



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)

Lesson 3 – Second Century Persecution

Christians continued to be persecuted intermittently during the reigns of the second century Roman emperors: Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius. These heathen rulers did not always know how to handle Christians. On the one hand, the believers in Christ were not guilty of major crimes against their fellow-citizens. But on the other hand, they were guilty of not worshiping the approved Roman gods and of not participating in the customary idolatrous feasts.

Pliny the Younger was the governor of Bithynia in the early second century, and there were many Christians in his region. He knew that being a Christian was against the law, but he wondered if the Emperor Trajan really want him to hunt down Christians and execute them. He had learned that the Christians gathered before dawn to worship Jesus Christ, whom they considered to be God. He knew they swore not to commit theft, adultery, and other actions they considered to be sinful. Pliny wrote to Trajan for advice. The emperor responded that the government should not hunt down Christians to punish them. Nevertheless, if someone was accused of being a Christian, he should be questioned. If he stubbornly refused to worship the Roman gods, then he should be punished. This was the standard Roman policy for the second century and part of the third century.

This policy, when it was enforced, led to the deaths of many Christian martyrs. Two of the most prominent martyrs of that age were Ignatius and Polycarp, both of them bishops (overseers) of the congregations in their region.

Ignatius was already an old man when he was condemned to death by the Roman authorities. On his way to Rome for his execution Ignatius wrote seven letters, whose contents have been preserved to this day. In one of these letters Ignatius wrote: "Let fire and cross, struggles with beasts, tearing bones apart, mangling of limbs, crushing of my whole body, and tortures of the Devil come upon me, if only I may attain to Jesus Christ" (Eusebius: *The Church History* [Paul Maier edition], p. 124). He asked the Christians to pray for him, but not that he would be set free, but rather that he would be given strength to remain faithful to his Lord.

About fifty years later the bishop Polycarp gave his life for his faith. At his trial some urged him to recant and worship the emperor. Polycarp replied: "For eighty-six years I have served Him [Christ], and He has done me no evil. How could I curse my King, who saved me?" (Gonzalez: *The Story of Christianity*, Part 1, p. 44).

Because martyrs who gave their lives for Christ were greatly honored by the Christians, some Christians actually sought to be killed in order to gain such honor. But most Christians realized and believed that martyrdom was not something a Christian should choose on his own, but rather it was something for which one was chosen by God.

Another example is a widow named Felicitas and her seven sons; they were accused of being Christians. The authorities tried to persuade her to renounce Christ. When she remained firm, they tried to convince her sons to recant. When they all remained faithful to Christ, they were all put to death. The heathen authorities were surprised that Christians would choose death rather than perform a simple act of obeisance to the Roman gods. In the Romans' eyes the Christians were guilty of obstinate stubbornness that had to be punished.

Other martyrs included the scholar Justin, who founded a school in Rome for the pursuit of the true philosophy of Christianity.

In some cases, almost all the Christians in a town or village were put to death. A letter from several congregations in Gaul (France) reported “that the place where Christians were being held was so full that some died of suffocation before the executioners could get to them” (Gonzalez: *The Story of Christianity*, Part 1, p. 47).

But Satan was unable to prevent the growth of the Christian Church through these many persecutions and death sentences. Much of the testimony of Christians had to be given in secret. But still the Gospel of Christ was made known, and the Holy Spirit used that seed of the Word to change the hearts of many pagans and their families and lead them to the truth in Jesus Christ.

Questions:

1. What was the Roman policy concerning Christians in the second century?
2. Why did Pliny the Younger write to the emperor Trajan?
3. How did Ignatius and Polycarp respond to the possibility of death?
4. Why would it be wrong for a Christian to seek martyrdom?
5. Why is the death of a martyr not a victory for Satan, but a victory for God?

If you have access to a book that speaks about martyrs, read an account of one or two others who lost their lives for Christ's sake during this period.