

## **The Persecutions**

This lesson is entitled “The Martyrs Who Lived.” You might be perplexed by that title. The more conventional way to say it is, I suppose, “martyrs who died.” But I use that phrase in the title for this lecture because I read it some time ago in the writings of Aleksandr Menn, a Russian preacher in the Orthodox Church who was himself almost certainly a martyr for the Christian cause. He wrote these words, “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 all our solar system.” He makes the context rather large with that last phrase. As I thought about the expression, “martyrs who lived,” it appealed to me because I think Aleksandr Menn understood the true nature of the martyrs’ sacrifice. They do live, these martyrs about whom we will talk today. They live on in the memories of others, including ours as we read about them, and they live on in their witness. As you may know, the New Testament word for martyr means “witness.” These martyrs were witnesses who lived in the early days of the church. But even more important for them is that they live on eternally with God in heaven. The dates of the deaths of the early Christian martyrs were often remembered in the early church and even later as birthdays. These were really the days they died, but the church celebrated those days as birthdays because on the days of their deaths they began their lives in the presence of God in heaven. I will begin with a prayer from one of the famous martyrs of the church, Polycarp. He lived from the late first century into the early second century AD. He was a disciple of John. He studied with John who was a disciple of Jesus. Polycarp was burned at the stake in the year 155 AD. He made that famous speech, the story of which you can read in Gonzales’ book. When asked to deny the Lord, Polycarp said, “I have served him for 86 years and He has done me no harm. How could I curse my King who saved me?” We have an account of the prayer Polycarp prayed at the stake. I will use that prayer as we begin this lecture. This is not exactly the way Polycarp prayed it because few of us are facing anything like being burned at the stake today. But there are pressures and problems that we all have, and we can relate this prayer in some ways to our own situations, I am sure. But as we pray it we will think of this earnest man, an old bishop, 86 years old, who was not willing to give up his faith to save his earthly life. Let us pray.

*“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, 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.”*

That is an amazing prayer. To think of uttering those words, so proper, so complete in the face of imminent death. As we study the New Testament, particularly Acts and the Epistles—and the Gospels, all the New Testament—we recognize that the persecution that came to the early Christians came first from the Jews. Especially in Acts, the persecutors are the Jews and sometimes pagans, and Rome is often the protector of the Christian church. Paul appeals to Caesar in order to have a fair trial. But as we move to Revelation, from the decade of the 60s AD in Acts to the decade of the 90s AD in Revelation, things have changed dramatically. Rome is no longer the protector of the church but rather the persecutor. Rome has become, as John describes her in Revelation, the great Babylon. Thus we will move quickly to the Roman persecution.

The Roman persecution lasted from the 60s of the first century to the 320s. So there were about two-and-a-half centuries of persecution. I have summarized all this on page 14 in the syllabus, giving 8 main points. I will not lecture through those main points, but page 14 in the syllabus gives you something of an outline of the major times of persecution. The Roman persecution began in the time of Nero in the 60s AD. The Roman historian Tacitus left us that vivid description of the awful persecution of the Christians under Nero: "Covered with skins of beasts Christians were torn by dogs and perished. Or they were nailed to crosses or burned by flames to serve as nightly illuminations in Nero's gardens." This is from Tacitus who was not necessarily sympathetic to the Christians; he was simply describing what happened. From that first persecution in the 60s, which claimed almost certainly the lives of Peter and Paul and is described in the great novel *Quo Vadis?*, we move all the way down to the last persecution under Diocletian. This was the final and fiercest attack on the Christian faith.

As we think about that two-and-a-half century period, let me make two points that I think are important for us to keep in mind. One is this: these persecutions were sporadic. We are not talking about two-and-a-half centuries of intense, consistent, persistent persecution. Actually there were two periods of long peace in the third century interrupted by persecution in the mid-third century. For much of this period Christians were not being persecuted. We should not think of this as a consistent period of extreme persecution. Persecution could break out at almost any time and in almost any place, but many Christians lived their lives in relative peace during these first centuries of the Christian church. The other point to emphasize is this: until the mid-third century this was not systematic, empire-wide persecution. Until the middle of the third century persecution tended to be localized. It might happen in North Africa, it could happen in Lyon, it could break out in Asia Minor, and it did from time to time strike Christian people in all those places. But until the first empire-wide, systematic persecution under Decius in 250 AD, there was no concerted effort to wipe out the Christian church that stretched across the empire. There are many wonderful accounts of Christians who suffered, who were persecuted, and who were faithful. There were also many Christians who were not faithful; we will talk about that in a few minutes. Many people apostatized. Not every Christian was able to stand like Polycarp and say, "Yes, I serve the Lord and I will serve Him in my death as I have served Him in my life." There were many who failed. But there were many who were faithful.

There is the amazing story of Perpetua, a 22-year-old young woman, mother of an infant child. She wrote her diary while in prison in Carthage, North Africa. The diary of Perpetua is probably the first writing we have from a Christian woman. That is a wonderful account of courage and faith in the midst of awful tension and eventual death. There is also the famous story of Polycarp, the old bishop who died in Smyrna, Asia. One of my favorite stories from this part of church history is the account of the martyrdom of the 40 martyrs of Sebaste, Asia. These martyrs were from the Roman province of Cappadocia. The martyrdom of these 40 soldiers happened in the year 320 AD, which is after persecution had ceased in the western part of the empire because it is after the date of the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, but persecution continued in the East for some years. Gonzales has a picture, a mosaic of the 40 martyrs, in *Story of Christianity*, and he speaks of it as "The legend of the 40 martyrs." But Cambridge's *Ancient History* speaks of it as actual history with undoubtedly legendary aspects added to it. Many of the stories that we get from this period have been enhanced or elaborated by certain legendary elements that grew through the years. But I think there is good reason to believe that the story of the 40 martyrs actually took place.

I have mentioned the book *Quo Vadis?*, an exciting story. It tells of the persecution of the Christians and what happened to some of them during the time of Nero. A much more competent book, another novel but an historical novel that will teach you a great deal about this period, is the book *The Flames of Rome*, written by Paul Maier. That is a very enjoyable and accurate book. Dr. Maier is a professor of

history and a Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor. If you read *The Flames of Rome* you will notice that it includes about 50 pages of footnotes—there is much history in that book, and it is an exciting story as well.

Let us come to the question of why. Why were the Christians persecuted? Many reasons were given. There were many charges brought against the Christians at that time, some of which could be easily refuted. Those charges included cannibalism. It seems strange that Christians would be charged with cannibalism; it certainly was not true. But Christians did speak in their worship about eating Jesus' body and drinking Jesus' blood. So you can see how rumors might spread that cannibalism was being practiced in these secret meetings often held before dawn in out-of-the-way places. When Pliny was a governor in Bithynia, Asia he did not quite know how to handle the Christians in his province. He wrote to Emperor Trajan to get some suggestions, and he tried to describe the Christians as he saw them. He said, "They eat only ordinary and harmless kinds of food." Thus we see that this Roman governor was careful enough to do research and discover that the charge of cannibalism was grossly unfair and untrue. Christians were also charged with disruption of business. Perhaps in some way they could be charged with that. In Acts chapter 19 Paul's preaching certainly disrupts the business of those engaged in the worship of Artemis or Diana. Also, as people became Christians they did not buy the sacrificial items or other items that were used in false worship. Another charge brought against them was "gross immorality, including incest." This also came from unfounded rumors. Christians call one another "brother" and "sister." They had the habit of greeting one another with a "holy kiss." And the love Christians had for one another was transposed in the Roman mind to sexual extravagance and even incest. Those charges were fairly easily answered.

Christians were also charged with being anti-family. This seems like a strange charge to us, as Christians are very much pro-family. But what happened here, I think, was that Christians like the young woman Perpetua were willing to say, "We must forsake father and mother and husbands and wives and take up our cross and follow Christ." People could not understand that. In the account of Perpetua her father pleads with her, "Do not forget me! Do not forget your mother! Do not forsake your sisters! What about your infant child?" It seems like this woman was not concerned with them. She was concerned about them, but her allegiance to Christ meant that she could deny her father even to maintain her place in that family. Christians were also charged with poverty. As we saw in the previous lesson, that was largely true. But it was more a source of ridicule than of persecution. The Christian apologists like Minucius Felix whom I already quoted in the earlier lecture said, "That many of us are poor is not our disgrace but our glory." Then there was a strange charge: atheism. Christians were considered atheists because they did not worship all the gods. They did worship one God, but He is invisible and so did not count. To the Romans, Christians were atheists. At Polycarp's martyrdom he was in the stadium with the proconsul and the crowd of people who had come to see what would happen to him, as they often came to see what would happen to the Christians. The proconsul ordered him to say, "Away with the atheists." By that the proconsul meant for this bishop, Polycarp, to say, "Away with the Christians [the atheists]." "Just say, 'Away with the atheists,' and we will let you go." Well this was a feisty bishop and he waved around to the crowd pointing to them and said, "Away with the atheists!" But he obviously had a different group in mind than the Christians and as a result he died for his faith.

Another charge against the Christians was novelty. This was a new religion. This is a strange charge since all sorts of new religions were pouring into the Roman Empire from the East, not only Christianity but the mystery religions as well. The Christians were well able to answer this and they did, over and over again: "Our faith goes far back, all the way to the beginning of the Old Testament. This is not new; this is the continuation of the religion of Israel." And then the charge was also often made that the Christians were not patriotic. Christians, it is true, did not participate in some of the city festivals

because immorality was practiced in connection with those festivals, and emperor worship was part of the city duty in those festivals. Therefore Christians would absent themselves from the festivals, from the celebrations. And consequently they were charged with lack of patriotism. Their behavior was considered anti-social, staying in their homes and not associating with other people. This, however, was not quite true. The Christians were separate and different in significant ways. But Christians said over and over again, "We live in the same cities, we work side by side with you, we are part of Rome (or Alexandria, or Carthage, or Thessalonica). But in some ways we have to be different." But as Tacitus put it, "These Christians were loathed for their hatred of the human race." When people are different and separate themselves somewhat, others will charge them with hatred of the human race.

Then there was a charge that was frequently repeated: "You Christians are the cause of the disasters that are happening." This was a charge that more and more affected the Christians as Rome began to crumble. People thought, "We were strong and doing well until these Christians came in." That is why Saint Augustine wrote *The City of God*, which we will discuss in some detail later. Christians were blamed for almost anything that happened. Tertullian, the church father, put it this way, "If the Tiber reaches the walls, if the Nile does not rise to the fields, if the sky does not move so that there is drought, or if the earth does move so that there is an earthquake, if there is a famine, if there is a plague, the cry is at once, 'Send the Christians to the lions!'" That was a charge that was repeated consistently throughout this period.

Trajan's letter to Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia in about the year 112 AD, set forth the policy that was generally followed until the empire-wide persecution under Decius in 250 AD. That policy was, "Christians are not to be sought out. Do not go looking for them. But if someone denounces someone as a Christian, then bring that person in and question them. And if that person refuses to recant and worship our gods, then they should be punished." That was the way it worked until 250 AD. So it took a jealous neighbor or an envious associate or someone who was spiteful to bring a charge. And then the Christian would be arrested and tried. Thus Christians lived under the cloud of the possibility of persecution almost all the time. Now, there was a more serious charge that really began to affect the Christians in every part of the empire. That was, "These people simply refuse to worship the emperor." And Christians did refuse to worship the emperor. Jews did as well, but Jews were exempt for reasons I will not go into in this lecture. The Jews were a nation, but the Christians were everywhere. They came from all nations, and they were not exempt. The Christians' response to this was, "We cannot worship the emperor. We worship God alone. To worship the emperor would mean that we were no longer Christians. But we respect the emperor as chosen by our Lord. Caesar is more ours than yours because he is appointed by our God." That was a good answer but it did not satisfy the Romans. It probably infuriated them for the Christians to say, "We do not worship the emperor but he belongs more to us than to you because our God put him on his throne."

Especially later on in this period, but it was possible at any point during this time, people who were Christians suffered simply because they were Christians. They suffered because they bore the name of Christ. And they were prepared for this. In 1 Peter 4:16 it says, "However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name." You can imagine that this text was often quoted in church meetings in the second, third, and early fourth centuries. As we read that amazing account of the witness of Perpetua in Carthage whose father was pleading with her to denounce her faith, we can feel the tension there. She had to remain a Christian and reject the pleas of her father, which to Romans was unthinkable for a young woman to do. But she said this, "Father, do you see this water pot here?" He said, "Yes, of course." "Well that is what it is. It is not something else. Can it be called by any other name than what it is?" He said, "No." She said, "Then I cannot be anything other than what I am, and I am a Christian." That is a very moving story, I think, because she really stood firm

at a point where it would have been easy to cave in. She knew she was going to suffer simply because she was a Christian. There is also the story of Ptolemaeus, who died during the reign of Antoninus Pius. The judge said, "Are you a Christian?" He said, "Yes," and they took him out and executed him. Execution was practiced quickly after the sentence. Someone objected to that so they said, "Are you a Christian?" He said "Yes," so they executed him. A third person said, "Well this is not right, to be executing these people simply because they are Christians!" The judge said, "You sound like a Christian, too." The man said, "Yes, I am." So they executed him. Justin, later himself a martyr and thus called Justin Martyr, heard about this and in protest wrote a letter to the emperor. The letter is called "The second apology of Justin Martyr."

What was the Roman state trying to do in persecuting the Christians? Two things, I think. The main purpose was to cause the Christians to apostatize. Most of the Romans, the emperors and officials, did not want to kill the Christians as much as they wanted them to simply stop being Christians. Therefore pressure was put on in different ways and in various places in the empire to try to produce apostates. People at large, including Christians if they were to get through the persecutions, were required to have a little certificate (rather like a U.S. social security card) called a libelus. If you worshiped the emperor, which was a very simple thing involving bowing your head or burning incense to an image of the emperor, in this very easy fashion then you got your card. Because this was such an easy thing Christians were tempted, and some Christians did bow their heads and did burn the incense. What would you do in a situation like that? Some of them did and they got their cards and went on their way. This created a problem in the church later, which we will discuss in another lecture, the Donatus controversy. This controversy arose because after the persecutions were over many of these same Christians were sorry they had worshiped the emperor. They wanted back in the church and the big question became, "Can we let them back in?" I will not discuss that more now because it occurred some centuries later and we will come to it in a later lesson. So the two main purposes of the persecutions were to cause apostasy and to martyr the obstinate. If people just refused like Perpetua, Justin Martyr, and Polycarp, then they ought to be put to death. And many were put to death.

Those were the purposes, but what were the actual results of the persecutions? I think we can summarize the results of persecution in the early church in these two points: persecution purified the church and persecution extended the church. The results were not really what the Romans planned. Actually, as F. F. Bruce puts it in *The Spreading Flame*, "Christianity was organized for catastrophe." The church was ready for this. You only have to read the New Testament a little to see that Christians must be prepared, organized, for catastrophe. Jesus said, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also." Thus the Christians were not surprised. They were expecting it. We read also from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:10, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The church was ready for this. Actually I think we will see a kind of problem develop because Christians began to want to be persecuted. The church fathers had to say, "If you are brought before the authorities, do not deny Christ. Die like a Christian. But do not try to be persecuted; do not try to be martyred." This may seem strange to us, that people were trying to be martyred, but they were. The church father Origen when he was a teenager saw his father taken out and martyred. Origen wanted to be martyred as well. His mother had to hide all his clothes in the house so that he would not have anything to wear. He was ashamed to go out without anything on so he was not martyred. His mother did well, and Origen played an important role in the history of the church later on.

But persecution did purify the church. That is easy to see, is it not? If you live in a time or place like this, where the very fact that you are a Christian could give someone grounds to accuse you and bring you before the judge—if that is what it means to be a Christian—then people will not consider Christianity lightly. They will realize that to be a Christian means to take up one's cross and be crucified

on it. Tertullian, whom I quote so often because of all the church fathers he has the facility of saying things in the crispest and most memorable way, said that persecution was “God’s winnowing fan, which even now cleanses the Lord’s threshing floor.” Persecution would blow through, blow the chaff away, and leave the good grain. Persecution did purify the church. When we come to the time of the end of persecution under Constantine, the church has a new problem: nominalism. This happened because it became popular to be a Christian. But before Constantine it was not popular to be a Christian, and Christians faced very serious threats and even death. And persecution also extended the church. Again Tertullian says it in a very famous quote, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” Over and over again we read stories like that of the 40 martyrs of Sebaste where persecution extends the church. In the story of the 40 martyrs, 40 Christians were taken out on a frozen lake to die overnight. They were singing, “40 good martyrs, 40 good soldiers for Christ.” Then in the middle of the night one of them left the lake, ice, and certain death to go to the heated bathhouse that was available for anyone who would apostatize. So out on the lake came then the song, “39 good soldiers for Christ.” And then according to the story the jailer who had been watching all this through the night ripped off his clothes and joined the soldiers on the lake and the song came again, “40 good soldiers for Christ.” You can see in that story both the temptation to apostasy and the effect that the endurance of this persecution by faithful Christians had upon people. Persecution did extend the church. But I think we should say something that I have not always said at this point in the lesson: it did not always work that way. Reading Samuel Moffat’s *Christianity in Asia*, we see that there were times when in Asia persecution just stayed with no relief, and the church in those places was destroyed. Thus we see that it is not always the case that persecution extends the church. But in the history of the church in early Rome, by God’s providence and mercy, persecution did extend the church. Many people came into the church because they saw something in Christians who suffered that they had never seen before and they could never forget it. This was like Paul, I expect, who never could forget the stoning of Stephen until it finally broke through into his mind and heart that God wanted him to go the same way.

Before we close let me just say this: we usually think of the history of the early church as *the* time of persecution in the church. It was *a* time of persecution in church history. But people have said, and I think they are right, that more people have been martyred for Christ in the last 50 years than in the first 250 years of the church’s history. That is partly because there are more Christians today. We are all over the world now, and in many places our brothers and sisters in Christ are being persecuted and martyred. We in the United States and other places of relative safety for Christians should not think that persecution is something that is finished with, something that is not and will not happen again. We know that it is happening now in different places in this world.

I have been asked about the libelus, the little cards that anyone who wanted to avoid persecution must have during this time. These cards were checked from time to time. Let me read you part of a typical libelus: “To the commission chosen to superintend the sacrifices at the village of Alexander’s Isle, from Aurelius Diogenis, 872, with a score above the right eyebrow [there had to be some kind of identification to make sure you were talking about the right person]: I have always sacrificed to the gods and now in your presence and in accordance with the edict I have made sacrifice and poured a libation and partaken of the sacred victims. I request you to certify this below. Farewell. I Arelius Diogenis present this petition.”

This man got his libelus and he would keep it in his house. If he was charged with being a Christian he could produce it. I expect these cards were checked, but remember that these persecutions were sporadic. There would be times of intense persecution when a whole city or province would be subjected to this. It depended on the mood of the emperor back in Rome; it depended on whether catastrophes

were threatening locally. All kinds of things could produce a persecution and then it was important for a person to have a certificate.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Hebrews 12:1).