

Persecution



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When Nero first became emperor he had "good intentions" he was a good emperor and tried to rule Rome with compassion for his people. Under his Rule Rome continued to be a flourishing country. He ruled with two able tutors for about ten years but from 64 A. D. he became power hungry and more selfish. He ordered the murder of his mother in 59 AD as she was accused of treason. At this his reign started to turn. He became self-obsessed and live in pleasure, not caring about the people around him.

Christians were persecuted by the Romans as they did not know a lot about them. The Christians also did not get involved or have any interest in politics, making them an easy target. At first the Romans thought Christians were Jewish, but they soon realized that they were from a different religion. The Roman officials feared this new, fast growing religion and feared that it would take over the religion of Rome. The religion was seen as a "cult" by the Roman authorities. It was believed that the cult performed acts in cannibalism and incest. They thought this because they called each other brother or sister, and to greet other Christians they would give them a kiss. As a result of this the Romans charged the Christians as committing incest.

Also at Mass when a Christian eats the Body of Christ and drinks His blood, they took it literally and again charged them of cannibalism. The Christians were being called "abominations" and were being blamed for everything, even floods, draughts and famine. They refused to worship the Roman gods or the Emperor and were considered anti-social and were prosecuted as a result. Christians were tortured and put to death if they refused to comply with Roman orders. Nero also used the Christians as street lights and set them on fire at night to light up the streets.

Christians were persecuted soon after the fire of Rome, which was in 64AD. Although no one knows how the fire started people suspect that it was emperor Nero himself who started the fire, for two reasons. Some historians say that it was because Nero thought he was talented in the field of singing and made many songs and ballads, and some say he started the Fire to act as inspiration as he had writers block. However immediately after the fire he started to rebuild Rome and this lead to much speculation on whether he started it or not. It is possible that he did start the fire and wanted to make room for a new city built in his honour.

The persecution of Christians by Nero is recorded in many accounts, some anti-Nero and some pro. A main source is Tacitus who was a non-Christian, who questioned their motives and a severe critic of Nero. He says that during the fire Nero used the Christians, who were already unpopular, as a scapegoat. This means he accused the Christians of starting the fire to shift the blame from him. Christians were disliked by the Romans as they were mixed up with the Jews who were rebellious and lazy, as they rested on the Sabbath.

First Christians who admitted their faith were killed, but by using their information the Romans were able to find and execute many more Christians. They then accused them of hatred for the human race. The punishments were then turned into sports; they would attach hides of beasts to the victim and then dogs would attack them and kill them. They would also be nailed to crosses or set aflame. When it got dark they were also used as night time lamps. They were also used in a circus game that took place in Nero's garden.

St. Peter and St. Paul were executed some time during Nero's reign. Peter is believed to have been crucified upside down as he did not think himself worthy to die the same way Christ did, however this is not entirely certain. St. Paul was more likely to die under the sword. This is because Paul was a Roman citizen and crucifixion was a punishment reserved for non-Romans.

Mark's Gospel was well known throughout the time of the early church. People often wrote things about it. In particular Papias, who was a Bishop of the early church. He wrote about Mark and how, although he wasn't an eye witness, Peter told him everything. He also made a point to say that he left nothing out or lied about anything that happened. He also commends Mark on his ability to adopt his teachings to the needs of the moment.

Mark wrote his Gospel for "Gentile" and Roman readers. We know this because he does not include things that they would have no knowledge of, like the condemnation of the Jewish authorities (which Matthew includes). He also uses fewer quotations from the Old Testament as they have no knowledge of it. He also translates some words like "Boanerges", which means sons of thunder and Abba which means father.

Mark wrote to non-Jews because at the time Christians were being persecuted. This was probably due to the fire in Rome in 64 A. D. which is believed to have been started by Nero himself. Nero blamed the fire on Christians and therefore punished them unjustly. Mark wrote to prepare Christians for the suffering they were about to endure by placing them before the life of our Lord.

To help Christians deal with persecution Mark makes great emphasis on the importance of discipleship. This helped the readers have faith as he explains the rewards. Mark includes the story of the seeds falling on the rocky ground. This story is similar to the persecution as, in the story of the seeds falling on rocky ground the seeds which fell on rocky ground sprouted quickly but had no root and were scorched by the sun and withered away. This shows that some followers may hide away and not stand firm on their beliefs when being persecuted. Mark also includes the advice that Jesus gives to those being persecuted. Jesus said when trouble occurs stand strong on your beliefs and the Holy Spirit will save you.

Another reference is from Peter, James and John in the garden. Jesus asked them to stay awake but they fell asleep. When Jesus came back he was angry as they did not do as he asked and he said " the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." This is a trait shown by some followers when they cower and run. Although they want to worship Jesus and die for Him, they are too scared and not ready to.

Finally Mark talks about when James and John ask Jesus who will be on His right hand side, Jesus says that it is not His power to decide and says that " to be first you must put yourself last, and to be great you must be the servant of others;. For even the Son of God came, not to be served but to serve." This shows that followers must help each other and be humble.

The life and Death of Jesus can inspire, comfort and even encourage persecuted Christians. There are many examples of Jesus doing this in Mark's and Luke's Gospels. In Mark 8: 31-38 Jesus says that, if any one loses their

life for Him they will be saved and whoever wants to save his life will lose it. He says " what good is it to gain the whole world but lose his soul," This shows us that if we wish to suffer for Jesus we will lose our life, but will be saved. This is encouraging because here we know that we will go to Heaven and have eternal life.

In Mark 14: 32-46, it shows us that even Jesus had doubts about giving Himself to us, but he overcame this when he said " take this cup from me" as he was prepared to give himself for us. This inspires and encourages Christians to stand firm through all their doubts like Jesus did and they will be saved. It then goes to say that he prayed, and it was this that gave him strength to do what God had sent him to do.

This will encourage his followers to accomplish what ever task God has set them, as they know if they ever need help, they can pray and God will give them strength. When Jesus comes back to meet Peter, James and John he finds them asleep and he says " the spirit is willing, but the body is weak". This shows us that even though we want to do something to help others, our body does not allow it since it is made of flesh. This applied to Christian persecution, even if the follower does not want to denounce Jesus and his beliefs, due to persecution and fear he may claim not to be a Christian. This is comforting to Christians as they know that even the strongest believers, like Peter, John and James sometimes fail their tasks.

In Luke 22: 47-53 Jesus is arrested, and when they come to take Jesus away, Peter cuts off one soldier's ear. Then Jesus says " No more of this!" By saying this he sets an example for Christians, not to fight back and the Holy Spirit

will save you. It shows us that Jesus knew that violence solved nothing and therefore there is no need to fight back.

In Mark 15: 16-20 we are shown Jesus being mocked and subjected to torture to torture. " Again they struck him on the head and spat on him ". This shows that, although he had the power to stop all the torture, he chose not to. This encourages Christians not to give in to persecution. It is easy to denounce Jesus, then he suffering will stop, but Jesus did not do this and therefore he sets an example to his followers.

In Luke 23: 32-34 Jesus forgives those who were persecuting him by saying " father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing". This encourages his followers to forgive their persecutors as they will try to be like Jesus and that's what Jesus did.

" Christians today are not prepared to suffer as Jesus did." I think that this is true because, the world has changed since Jesus' time and the people in it have as well. Back then religion was a huge part of peoples' life. They would use Religion to explain the unexplainable, make choices and even bas their daily routine around prayer. Nowadays, most people go to Mass every Sunday and think that they have fulfilled their spiritual part. However people should pray every day and devote their life to God. If people aren't prepared to spend ten minutes a day to pray to God then, how can one ask them to give their life for us?

The main reason this is the case is because of all the distractions in the world. People want material goods as they think it will make them happy. However the only way to get those goods is to buy them and so people

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become obsessed with money. They gradually think less of God and give in to temptation. They disobey God and may not follow His rules, People start lying, thinking that is just a little sin. Whereas, it is actually a major sin as people are constantly lying and it becomes a way out of trouble. It then becomes part of their daily routine. This shows that people don't really take religion seriously because, a commandment is not to bear false witness, yet people think it is okay to lie but only a little. Also people use violence to settle arguments, although Jesus specifically told us not to use violence. He told us this when he went to Gethsemane and Peter strikes a soldier in the ear, yet Jesus told him to do so.

People are also being tempted to break God's laws, as they aren't actually illegal. There are many temptations in life, mainly sex before marriage. To break any of the commandments is a bad sin as God forbids it yet everyone does it. God set Ten Commandments to follow, not to take away freedom, but to make you a better person spiritually.

However, this does not mean to say that everyone is not prepared to suffer. In fact there are many people who have died for their beliefs in particular in China and Pakistan but they are not known. One well known martyr is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was born 9th April 1906. He set up an illegal seminary called the Confessing Church at Finkenwalde, but was shut down by the state police in 1937. He was an active Christian who opposed the Nazi regime. He realized a Nazi Europe would be the end of Christianity. He and his comrades, who were committed to overthrow the government, plotted many schemes to do so. He was captured and killed in 9th April 1945 weeks before the war was over. Although some could argue that Christians should not

resolve to violence and by plotting to kill Hitler, he does. However, during this time things were desperate and unpredictable. What if Nazi Europe was a reality, what would become of Christianity? So, if he was successful maybe the ends would justify the means.

Another example of Christians being prepared to suffer like Jesus was Maximilian Kolbe. He was born on 8th January 1894 in Zdzanska Wola, Poland. He set up a new body called Militia Immaculatae, who taught people about the Virgin Mary. He had his lectures in Franciscan. Until 1927, when he acquired his own set of land, near Warsaw where his lectures took place. When war came Kolbe was captured and sent to Auschwitz. Here he was known to give up his food for others even when it was evident, that he was seriously ill. He helped confessions and even performed Mass. However, his most famous deed was in 1941, when a prisoner escaped and ten men were chosen to be executed as punishment. Kolbe volunteered to be one of the ten when he one man say my " poor wife and children," After two weeks of starvation, on the 14th August 1941 Kolbe was consciously administered a lethal injection.

Kolbe was considered a martyr, not of faith but charity. He died for his love for others during most of his life he taught and sacrificed himself for another. Both men are martyrs because they both gave their lives for others, with a Christian mentality. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wanted to protect Europe from becoming fascist even if it was in vain; Kolbe gave his life so another man could live.