



THE BLOOD OF THE MARTYRS: THE EARLY CHURCH UNDER PERSECUTION (100–313 CE)

September 24 / 25, 2025

John 16; I Peter 3:8-22, 4:12-19; Revelation 6:9-11

Gonzalez, chapters 5-7, 10

Prelude: (Acts 4:23-21)

²³ When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴ And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, ²⁵ who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,

“‘Why did the Gentiles rage,
and the peoples plot in vain?

²⁶ The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers were gathered together,
against the Lord and against his Anointed’—

²⁷ for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, ²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. **²⁹ And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.** ³⁰ while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” ³¹ And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

I. Persecution Foretold in the New Testament

a. The New Testament prepared Christians to expect hostility as part of discipleship.

b. Witness = Martyr (Greek: *martyrs*)

i. Not just “observer,” but one who risks life to testify.

ii. Example: Hebrews 12:1–2 – “a great cloud of witnesses.”

- iii. **Jesus' Warning** – John 16:33, “In this world you will have tribulation.”
- iv. **Peter's Reminder** – 1 Peter 4:12, “Do not be surprised at the fiery trial.”
- v. **Revelation's Vision** – Martyrs cry out for justice (Rev. 6:9–11).

II. Roman Policy Toward Christians

- a. Seen as **politically disloyal** for refusing to worship emperor/gods.
- b. **Pliny–Trajan Correspondence (112 CE):**
 - i. Not to hunt Christians down.
 - ii. If accused and guilty, punish.
 - iii. If they recant, pardon.
 - iv. Ignore anonymous charges.
- c. Christianity was always legally vulnerable.

III. Major Episodes of Persecution

- a. **Nero (64 CE):** scapegoated after Rome's fire—Peter and Paul likely martyred.
- b. **Ignatius of Antioch (107 CE):** “I am God's wheat...ground by the teeth of wild beasts.”
- c. **Polycarp (155 CE):** “Eighty-six years I have served Him...How can I blaspheme my King?”
- d. **Blandina in Lyon (177 CE):** “I am a Christian, and nothing wicked is done among us.”
- e. **Perpetua & Felicitas (203 CE):** martyrdom as sharing Christ's victory.
- f. **Imperial Persecutions:**
 - i. Decius (249–251): All subjects must participate in (pagan/imperial) sacrifices.
 - ii. Valerian (257–260): targeted clergy/property.
 - iii. Diocletian (303–311): “Great Persecution”—burned Scriptures, destroyed churches.
- g. Persecution came in waves, often brutal, but never destroyed the church.

IV. The Cost and Witness of the Martyrs

- a. Christians answered Rome's “Caesar is Lord” with Acts 5:29: “We must obey God rather than men.”
- b. **Tertullian:** “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”
- c. Their hope and joy under death unsettled the pagan conscience.

V. Legacy of the Persecutions (100–313 CE)

- a. **Identity** – loyalty to Christ above all else.
- b. **Theology** – martyrdom = union with Christ, “baptism of blood.”
- c. **Mission** – their courage drew others to faith.

VI. Boldness in the Face of Persecution (Acts 4)

- a. The early church prayed for **boldness**, not protection.
- b. **Boldness = *Courage and Candor* grounded on *Confidence and Compassion***
- c. **Four Aspects of Boldness:**
 - i. **Courage** – to speak truth despite danger.

- ii. **Candor** – honesty without condemnation.
- iii. **Confidence** – rooted in who God is and what He has done.
- iv. **Compassion** – God loves the lost like a parent seeking a lost child.

VII. Boldness Today

- a. Global persecution: Iran, Nigeria, and beyond.
- b. Example: Pentecost Sunday attack in Nigeria—80 killed, yet faith spreads.
- c. The gospel continues to flourish through faithful witnesses.

VIII. Words to Remember

- a. **Ignatius**: “I am God’s wheat...ground by wild beasts.”
- b. **Polycarp**: “How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”
- c. **Tertullian**: “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”