. As one contemporary (Lactantius) explained, 'There is another cause why God permits persecutions to be carried out against us, that the people of God may be increased.'"⁵⁹

The early church's response and attitude towards persecution:

⁵⁶ Galli, "Persecution in the Early Church."

⁵⁷ Ferguson, "Persecution in the Early Church."

⁵⁸ Eastwood, "Causes for the Early Persecutions."

⁵⁹ Ferguson, "Persecution in the Early Church."

It is interesting to note what the early church believed and understood about persecution and martyrdom while it persevered and suffered. The church even made a distinction between those who suffered and those who suffered to the point of death: “In the second century, then, *martyr* became a technical term for a person who had died for Christ, while *confessor* was defined as one who proclaimed Christ's lordship at trial but did not suffer the death penalty.”⁶⁰ When considering why early believers chose not to fight against the injustices they faced, William Bixler shares that “The church understood martyrdom as an imitation of Christ. The Lord was the exemplar of nonviolence at his own trial and execution, declaring that his servants would not fight because his kingdom was not of this world.”⁶¹ The early church also gleaned much strength from learning those who suffered: “Stephen, the first Christian martyr, died a Christlike death, praying earnestly for his tormentors. Eusebius, the church historian, called Stephen ‘the perfect martyr’; thus he became a prototype for all martyrs to follow.”⁶² However, the choice to not engage in violent retaliation, was anything but passive:

The martyr's nonviolent response to trial and torture was never equated with passivity or resignation. For the early church, the act of martyrdom was a spiritual battle of epic proportion against the powers of hell itself. Justin, for example, wrote an apologetic to Emperor Antoninus Pius charging that his punishment of Christians without examination was "by the instigation of demons." ⁶³

In all of this, believers knew that they could not wage this war on their own, but rather “The church understood the source of the martyr's strength and testimony to be the Holy Spirit.”⁶⁴

By their faithfulness to Christ in spite of torture and death, these men, women, and children proclaimed to the world that Jesus, and not Caesar, is Lord. In the words of the Book of Revelation, "They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death (12:11)."⁶⁵

⁶⁰ William G. Bixler, “How the Early Church Viewed Martyrs.” *Christianity Today*, 1990, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-27/how-early-church-viewed-martyrs.html>.

⁶¹ Bixler, “How the Early Church Viewed Martyrs.”

⁶² Bixler, “How the Early Church Viewed Martyrs.”

⁶³ Bixler, “How the Early Church Viewed Martyrs.”

⁶⁴ Bixler, “How the Early Church Viewed Martyrs.”

⁶⁵ Bixler, “How the Early Church Viewed Martyrs.”

Persecution and martyrdom was also unifying for the church:

The attractive feature of a martyr's death was that it was open to anyone, regardless of social status or talent. Women were martyred alongside men, slaves alongside free persons. The necessary ability was to die bravely and with dignity, turning the agony and humiliation into shame and instruction for the spectators. Martyrs' bones were treasured and their burial places became the first Christian shrines.⁶⁶

Notable martyrs throughout the centuries:

During the first century, Gonzalez also writes that it is “very likely that both Peter and Paul were among the Neronian martyrs.”⁶⁷ In the midst of the persecutions of the second century, “Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, was perhaps the best known to have suffered death during [Trajan’s] reign”⁶⁸ while “Justin, the first Christian philosopher, was martyred during Marcus’s reign”⁶⁹ as well as Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna.⁷⁰ In the third century: “Among others, the dramatic martyrdom of Perpetua and her servant Felicitas occurred under Severus. Clement of Alexandria also perished, as did the father of Origen.”⁷¹ And under Decius, “Origen was arrested and tortured during this time. Though released, he died within a few years.”⁷²

Persecution still today:

Still today, the church continues to face persecution all over the world. Open Door’s World Watch List estimates that one in seven Christians are persecuted worldwide: “Today, more than 360m Christians suffer high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith. In Open Doors’ World Watch List top 50 alone, 312m Christians face very high or extreme levels.”⁷³ The country that is number one on its list is currently North Korea:

⁶⁶ MacCulloch, 161.

⁶⁷ Gonzalez, 35.

⁶⁸ Galli, “Persecution in the Early Church.”

⁶⁹ Galli, “Persecution in the Early Church.”

⁷⁰ Eastwood, “Causes for the Early Persecutions.”

⁷¹ Galli, “Persecution in the Early Church.”

⁷² Galli, “Persecution in the Early Church.”

⁷³ Open Doors, “World Watch List: Trends.”

<https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/persecution-trends>.

North Korea remains a brutally hostile place for Christians to live. If discovered by the authorities, believers are either sent to labour camps as political prisoners where the conditions are atrocious, or killed on the spot – and their families will share their fate as well. Christians have absolutely no freedom. It is almost impossible for believers to gather or meet to worship. Those who dare to meet must do so in utmost secrecy – and at enormous risk. A new 'anti-reactionary thought law' makes it amply clear that being a Christian or possessing a Bible is a serious crime and will be severely punished.⁷⁴

In the same way that Rome often retaliated against the church because it felt threatened, in North Korea, “The reason for such extreme persecution is that Christianity is seen as a particular threat to the dictatorial ideology and governance of the country's barbaric regime. Christians are viewed as enemies of both the leadership and society in general.”⁷⁵

Conclusion and Application:

It is Tertullian who is known to have said “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”⁷⁶ Jesus warned his disciples of persecution (a warning that was just as relevant then as it continues to be today):

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.⁷⁷

Yet, Christ also went on to assure us: “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”⁷⁸ Paul, who first persecuted the church and who then died a martyr's death, exhorts us today:

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him

⁷⁴ Open Doors, “World Watch List: Trends.”

⁷⁵ Open Doors, “World Watch List: Trends.”

⁷⁶ Collins and Price, 45.

⁷⁷ Jn 15:18-21

⁷⁸ Jn 16:33

but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.⁷⁹

Following the Lord's instruction and the example of the early church, I pray that we are bold and Christ-like in the face of existing and coming persecutions, as we pray for those who find themselves presently suffering for the sake of Christ. We have a rich history of men and women who did not succumb to the pressures of their time to recant their faith and who were willing to give it all as a witness to the truth and worthiness of Christ.

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⁷⁹ Phil 1:27-30

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