

# Martyrdom

*Phil 1:20-21 I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain*

The picture of defenseless, peaceful Christians standing in their white robes before menacing lions while an amphitheater echoes with the shouts for blood from a Roman throng is sometimes misleading. Prior to A.D. 200 Roman attempts to silence Christians were half-hearted at best. Few Roman emperors were bloodthirsty villains.

ROME'S POLICY – basic policy: *tolerant of religions from those lands overrun by the Roman legions. If the national religions of the conquered countries would add homage to the emperor to their other ceremonies, Rome almost never interfered* In one notable instance, Rome even dropped the requirement of burning incense to the emperor. *“The Jews, with their fanatical loyalty to their one true God, and their readiness to turn their homeland into a bloodsoaked wilderness before they would acknowledge any other deity, were the exception.”* -----As long as Roman authorities considered Christians as just one more sect of Jews, they enjoyed this same immunity from imperial pressure. **But the Jews made it known in no uncertain terms that they would have nothing to do with the new movement,** the situation changed dramatically.

The Jews were *“a sort of closed corporation, a people set apart from others by the mark of circumcision, who lived and worshiped largely by themselves, and did no active proselyting.”*

Christians were always talking about Jesus. *Not only did they, like the Jews, refuse to worship the emperor as a living god, but they were doing their utmost to convince every subject of the emperor to join them in their refusal.*

## REASONS FOR PERSECUTION - ????

The main cause of the hatred of early Christians in Roman society lies in their distinctive life-style. *“We have the reputation,” said Tertullian in his Apology, “of living aloof from crowds.”* The word used to describe the Christian is the term *hagios*, often translated “saints.” It means holy ones, but its root suggests **DIFFERENT. So a holy thing is different from other things**

**By simply living according to the teachings of Jesus, the Christian was a constant unspoken condemnation of the pagan way of life.**

Fundamental to the Christian life-style and the cause of endless hostility was the Christian's rejection of the pagan gods. The Greeks and Romans had deities for every aspect of living—**sowing and reaping, for rain and wind, for volcanoes and rivers, for birth and death.** But to the Christians these gods were nothing, their denial marked them as *“enemies of the human race.”*

One simply could not reject the gods without arousing scorn as a social misfit.

- For the pagan every meal began with a liquid offering and a prayer to the pagan gods.
- Most heathen feasts and social parties were held in the precincts of a temple after sacrifice had been made, and the invitation was usually to dine “at the table” of some god.
- Gladiatorial combats were to the Christian inhuman.
- A mason might be involved in building the walls of a heathen temple, a tailor in making robes for a heathen priest, an incense-maker in making incense for the heathen sacrifices.
- To be a schoolteacher you used textbooks that told the ancient stories of the gods and called for observing the religious festivals of the pagan year.
- Working with the sick early Christians found the pagan hospitals under the protection of the heathen god Aesculapius – the priest went down the aisle chanting to the god.

The early Christian felt bound to divorce himself from the social and economic life of his time—if he wanted to be true to his Lord. **Everywhere the Christian turned his life and faith were on display because the gospel introduced a revolutionary new attitude toward human life.**

- Christians also held slaves but they treated them kindly and allowed them to have the same rights within the church as anyone else. One former slave, Callistus, became the bishop of Rome.

- The same value upon human life applied to infants. *Unlike his pagan neighbor the Christian refused to take his weak and unwanted children out in the woods and leave them to die or be picked up by robbers.*
- In modern times the church has often borne the brunt of criticism for its ‘dated views’ of sex and the sanctity of marriage, but it is unlikely that charge would have been voiced in the Roman Empire. Pagan society; through its excesses, teetered on the brink – **Christianity; however, represented another way—The Pauline doctrine—that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit—introduced to the ancient world an uncompromising condemnation of unchastity and a sacred calling to family life.**

In the year 64, Emperor Nero, fire broke out in Rome. For six days and nights the fire burned. *The greater part of the city was laid in ashes (Nero let it burn).* The rumor circulated that Nero himself had caused the city to be set on fire. This aroused great hatred among the people of Rome against the emperor.

To turn this hatred away from himself Nero accused the Christians of having set the fire (“*Their God is a consuming fire*”). Large numbers of Christians were arrested and a terrible persecution followed. They were: **crucified**; sewn up in the skins of wild beasts then big dogs were let loose upon them. **Women were tied to mad bulls and dragged to death.** After nightfall Christians were burned at the stake in Nero’s garden. **The Roman people were free to come into the garden, and Nero drove around in his chariot enjoying the horrible spectacle to the full.**

During this persecution the apostles Peter and Paul suffered martyrdom in Rome. Peter, at his own request, was crucified with his head down. *He said he was not worthy to be crucified in the same manner as his Master.* Paul, being a Roman citizen, was beheaded.

Persecution was always poised above them. **It only took a malicious informer, a popular uproar, a governor determined to carry out the letter of the law, and the storm would burst.** The Christian as a Christian was legally an outlaw. *“Public hatred,” says Tertullian, “asks but one thing, not the investigation of the crimes charged, but simply the confession of the Christian name.”*

## SEX AND SLANDER

A 2<sup>nd</sup> and related cause of persecution of early Christians were the slanders disseminated about them. *“The Christian gatherings were sexual orgies and cover for every kind of crime”* took hold of the popular imagination with a terrible vehemence.

Christians were accused of a host of practices but most often of sexual sins and cannibalism.

- One Christian meeting was called the Agape— the Love Feast—
- Custom of the “holy kiss” of peace the Christians gave to one another.
- The charge of cannibalism started because the Lord’s Supper – they heard that somebody was being eaten. *Jesus had said at the Last Supper: “This bread is my body. This cup is my blood.”* The pagans concluded that the Christians must be eating and drinking human flesh and blood.

About A.D. 112 one governor in Asia Minor, Pliny, *“I do not know just what to do with the Christians, for I have never been present at one of their trials. Is just being a Christian enough to punish, or must something bad actually have been done? What I have done, in the case of those who admitted they were Christians, was to order them sent to Rome, if citizens; if not, to have them killed. I was sure they deserved to be punished because they were so stubborn.”* Pliny seems to feel that Christians are guilty of something. He isn’t sure what it is.

A 3<sup>rd</sup> cause of Christian suffering may strike us as strange. **Christians were accused of atheism.** Many within the empire could not understand an imageless worship. Monotheism held no attraction for such people. **As a result they blamed Christians for insulting the gods of the state.**

In his Apology Tertullian writes: *“If the Tiber floods the city, or if the Nile refuses to rise, or if the sky withholds its rain, if there is an earthquake, a famine, a pestilence, at once the cry is raised: ‘Christians to the lion.’”*

The supreme cause of Roman persecution of Christians arose from the tradition of emperor worship. When Roman administration came, the roads were cleared of robbers and the seas of pirates, and a new security entered into life. This was pax Romana, **the Roman peace**.

The result of this was a deep and heartfelt gratitude to the spirit of Rome. ***It was an easy step for the spirit of Rome to become the goddess Roma, and by the second century B.C. there were many temples in Asia Minor to the goddess Roma.*** But the human mind and heart seek symbols; it was an easy step to see the goddess Roma and the spirit of Rome incarnated in the emperor. **He embodied Rome; he was Rome; in him the spirit of Rome resided and had its earthly dwelling.** The first temple actually built to the godhead of the emperor was built in 29 B.C. at Pergamum in Asia Minor.

**THERE IS NO UNIFYING FORCE LIKE THE FORCE OF A COMMON RELIGION; AND CAESAR WORSHIP LAY READY AT HAND.** As a result Caesar worship became “the keystone” of imperial policy. ***It was deliberately organized in every province in the empire.*** Everywhere temples to the godhead of the emperor appeared.

People within the empire came to believe that any allegiance in conflict with loyalty to the emperor, and therefore to the empire, could only lead to the disintegration of order. **Worship of another Lord could only open the floodgates of chaos. – Following?** Under Emperor Decius Caesar worship was made universal — **and compulsory for every race and nation within the empire with the single exception of the Jews.** Every Roman citizen had to come to the Temple of Caesar and had to burn a pinch of incense there, and say: “*Caesar is Lord.*” He was given a certificate to guarantee that he had done his duty.

Caesar worship was primarily a test of political loyalty. If a man refused to carry out the ceremony of acknowledging Caesar, he was automatically branded as a traitor and a revolutionary. Exaltation of the emperor created a problem for the Christians. **They had not failed to pray FOR the emperor in their meetings, but they would not pray TO him in private or in public.**

Roman coins usually celebrated the blessings each successive emperor was to bring to a waiting world, announce his reign with, “*Hail, Lord of the Earth, Invincible, Power, Glory, Honor, Blessed, Great, Worthy art Thou to inherit the kingdom.*” How could a Christian compromise with this?

- Who was worthy to ascend the throne of the universe and direct the course of history? *Caesar, or Christ?* Christian worship and Caesar worship met head-on. ***The one thing that no Christian would ever say was: “Caesar is Lord.”*** For the Christian, Jesus Christ and he alone was Lord. **To the Roman the Christian seemed utterly intolerant and insanely stubborn; worse, he was a self-confessed disloyal citizen.**

***The Revelation of John reflects the Christian response to the imperial cult in Asia Minor toward the end of the first century.*** John traces the oppression of believers to the devil himself, to the great red dragon, who wages war against the saints through two agents— the beasts of Revelation 13. **The first is the beast from the sea (or abyss), the imperial power. The second is the beast from the land (the false prophet), or the imperial worship.**

And what was the Christian defense against this attack from Rome? They conquered the dragon, John says, “*by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death*” (Rev. 12:11).