

A photograph of the Colosseum in Rome at night, illuminated by warm lights. The lower portion of the image is overlaid with a dark red, semi-transparent band. The title text is centered within this band.

PERSECUTION AND TRIBULATION FOR EARLY BELIEVERS

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KEN TOUCHTON (4/1/3)

By Dale "Geno" Robinson

IN ROMANS 8:35, near the end of his life,¹ Paul put forth a song of victory over persecution and tribulation:

Who can separate us from the love of Christ?

Can affliction or anguish or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? (HCSB)

Paul saw those difficulties as natural consequences of his faith, causing him pain, but received with joy. Persecution was the religious and legal punishment he and other believers received from Jews and Gentiles because of their Christian faith. Tribulation was their experience of persecution. It was as the cost of doing missionary business, the ongoing hardship they experienced because they proclaimed the gospel. It was the pain and anxiety they suffered at the hands of their Jewish or pagan neighbors because they were believers. The Jews saw them as heretics. The pagan on the street saw them as suspicious disturbers of society.²

Opposition at the Outset

The early believers were not surprised when they were persecuted. Christ warned His disciples they would be arrested, arraigned, and physically punished for being His followers. He endured resistance, hatred, persecution, and death. He taught that His disciples could expect nothing less (Mark 13:9-13; Luke 21:12; John 15:20-21).

Jewish Persecution

Pilate, as Roman governor of Judea, limited Jewish persecution of dissidents like Christians. When Lucius Vitellius became Roman governor of Syria in A.D. 36, he deposed Pilate. A period of benign Roman neglect allowed the Jews to exert a greater police power than before.³ They imprisoned Peter and John. A jealous conspiracy by Hellenistic Jews resulted in Stephen's stoning death, an action that would have been impossible under Pilate. The Sanhedrin felt empowered enough to license Saul of Tarsus to harass Christians as far away as Damascus (Acts 4:1-22; 7:54-60; 9:1-2; 1 Cor. 1:23).

Diaspora Jews regularly disturbed the common peace with rioting and

violence. Their public protests were so disruptive in Rome that in A.D. 49, the emperor Claudius expelled them all from the city. Suetonius, the Roman historian, suggested that reaction against the teaching of someone named "Chrestus" caused it all. Many scholars assume this referred to the teaching of Christ.⁴

Believers bore the brunt of Jewish anti-Christian rage. In Thessalonica zealous Jews rioted because Paul's preaching led many to Christ. When they could not locate Paul, they turned on his host, Jason. They forcibly entered Jason's home, beat him, and dragged him before the magistrate. Though Jews had caused the riots, Jason had to post the bail (Acts 17:9).

Pagan Persecution

Pagans persecuted Christians because they, as Christ's followers, rejected the veneer of false religion that covered the economic, cultural, and political life of that society. The rioters in Thessalonica were correct: "These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also."⁵

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO (35/85/72)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KEN TOUCHTON/ CARTOONIST MUSEUM/ ROME (12/28)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KEN TOUCHTON (3/27/12)

INEVITABLY SOMEONE WOULD RAISE THE CRY, “THROW THE CHRISTIANS TO THE LIONS!”

Above: The Greek Orthodox Church of St. Stephen dominates the north end of the Kidron Valley at

Jerusalem and commemorates the traditional site of the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

Economic Persecution

Christian preaching was always a threat to some group’s livelihood. In Philippi Paul and Silas cast a “spirit of prediction” out of a slave girl (16:16-19, HCSB). When her owners “saw that their hope of profit was gone” (v. 19, HCSB), they seized Paul and Silas and marched them to the authorities for punishment.

Ephesus, which was the center of worship of the goddess Diana,

Far left: Ruins of the amphitheatre that stood on the outskirts of Carthage in North Africa, which was part of the Roman Empire. The amphitheatre was often the scene of violent and bloody entertainment, combat to the

death between armed men, men against animals, or fighting between animals. In 202, two believers, Perpetuë and Felicité, were martyred here by wild animals.

Left: Bust of Domitian.

attracted thousands of tourists and worshipers. The local merchants had a thriving trade in tourist trinkets and silver replicas of the Temple of Diana (also called Artemis). A problem arose because Paul was too successful in gaining converts (19:1-41). The silversmiths and other craftsmen feared that the growth of this new imageless faith was a threat both to their livelihood and their religion. They rioted; caused great public disturbance; and almost lynched Paul’s helpers, Gaius and Aristarchus. Finally, the magistrate was able to calm and then dismiss the disorderly crowd. Paul wisely heeded the advice not to appear in public, and later quietly left town. These Christians were persecuted because their faith threatened the economic well-being of certain interest groups.⁶

Cultural Persecution

By A.D. 64, government officials and pagan men on the street alike recognized Christianity as a separate, yet suspect religion. Christians had become numerous enough that some people saw them as being a subversive threat.

Everything Christians did was counter-cultural to almost everything in pagan society. By rejecting idol worship and denying the reality of local deities, believers excluded themselves from the civic life of their cities. They would not attend public festivals that honored these gods nor would they participate as local magistrates and priests—each of which was as much a religious as a civic responsibility. Their practices of sharing their goods and of remaining celibate ran against common mores. A “tolerant” society that

expected everyone to live according to the cultural norms was repulsed by the Christians' adamant refusal to do so.⁷

Christian religious practice also seemed antisocial. Their secret meetings in secluded places at odd hours caused some to think they were plotting against society. Because they spoke figuratively about drinking Christ's blood and eating His flesh, literal-minded pagans thought they were cannibals. The practice of sharing a holy kiss between Christian brothers and sisters at communion gave rise to whispers of incest.⁸

Pastor Clement of Rome writing about A.D. 94 remembered this anti-Christian anger as "envy and jealousy." This jealousy led to the torture and death of Christians of all stations. Persons carrying out vigilante "justice" persecuted believers like the Danaids and Dircae (figurative

terms for certain women who were martyred because of their faith). Clement tells us that "after they had suffered terrible and unspeakable torments, [they] finished their course of faith with steadfastness."⁹

Roman historians disliked Christians. Tacitus (A.D. 55-120) reported they were "hated for their abominations."¹⁰ Suetonius (ca. 70-140) said they were "a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition."¹¹ Much later, church father Tertullian (ca. 150-222) recalled that in times of national anxiety, catastrophe, or raging inflation the mob would make Christians the scapegoats. Inevitably someone would raise the cry, "Throw the Christians to the lions!"; as if that would cure everything.¹²

Roman Persecution

The Roman government was at first indifferent to Christians, but

over time came to see them as atheistic threats to the essential fabric of the Roman state. Nero was the first emperor to persecute them. He blamed them for the great Roman fire of A.D. 64, and punished them with ferocity for the trumped-up charge of "hatred of mankind." He had them draped with animal skins and thrown to fierce dogs to be torn apart. He crucified them or coated them in tar and lit them to illuminate his garden at night. Both Peter and Paul were martyred at this time. This first imperial persecution was limited to Rome and lasted only a short while.¹³

Official persecution receded into the background because of Roman political upheavals and civil wars for the next 30 years or so. The next such persecution occurred from 91-96 specifically in Rome and Asia Minor. The



Lower left: A wide-angle view of Philip's Martyrium at Hierapolis. It commemorates Philip the apostle's founding a church here and his martyrdom.

Right: Ruins of the Church of Saint Monica in Carthage, North Africa, which was part of the Roman Empire. This was one of the houses of worship set up by Cyprian, who became bishop of Carthage in 248

and was martyred in 258. This was the place of his tomb where, in his memory, this church was built at the end of the 4th century and into the start of the 5th century. This was apparently a simple chapel where Monica spent the night in tears and prayers after her son Augustine left for Rome in 383. The church was abandoned about the 6th–7th centuries A.D.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO (35/86/26)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ GB HOWELL (35/37/49)

Left: At Gortyn, Crete, the Church of Ayios Titos (Saint Titus). Paul commissioned Titus to lead the first Christians on Crete. The church, built in honor of Titus's ministry and his martyrdom, was begun in the 6th century and was later greatly enlarged. This domed basilica links early Christian architecture with Byzantine art.

emperor Domitian declared himself a god equal to other Roman gods. He had large statues of himself set up all over the empire and demanded that each citizen offer obeisance to him at least once a year. People who failed to honor his deity, including close relatives, were killed outright. Christians, of course, flatly refused to worship anyone other than Christ and thus faced persecution.¹⁴

Following Christ in those first days of belief was no easy adventure. It was a choice many made with the full knowledge of its difficulty. The discomfort and pain were real, as both the neighbors and the government persecuted

believers. Because Paul had set the example, however, all could sing, "We are more than victorious through Him who loved us" (Rom. 8:37, HCSB). **B**

1. About A.D. 54-59. Harold S. Songer, "Romans, Book of" in *The Holman Bible Dictionary* (HBD), general ed. Trent C. Butler (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 1202-1207.

2. Heinrich Schlier, "θάλιβω, θλιψις" (*thlibo*, afflict, *thlipsis*, tribulation) in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, ed. and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 143-48. See also J. Vernon McGee, *Reasoning Through Romans*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Pasadena, CA: Thru the Bible Books, 1973), 155.

3. "Lucius Vitellius," Livius.org [online; accessed 04 October 2010]. Available from the Internet: www.livius.org/rome.html; Bo Reicke, *The New Testament Era: The World of the Bible From 500 B.C. to A.D. 100* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 191-92.

4. Suetonius, "Lives of the Twelve Caesars: Claudius 25," quoted in C. K. Barrett, ed., *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1961), 14.

5. Acts 17:6, KJV.

6. Acts 19:21–20:3; "Demetrius" in HBD, 352; Mitchell G. Reddish, "Ephesus" in HBD, 424-28.

7. Arthur E. R. Boak & William G. Sinnigen, *A History of Rome to A.D. 565* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 399; "Christian Persecution," UNRV History [online; accessed 21 July 2010]. Available from the Internet: www.unrv.com.

8. "Christian Persecution," UNRV History [online; accessed 21 July 2010]. Available from the Internet: www.unrv.com.

9. Clement of Rome, *1 Clement* 5-6, trans. Roberts-Donaldson. *Early Christian Writings* [online; accessed 30 August 2010]. Available from the Internet: www.earlychristianwritings.com.

10. Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44, in Barrett, *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents*, 15-16.

11. Suetonius, *Nero* 16, in Barrett, *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents*, 16.

12. Tertullian *Apology* 40.

13. Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44, in Barrett, *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents*, 15-16.

14. Reicke, 293-94.

Dale "Geno" Robinson is pastor of Madison Avenue Baptist Church, North Highlands, California.