

Persecution in the Early Church

- **Introductory Note:**

- Tertullian: *the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.*
- Persecution was not the norm in the Roman Empire and most of the persecutions that did occur were related to social or economic circles and did not come from the government. In fact, more Christians were persecuted outside of Rome than inside of it.
- "It is an illusion to think that persecution drove the church down to the catacombs and that the sacraments had to be celebrated in a kind of troglodyte life. Persecution had the opposite effect. When one governor in Asia Minor in the second century began persecuting the Christians, the entire Christian population of the region paraded before his house as a manifesto of their faith and as a protest against the injustice." (Chadwick, pg.55)

- **Nero (54-68)** was probably clinically insane and his persecution of the church was consistent with his violent nature. Traditional history teaches that both Peter & Paul were martyred by him.

- **Domitian (81-96)** had a violent nature like Nero but may also have been reacting to the somewhat recent Jewish revolt. The Book of Revelation was likely written during this time and may describe events and victims of this persecution.

- **Trajan (98-117)** did not seek out the church and did not even trust anonymous tips. His persecution of the church is probably more publicized because it is recorded in his correspondence with Pliny and his famous martyring of Polycarp.

- **Marcus Aurelius (161-180)** was a Stoic philosopher and held many conservative Roman values. His persecution of the church sprung from his conservative views on self-reliance and Roman dignity, which the church opposed. He criticized the flamboyance of certain martyrs.

- **Decius & Valerian (249-260)** and other emperors began to persecute the church because it was becoming a powerful force in social and political circles. They pursued the church through edicts that demanded that sacrifices to Roman gods.

- **Diocletian (284-305)** unleashed the most severe persecution the church had known. Often called The Great Persecution, he and the other emperors issued edicts that rescinded previous rights, singled out Christians serving in the military and government, and targeted the clergy.

- **The Legacy of Persecution:**
 - Early persecution helped build solidarity for Christians.
 - Later persecutions began to leave a legacy of schism within the church, with questions like:
 - Was it okay to flee persecution, or did one have to face martyrdom?
 - Could believers comply with some edicts and hand over sacred documents?
 - How should churches handle Christians who had apostatized and then repented?