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Fall 2023

# Profiles in Christian Courage



## 1. The *Martyrs* of the Early Church



# The Beginning of Roman Persecution

- ▶ Nero (64 A.D.): Scapegoated the Christians to cover for his role in the great fire in Rome.
  - ▶ Subjected Christians to the vilest torture and mockery: burned as torches, sewn in animal skins to be torn by wild animals, etc.
  - ▶ Beheaded the apostles Peter and Paul
- ▶ Domitian (81-96 A.D.): Required worship of his image, which Christians would not do.
  - ▶ Heavy persecution in Asia Minor (churches of Revelation), including economic sanctions.
  - ▶ Sent the apostle John to the Isle of Patmos
- ▶ Trajan (98-117 A.D.): No systematic persecution but Christianity still illegal
  - ▶ Ignatius of Antioch martyred in 107 A.D.



# Roman Persecution

- ▶ Antonius Pius (138-161 A.D.):
  - ▶ After Hadrian largely protected Christians, he executed many, including Polycarp of Smyrna.
- ▶ Marcus Aurelius (161-180 A.D.): Revived persecutions on a wide scale.
  - ▶ Justin Martyr killed (166 A.D.).
  - ▶ Persecutions at Lyon (170 A.D.).
  - ▶ Perpetua & Felicity martyred in Carthage (180 A.D.).
- ▶ Septimius Severus (193-211 A.D.): Sporadic persecutions
- ▶ Decius (249-251 A.D.). First Empire-wide persecution of Christians
  - ▶ Barred Christians from worshipping
  - ▶ Called for execution of church leaders.
  - ▶ Banned Christians from positions of power.
  - ▶ Confiscated property from arrested Christians.



# Reasons for Christian Persecution

- ▶ Accused of being “unpatriotic.”
  - ▶ Refused to call Caesar “Lord” or to worship the Imperial cult.
  - ▶ Did not participate in popular civic practices/customs: “You do not attend our shows; you take no part in the processions; you are not present at our public banquets; you abhor the sacred games (i.e. gladiators).” Minucius Felix
  - ▶ Christians were called “athiests” because they would not offer sacrifices to pagan gods.
- ▶ Resented for Moral Purity
  - ▶ Christians condemned and opposed abortion, infanticide, homosexuality, and the degradation of women.
- ▶ Religious Exclusivism
  - ▶ Christians insisted that there is only one God and only one Savior in Jesus Christ: “They would gladly have welcomed the addition of Jesus Christ to the Pantheon if the Christians would only have agreed to give at least some obeisance to the Roman gods.” Alvin Schmidt

# The Martyrdom of Polycarp, 155 A.D.

- ▶ Polycarp, a disciple of the apostle John, was Bishop of Smyrna
- ▶ During a persecution in Asia, the people cried to the Roman proconsul, "Down with the Atheists," and "Get Polycarp!"
- ▶ Learning of this threat, Polycarp was persuaded to go into hiding but was betrayed.
  - ▶ When soldiers came to arrest him, Polycarp greeted them, provided a meal for them, and asked for an hour to pray. The soldiers expressed sadness at having come "to arrest such a godly and venerable an old man."



# The Martyrdom of Polycarp, 155 A.D.

- ▶ Entering the arena, Polycarp heard a voice: "Be strong, Polycarp! Play the man!"
- ▶ Appeal for Polycarp to Apostatize:
  - ▶ "Have respect for your old age, swear by the fortune of Caesar. . . . Reproach Christ, and I will set you free."
  - ▶ "Eighty six years have I served him, and he has done meno wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?"
- ▶ Threat of Violence
  - ▶ "I have wild animals here. I will throw you to them." – "It is unthinkable for me to repent from what is good to turn to what is evil." – "I will have you burned" – "You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and is then extinguished, but you know nothing of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. Why are you waiting? Bring on whatever you want."
- ▶ Polycarp's Dying Prayer
  - ▶ "O Lord God Almighty, the Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, . . . I give you thanks that you count me worthy to be numbered among your martyrs, sharing the cup of Christ and the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and body, through the immortality of the Holy Spirit."





# The Martyrs of Lyon (177 A.D.)

- ▶ Around 152, Polycarp sent his disciple Pothinus to plant a church in Lyon, a growing city in Gaul. By 177, the church had grown considerably.
- ▶ Under a hostile governor (and alarmed by natural catastrophes), persecution began. Christians were deprived of their homes and workplaces. Mobs assaulted Christians. Finally, they were arrested and a large number were in prison.
- ▶ On August 1, the proconsul arrived to celebrate the August 1 anniversary of the Empire. He decided to make sport of the Christians.
  - ▶ The Christians were confined in a deep, confined prison space (Pothinus died of suffocation after 2 days).
  - ▶ They were placed on a hot-iron seat to be charred and grilled over open flames
  - ▶ For the celebration, they were thrown to animals in the arena.

# The Martyr Blandina

- ▶ Blandina was a Christian slave in the home of a believing aristocrat.
- ▶ Refusing to renounce Christ, she was affixed to a cross so that wild animals might attack her. They refused to do so.
- ▶ She then was laid on a red-hot slab of iron, so that her body was charred, then placed in a net for a bull to trample and gore her.
- ▶ When the crowd called for the “coup de grace,” she helped the trembling soldier place the sword at her neck.
- ▶ As a result, many in the crowd ultimately were converted, purportedly including the Roman governor.





# The Great Persecution of Diocletian (303-311 A.D)

- ▶ Diocletian (284-305) was one of the greatest emperors and had not bothered Christians. In 303, he was persuaded by his deputy Galerius to eradicate Christianity. It was a “last gasp” face-off between paganism and Christianity.
- ▶ Four edicts were published over two years:
  - ▶ Christian worship barred (church at Nicomedia burned)
  - ▶ Bishops, priests, and presbyters to be executed
  - ▶ All Scriptures to be destroyed
  - ▶ All Christians required to renounce and worship image of Caesar on pain of death.
- ▶ Empire-wide persecution of great severity with large numbers of Christians slain. Others apostatized, shocking the believers.



# From Diocletian to Constantine

- ▶ Edict of Toleration issued in 311:
  - ▶ In 310, Galerius was stricken with a horrible intestinal ailment (like Herod Agrippa in Acts).
  - ▶ Under the influence of his Christian wife, he is said to have repented before dying.
- ▶ After Galerius' death, Constantine and Maximinus vied for power, fighting a decisive battle outside Rome, at the Milvian Bridge (312).
  - ▶ Constantine claims to have seen a vision of the *Chi-Rho* with the inscription *in hoc signo vinces*. He painted the symbol on his soldiers' shield and was victorious.
- ▶ The Edict of Milan (313) ended all persecution and legalized Christianity





# Lessons from the Early Church Martyrs

- ▶ The Christian martyrs stunned the pagan Romans with the power of lives transformed by a living Savior.
  - ▶ The martyred church provided “evidence of the indestructible, divine nature of Christianity.” Philip Schaaf.
  - ▶ “Men and women of all classes, noble senators and learned bishops, illiterate artisans and poor slaves, loving mothers and delicate virgins, hoary-headed pastors and innocent children approached their tortures in no temper of unfeeling indifference and obstinate defiance, but, like their divine Master, with calm self-possession, humble resignation, gentle meekness, cheerful faith, triumphant hope, and forgiving charity.”
- ▶ The moral and spiritual weakness of paganism was revealed in light of Christian conviction
  - ▶ “Paganism contained no promise that “He who believe in me will live, even though he dies” (Jn. 11:25). Paganism had no transforming spiritual power.” A. Schmidt



# Lessons from the Early Church Martyrs

- ▶ There are no records of the Christians revolting or taking up arms. Theirs was a purely spiritual movement (Jn. 18:36).
  - ▶ Eusebius: "So many were killed on a single day that the axe, blunted and worn out by the slaughter was broken in pieces, while the exhausted executioners had to be periodically relieved. All the time I observed a most wonderful eagerness and a truly divine power and enthusiasm in those who had put their trust in the Christ of God. . . . They paid no heed to torture in all its terrifying forms, but undaunted spoke boldly of their devotion to the God of the universe and with joy, laughter, and gaiety received the final sentence of death: they sang and sent up hymns of thanksgiving to the God of the universe till their very last breath."
- ▶ The Christians credited the persecution with purifying the church and cultivating a costly faith.
  - ▶ "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk. 9:23).
- ▶ Under the moral influence of the suffering Christian witness, the number of believers exploded.
  - ▶ Tertullian: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."
  - ▶ By 313 A.D., 10-15% of the Empire's population professed faith in Christ.