

FIRST CENTURY PERSECUTION AT THE HANDS OF THE JEWS AND ROME

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Peter wrote, "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you:" (1 Pet. 4:12). This was written to scattered "strangers" (1 Pet. 1:1), that is, Gentile Christians who were specifically in Pontus (on the southeastern shore of the Black Sea), Galatia (located in the center of Asia Minor; generally, the recipients of one of Paul's epistles, though critics debate which area of Galatia specifically), Cappadocia (located in the east of Asia Minor), Asia (located on the west coast of Asia Minor; the region which received the Revelation), and Bithynia (located on the southwestern shore of the Black Sea). The message was a simple one: Persecution was on its way; in fact, the key word of Peter's letter was "suffer." The suffering which can be a blessing (compare Matthew 5:10-12 and Luke 6:22,23) is a suffering for well doing (1 Pet. 2:20; 3:17), for righteousness' sake (1 Pet. 3:14), according to the will of God (1 Pet. 4:19), as a Christian (1 Pet. 4:15,16)! His message in a terrible time, then, was actually an encouraging one: Trial can be beneficial (1 Pet. 1:6-9; 2:21-23; 3:14-17; 4:12-16; 5:10).

Perhaps as Peter wrote to those soon-to-be-persecuted Christians, he remembered what Jesus had told His disciples: "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before *it hated* you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also" (John 15:18-20). Or perhaps he remembered other words of Jesus like "Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, But he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life" (Mark 10:29,30).

As Peter wrote encouraging his brethren, he asked, "And who *is* he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good? But and if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy *are ye*: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled;" (1 Pet. 1:13,14). He told them not to be surprised by the persecution, "But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy *are ye*; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified" (1 Pet. 4:13,14). How weighty must this admonition have been, "Yet if *any man suffer* as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf" (1 Pet. 4:16)!

Under whom was persecution experienced in those early days of the church--especially in the First Century? There were actually two sources: the Romans, and those who *had been* God's chosen people, the Jews.

John Foxe, in his famed *Book of Martyrs*, wrote of numerous persecutions of Christians at the hands of Rome through the first several centuries [it should be noted that by the time of the

latter persecutions apostasy had well taken hold, so the "church" would have been unrecognizable via New Testament standards; therefore, no longer truly would have been the Lord's body]. Foxe spoke of persecutions at the hands of Nero (A.D. 67--the dates are from his work) [note Tacitus' *Annals*, XV.44, which speaks of Nero's blaming Christians for the burning of Rome and his punishing them; note also Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, II.25; moreover, it may be Nero's persecution alluded to in Juvenal's Satire I.154,55 and VIII.233-236] and Domitian [note Eusebius, III.17-20,31,32] [both Nero's and Domitian's were persecutions addressed to some degree in the Bible], and at the hands of Trajan (A.D. 108) [in which time Pliny the younger (in his *Letters*, X.96) sought advice on how to deal with Christians, and which persecution would have impacted some of John's audience from the Revelation; see Eusebius, III.33], and at the hands of Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 162) [whose persecution may have killed the famed Polycarp] and Severus (A.D. 192) and Maximus (A.D. 235) and Decius (A.D. 249) and Valerian (A.D. 257) and Aurelian (A.D. 274) and Galerius (A.D. 303). Foxe recognized ten in total, missing some of the persecutions like those of Claudius (Acts 18:1,2) and Diocletian and Maximinus toward the end of the period. The worst of the Roman persecutions ended in A.D. 313 when Constantine's Edict of Milan legitimized Christianity in the Roman Empire.

Foxe named many of the martyrs--in fact he provided the information on the tradition regarding the deaths of each of the apostles and even early Christians like Luke and Timothy. Some of his information is more likely than other, but it must be understood that he was writing in the Sixteenth Century, well after first-hand accounts would have been available. At the least he provides a good overview of how the persecutions were accomplished and who was affected. More important than his record is the simple naming of one specific martyr, Antipas. Through inspiration John recorded the letter of Jesus to Pergamos: "I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, *even* where Satan's seat *is*: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas *was* my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth" (Rev. 2:13). What a wonderful testimony to the martyrdom of Antipas, it is with him in mind that one can associate at least one name with the souls beneath the altar who "cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" (Rev. 6:10).

Persecution had not only been conducted by the Romans, but by the Jews as well. Scripture records that John the Baptist was killed by Herod Antipas (Luke 3:19,20; Mark 6:16) prior to the establishment of the kingdom, so that would not technically be a persecution of the church but shows of what the Jewish rulers were capable. In the church age, the first martyr was Stephen (Acts 7:58,59) whose name, perhaps not coincidentally, means "victory crown." His chief persecutor was Saul who would lead a persecution against the church "throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria" (Acts 8:1). Saul was so terrible a persecutor that "he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed *them* to prison" (Acts 8:3). After his conversion, he referred to himself as "before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious" (1 Tim. 1:13). Herod Agrippa effectively carried the despotism of his family another generation as he "stretched forth *his* hands to vex certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword" (Acts 12:1,2). One might argue that he was acting as a Roman official rather than on behalf of the Jews, but "because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also" (Act 12:3). Peter was apprehended, but

miraculously enabled to escape (Acts 12:4-11). It is interesting that the verse so often quoted with regard to faithfulness, Revelation 2:10, is actually an encouragement to the Smyrnans to be faithful through persecution; the previous verse couches the tribulation with the "blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but *are* the synagogue of Satan" (Rev. 2:9; cf 3:9)--this contrasts physical and spiritual Israel (cf Rom. 2:28,29; 9:6; Col. 2:11,12). Playing on the word circumcision [cutting around], Paul told the Philippians to "beware of the concision" [cutting against], that is, the Judaizers who threatened spiritual and, likely, physical safety as well (Phi. 3:2).

Persecution was a dire threat against the church in the First Century, a threat faced at the hands of Rome and the Jews. As one looking back from the Twenty-First Century; it would serve the reader well to appreciate that persecution was not limited to the early church! Paul told Timothy, "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12). It may very well be that Christians in coming times could say with Paul, "*We are* troubled on every side, yet not distressed; *we are* perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh" (2 Cor. 4:8-11). If so be, may the church remember to "fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Mat 10:28).