

# Heroes of Faith – The Church Age

## *Faith Marked By Persecution Part I*

### *External Persecution*

#### Introduction:

1. As the 1<sup>st</sup> century came to a close; the 12 apostles, as well as Paul and the rest of the church leaders that we have discussed so far have passed on – most of them were \_\_\_\_\_ though some died a natural death.
2. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century, the church had expanded and had reached throughout the farthest regions of the known world which was in obedience to the Lord's command.  
(Matthew, 28:18-20, Acts 1:8)
3. The apostle John was the last of the original 12 apostles to die (approx. A.D. 100):
  - Prior to his passing away he wrote 3 very significant letters (I, II, III John) which helped to guide the church through the immediate challenges they would face and would also affirm the framework of doctrine that all of the apostles believed and taught. These teachings and other New Testament writings served as a strong foundation to **battle heresy and false teaching** that was beginning to infiltrate the church and would continue even through modern times.
  - John also wrote *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* which spelled out God's plan for the \_\_\_\_\_ and it provided \_\_\_\_\_ to the believer that no matter what challenges, persecutions, danger or disaster that came their/our way – they/we knew that in the end the Lord would \_\_\_\_\_ and evil would be \_\_\_\_\_.
4. These words (the very inspired Words of our Lord) that John wrote (as well as the words of the other New Testament writers) are what has guided the church throughout the centuries and continue to do so.

5. Jesus and the apostles warned that persecution and false prophets would come:

- “Behold I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves. But beware of men, for they will hand you over to the courts and scourge you in their synagogues; and you will even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. But when they hand you over, do not worry about how or what you are to say; for it will be given you in that hour what you are to say” (Matthew 10:16-20)
- “But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false prophets among you who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them bringing swift destruction upon themselves.” (II Peter 2:1)
- “But you, beloved, ought to remember the words that were spoken beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ, that they were saying to you, in the last times there will be mockers, following after their ungodly lusts. These are the ones that cause divisions, worldly minded, devoid of the Spirit” (Jude 17-19)

6. Initially (1<sup>st</sup> thru 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries) that persecution came from external sources like:

- The \_\_\_\_\_ religious leaders (The Sanhedrin – Jewish council, Pharisees, Sadducees, and other religious fanatics).
- The \_\_\_\_\_ Government
- Other miscellaneous groups (some Jews, some Gentiles), whose livelihood, customs, and religious practices were being threatened by the preaching of the apostles and those who genuinely followed The Lord Jesus Christ.

7. In the centuries to follow (4<sup>th</sup> century on) much of the persecution came from \_\_\_\_\_ the church due the influence of heretical teachings that was fueled by corruption and compromise between the sacred (the church) and the secular (government).

8. This lesson will focus primarily on the \_\_\_\_\_ persecution that the church faced during the first few centuries.

## Persecution against First Century Christian Leaders:

### 1. Stephen

- He was one of \_\_\_\_\_ men chosen to help the apostles in the daily administration of duties within the church in Jerusalem. (Acts 6:1-5)
- Stephen grew in the Lord and may have been instrumental in several Jewish priests coming to faith in Jesus. He was clearly gifted by God's grace and power and performed various \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. (Acts 6:7-8)
- His spiritual wisdom was beyond the norm and his ability to debate the truths about Jesus Christ with those who considered themselves skilled in philosophy put him at odds with them, and in the cross hairs of the Jewish Sanhedrin.
- Stephen was accused of \_\_\_\_\_ and subsequently put on trial. He was guilty of no wrong other than preaching the truth: (Acts 7)
  - 1) He provided an accurate description of Jewish (Israel) history in which he describes their blessings and benefits as well as their disobedience and need for repentance and reconciliation. (Acts 7:2-50)
  - 2) He rebukes them for their continued rejection of God's appeal for them to repent and obey as well as for rejecting Jesus (Acts 7:52 – "the Righteous One") and putting Him to death.
  - 3) This led to his (Stephen's) death by stoning. (Acts 7:51-60)
- Stephen's legacy of faith (Acts 7:54-60)
  - 1) Someone has said; "It's not just how you start your life but how you finish it that counts", and assuming there is any truth to that - Stephen finished well, for he boldly declared the truth in love and died with no apparent regrets or grudges. (Acts 7:59-60)
  - 2) Some might think that a life was cut short that day but perhaps we should see it as other lives had their beginning – **just ask Saul of Tarsus!** (Acts 7:58)

## 2. **James** (Son of Zebedee – brother to John)

- The only other recorded martyr in Scripture (after the resurrection of Christ)
- If you recall in our study about the Apostles, he was murdered by King Herod Agrippa I. (Acts 12:1-2)

## 3. **Ignatius of Antioch**

- Background Information:
  - 1) He is also called Theophorus (Greek) which means “bearer of God”
  - 2) It is believed that he was a disciple of both \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_
  - 3) Depending on who you read and or agree with, he was either the second or the third Bishop of \_\_\_\_\_ (Syria).
  - 4) He was very outspoken against the heresies of his day (**Ebionism** – a belief in Jesus but still required the keeping of the Mosaic Law to be fully saved, **Docetism** – a belief that Jesus’ body was an illusion and not physical).
  - 5) Many of his writings help to record the rapid growth of the early church
  - 6) He was a strong proponent of the hierarchal authority of the Church and was the first to use the term “**catholic church**” which simply means **universal church**. He wrote these words to Polycarp (Bishop of Smyrna); “Follow all of you, the bishop, as Jesus Christ followed the Father”.
  - 7) It is believed that Ignatius was the first known Christian writer to advocate replacing the **Sabbath** with the **Lord’s Day**.
  - 8) Ignatius seems to have been one of the first to support the eventual Roman Catholic position of **transubstantiation** – which teaches that the Eucharist is the Real Presence of the Lord. This belief has evolved into the Eucharist somehow transforming into the literal body and blood of Christ which is a belief held by the Roman Catholic Church. (*Something I do not support*)

- Somehow he caught the eye of the Roman authorities and was arrested on charges of atheism of all things! Apparently he denied or refused to worship the Roman deities and was subsequently ordered to appear in Rome to answer to the charges.
  - 1) While he was on this journey that he penned his seven recognized letters (6 to various churches and 1 to Polycarp) and he met with various church leaders.
  - 2) His death apparently occurred in the **Roman arena** where they intended to make an example out of him. The facts are sketchy at best as to how he eventually died but it is believed that he died a martyr's death.
- His closing words to the Christians who flocked to his side in hope of assisting his release; "If Christians really wanted to do something, they should pray that I would remain faithful. If you remain silent about me, I shall become a word of God. But if you allow yourselves to be swayed by the love in which you hold my flesh, I shall again be no more than a human voice". He further went on to say; Now I begin to be a disciple.....Let fire and cross, flocks and beasts, broken bones, dismemberment.....come upon me, so long as I can attain Christ."
- He was considered to be the "earliest post New Testament martyr"

#### 4. Justin Martyr

- Background Information:
  - 1) He was raised by \_\_\_\_\_ parents
  - 2) He followed the teachings of the \_\_\_\_\_ (the teaching that one must master passion and emotion with the intention of finding some sort of inner peace and bliss that occurs from internal self-control) and initially pursued the study of philosophy that went along with that system of belief.
  - 3) After his conversion (sometime around 130 AD) he claims; "A fire was suddenly kindled in my soul. I fell in love with the prophets and these men who loved Christ. I reflected on all their words and found that this philosophy alone was true and profitable. That is how and why I became a philosopher. And I wish that everyone felt the same way as I do."

- He became quite the Apologist (defender of Christian doctrine) and his conversion was timely:
  - 1) He wrote two “Apology’s” to the Roman Government in which he argues that Christians were actually the emperor’s “best helpers and allies in securing good order”. He defended their (Christians) cause as righteous and just and therefore not a threat to the Roman Empire.
  - 2) In many ways these “Apologies” are the beginning stages of what will lead to the eventual declaration of Christianity as a legal religion by Emperor Constantine (Edict of Milan – 313 AD). Some conclude this to be a mistake but Justin was not responsible for the corruption of men’s hearts.
  - 3) He also was an outspoken opponent of the raging Gnostic heresies of his day that sought to make Jesus less than divine or not a real being.
- He is eventually arrested for his faith while in Rome. During his trial he was asked to denounce his faith by making a sacrifice to the gods. Justin replied; “No one who is rightly minded turns from true belief to false” As a result he and his disciples were taken out and beheaded. Justin was given the surname Martyr thus Justin Martyr is how history remembers him.

## 5. Polycarp

- Background Information
  - 1) He would have lived during the end of the age of the early apostles and would have seen the church go through some significant transition in which now the “second generation” of believers was emerging.
  - 2) Some traditions have him being personally mentored by the Apostle \_\_\_\_ and then later appointed by him or some of the other apostles as bishop of Smyrna.
  - 3) By virtue of being the bishop (overseer/elder) of **Smyrna** he held an important and influential position of influence in the region. This region would have been where the apostles ministered and subsequently a region of strong Christian influence where the “Seven Churches of Asia” were located.

- Some of Polycarp's accomplishments:
  - 1) He was more of a gifted \_\_\_\_\_ and practical leader
  - 2) He continued to validate the claims of the early apostles by declaring and defending the same truths that they taught against the **impending Gnostic heresies** of his day (*gnosis – understanding/consciousness gained through personal experience.....sort of a transcendental experience*).
  - 3) He became quite the evangelist especially and tradition claims that he was responsible for converting many Gnostics to the faith.
  - 4) There is only one letter attributed to him in which he wrote to the church at \_\_\_\_\_.
  - 5) We also have him to thank for he slowed the process of hierarchy within the Church by challenging various practices that he felt the “bishops” did not have the authority to do. The eventual move toward a merge between the Church and government didn't come for another 200 years.....but Polycarp apparently saw the dangers of too much power from within the ranks of the churches leadership. Although he was outspoken about these dangers and he did much good.....the fact remains that he only slowed down the inevitable corruption that was already in its inception.
- Polycarp joined the ranks of the \_\_\_\_\_
  - 1) He was arrested by the Roman Government at the age of 86. We can only assume that it could have been for any number of reasons due to the time period of his death (155-167 AD); **Christians were being killed for sport as well as to silence their voice!**
  - 2) The account of his interrogation by the local proconsul Statius Quadratus is quite interesting for Polycarp says this; “While the proconsul's fire lasts but a little while, the fires of judgment (reserved for the ungodly) cannot be quenched.....But why do you delay? Come do what you will”. He was subsequently burned at the stake and it is said that “he is spoken of by the heathen in every place!”

## Changes taking place for Christians in the Second & Third Century (100-299 AD)

1. The major persecutors against Christians have now become the Roman authorities:
  - **Emperor Decius** (249-251 AD) – issues an Empire wide edict for the purposes of suppressing Christianity.
    - 1) Bishops and officers of the church were to swear allegiance to the Emperor and if not they would be killed.
    - 2) Those who were unwilling to follow or embrace Roman deities were to be rounded up and killed.
    - 3) The Christians were blamed (became scapegoats) for the second outbreak of the “Antonine Plague (aka the Cyprian Plague) and this resulted in their being rounded up and killed for bringing on this disaster.
  - **Emperor Diocletian** (284-312 AD) – also issued an edict and directed it against Christians with the intent of destroying their influence throughout the empire:
    - 1) All Christian soldiers were to leave the army
    - 2) All Christian books were to be confiscated and subsequently destroyed
    - 3) Anyone unwilling to apostatize (deny Christ or recant their Christian faith) was to be killed. This resulted in many deaths of Christians and caused them to go “underground” and worship in secret.
2. As the persecutions intensified, the Christ follower as well as the church leaders faced serious challenges:
  - To declare allegiance to Christ meant \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_
  - Some boldly remained faithful to Christ and died as \_\_\_\_\_
  - Some initially denied their faith and eventually repented and returned (like **Peter**) while others denied their faith and never returned (like **Demas**).



3. The Roman government seized property, and personal belongings that once belonged to Christians and they began to control most forms of religious expression and took over public church building that began to spring up around A.D 230
  - Many (including some bishops and church leaders) succumbed to the wishes of the Roman government and not only recanted but embraced the authority of the state which gave way to the eventual merging of religion and government.
  - This recanting of faith didn't sit well with many in the Christian community and as a consequence several key Christian leaders refused to follow bishops who recanted or denied Christ. In their minds this was tantamount to apostasy and therefore how could these same bishops continue to proclaim the very Truth that they denied.
  - It is not our purpose (in this setting) to judge their actions but it did result in a number of movements that evolved into many of our modern day denominations or religious groups and will eventually lead to **The Reformation**.
    - 1) One such movement (founded by Montanus) was called "**Montanism**" and it probably originated in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century (150-180 AD). The movement was squashed by the Roman "Church" because its primary focus was on the work of the Holy Spirit as seen through various "ecstatic" gifts such as prophecy and speaking in tongues. This movement will evolve over the years and is sort of a precursor to the modern day American Pentecostal Church (i.e. Assemblies of God etc.)
    - 2) Another movement is the **Donatists** movement founded by Donatus Magnus in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century (early 300's). The Donatists primarily lived in the Roman North African provinces. They considered the "Roman Church" corrupt and refused to follow any leader who denied Christ (they called them "**traitors**" – people who had handed over). The Donatists evolved over the years and became known as "Separatists" and later spawned denominations such as Baptists, Brethren, Methodists, Adventists, and others)
4. These movements that sprang up as a result of this corruption have both positive and negative consequences – and for those who took a stand for Christ they would still find themselves in harm's way. We will examine a few of them.....

## Persecution against Second and Third Century Christian Leaders:

### 1. Irenaeus: (probably 130-202 AD)

- Background information:

- 1) He was the bishop of Lyon, (Leon) France and a disciple of Polycarp
- 2) It is believed that he was raised in a Christian family and adopted a rather “rigid” adherence to orthodoxy.

- His contributions and accomplishments in the advancement of Christianity:

- 1) *He was the first Christian writer to list all four canonical gospels as divinely inspired* and opposed the Gnostic heresies that promoted “other” divinely inspired accounts of the Life of Christ. He is quoted as saying; “The heretics boast that they have many more gospels than there really are. But really they don’t have any gospels that aren’t full of blasphemy.”
- 2) He continued in the teaching of “**Logos theology**” which was taught by the Apostle John in his Gospel account and his Epistles. It was John who passed this on to Polycarp who in turn passed these same truths to Irenaeus. This same Logos theology (the teaching that **Christ is the Word becoming flesh that dwelt among us**) was also embraced by Justin Martyr.
- 3) This “Logos Theology” was the foundational truth held by the apostles and those whom they mentored. It along with other essential doctrines held by these men such as Irenaeus fueled the continual debate against the “Gnostic” heresies that taught Jesus was less than human, less than Divine or some sort of a ghost or spirit.

- Nothing is known of his death and most conclude he was not martyred.

## 2. Tertullian (155-220 AD)

- Background Information:

- 1) His birth name is Quintas Septimius Florens Tertullianus – so we'll go with his Anglicized name Tertullian.
- 2) He was born in \_\_\_\_\_ (modern day Tunisia)
- 3) He was a later convert to Christianity (about age 42) and took his conversion very serious for he said; "I cannot imagine a truly Christian life without such a conscious breach, a radical act of conversion, Christians are made not born!"

- He held to very strict moral standards:

- 1) He became a church leader (ordained presbyter/priest – although married) in Carthage, as well as a scholar and author in which **he denounced the prevailing heresies promoted by the disciples of Gnosticism.**
- 2) He will break from the Roman Catholic Church and follow the Montanist movement and ironically will be responsible for much of the strict adherence to moral standards and practices that will later be promoted by the Roman Catholic Church.
- 3) Some of what he considered morally wrong and something a Christian should avoid were; abstaining from the theater and amphitheater, women shouldn't wear gold or precious stones as ornaments, virgins should remain veiled, second marriages were considered adulterous.
- 4) He was a borderline \_\_\_\_\_ (advocate of extreme self-denial), which cause many to consider him too extreme and lacking in grace and charity. All in all his influence was more positive than it was negative during a time marked by moral compromise and corruption.

- His contributions and accomplishments in the advancement of Christianity:
  - 1) He was considered the “father of the \_\_\_\_\_ Christianity” and the founder of \_\_\_\_\_ theology.
  - 2) His greatest contributions were his writings which covered the whole theological field and we are deeply indebted to him for his apologetics against paganism, Judaism and support of discipline and morals.
  - 3) He also wrote a defense of Christianity (*Apologeticus*) in which he proclaims ***the principle of religious liberty as an inalienable right of man*** and he further demands a fair trial for even the Christian before a sentence of death is imposed.
  - 4) His influence was seen throughout the coming days of the Church, and the works of the later reformers (Luther, Calvin etc.) are forever in his debt! Many of our early American fathers trace their beliefs of religious liberty back to men like Tertullian.
  - 5) The phrase; “In the blood of the martyrs lies the seed of the church” is attributed to Tertullian.
  - 6) There are a number of doctrinal teachings (specifically **The Trinity**) that we continue to embrace today that were concisely documented by Tertullian. Without these “Apologies” and doctrinal positions the Church may well have splintered beyond recognition.
  - 7) Ironically late in life he does break from the Roman Catholic Church and many conclude that he remained true to the principles that he taught for the Church by that time was apostatizing by the minute! He was never canonized by the Roman Catholic Church.
- There is no “official” record of his death but it is believed he died sometime prior to A.D. 220 although this is unconfirmed.

### 3. Origen – “*Man of steel*” (185-251)

- Background information:
  - 1) He was a “religious fanatic who gave up his job, slept on the floor, ate no meat, drank no wine, fasted twice a week, and owned no shoes”. (131 Christians Everyone Should Know – page 332)
  - 2) He was born in Alexandria, Egypt in about 185 AD his father was beheaded for his Christian beliefs.
  - 3) He was an early Christian scholar, a theologian and a profound student of the Bible.
  - 4) He lived a life of rigid **asceticism** (extreme self-denial)
- His contributions and accomplishments in the advancement of Christianity:
  - 1) He sought to set forth and promote the \_\_\_\_\_ of his time and describe them from the **Christian point of view**. He desired to elevate Christianity to the same plane as Hellenism with the hope of persuading the philosopher toward the credible claims of Christianity. It came at extreme cost for he was often misunderstood and sometimes labeled by the Church as borderline heretical.
  - 2) He believed the Bible to be \_\_\_\_\_ by God and continued to promote that truth. He rarely made a statement that didn’t have a Scriptural basis associated with it.
  - 3) Origen was responsible for numerous writings that organized sound doctrine for future generations to come. Much of our current systematic theology can be traced to Origen and his writings.
- In addition to his conflicts with the Roman Church, the persecutions instituted by the Roman Emperor Decius led to the torture and eventual death of Origen.

### Concluding Remarks:

1. “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church”. This statement is forever etched in my mind, for where would we be if these followers of Christ would have chosen to run and hide instead of **stand and deliver!**
2. There is always room for debate as to their personal beliefs and complete theological positions and how they match up to ours....but in the end what seems to matter most is their willingness to remain faithful to what is True – The Gospel.
3. The influence of heresy (false teaching) even within the “Church”, along with continued corruption and compromise of prominent “church officials”, led to some various serious schisms/divisions among the Church at large. These and other factors will lead to the need for unification which many “Church leaders” will seek to accomplish in spite of the existing corruption in their midst:
  - One result was the \_\_\_\_\_ of the New Testament (367 AD)
  - Several \_\_\_\_\_ over the centuries will convene and help to define what will become known as “Orthodox” doctrine.
  - These leaders will establish a set of “\_\_\_\_\_” (statements of faith) that define the core beliefs that Christians embrace and will separate them from heresy.
4. The persecutions will continue but we’ll begin to see those persecutions coming from \_\_\_\_\_ and this will eventually lead to the need for \_\_\_\_\_.
5. Next week’s lesson will look at the centuries (Middle Ages/Dark Ages) where Christian will begin to persecute Christian! Stay tuned.....