

Persecution in the Roman Empire

Persecution was a fact of life for the Church, even when the New Testament was being written: Ro 16.7; 1 Cor 4.11-16; 2 Cor 4.8-11; 12.9-10; 2 Th 1.4; 2 Tim 3.10-12; He 10.32-39; 13.23; 1 Pe 2.20-23; 4.16-19. John, Luke, and Paul even call it **Tribulation**, something that was **present tense**: Jn 16.32-33; Ac 14.22; Ro 5.3; 8.35-39; 12.12, 14; Rev 1.9; 2.9-11.

Some of this came from Jews (Ac 4.1-2; 5.17; 7.59-8.3; 13.45; 14.2-6, 19; 17.1-14; 18.12-17; 26.10-15; Ga 5.11; 1 Th 2.14-16; 1 Tim 1.13); some from pagans (Ac 14.5; 16.19-22; 19.24-40); and some from the government (Ac 12.1-4; 16.22-23; 18.2; 2 Cor 11.32-33). Jesus said to expect this (Mt 5.10-12, 44; 10.21-23, 33-39; 13.20-21; Mk 10.29-31; Lk 14.27; 21.12; Jn 15.18-20).

Check it out. Look up the verses and read them.

Location was also a factor in the persecutions. Asia province took particular enthusiasm in persecuting Christians, from the time of Nero till 175 AD. Partly, that was because Asia had been the center of emperor worship, beginning in the days of Augustus. Sometimes Asia persecuted with the emperor's support, sometimes contrary to the emperor's stated policies.

The first persecution sponsored by the Empire was that of Nero, 64-68 AD. Nero wanted to acquire 125 acres to bridge two plots of his estate, adding a new house and gardens. (Eventually, Vespasian buried Nero's massive new gardens, placing the Colosseum on the site.) The fire got out of hand. After burning 5/7 of Rome, Nero needed a scapegoat. He couldn't blame the Jews and expel them from Rome, the way that Tiberius and Claudius had done. Nero couldn't because his girlfriend Poppaea was a Godfearer, a Jewish sympathizer. So, he turned on Christians. Paul and Peter were martyred at this time. For the most part, Nero's persecution was limited to Rome, but recent studies have found that the persecution was a bit more widespread; Nero was paying informers in Ephesus to expose Christians and other "political enemies."

By the time of Domitian, the Church had spread to Axum, Iraq, Iran, across North Africa through Egypt to Algeria, into India, Sri Lanka, Bactria, Xinjiang, Spain, the British Isles, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Alsace, Crimea, Georgia, Armenia, Baku, Italy, Illyria, Thrace, Greece, Cyprus, Turkey, Nabatea, and the Rhine & Moselle valleys. Domitian launched a persecution in 94 AD, against Jews and Christians. He arrested and executed the Consul of Rome, Flavius Clemens, and his predecessor, Acilius Glabrio. Both were Christians; Clemens was Domitian's second cousin. They were charged with "atheism," a common charge against Christians. Clemens' wife Domitilla, (Domitian's niece), was exiled to an island; the two sons of Clemens and Domitilla, Domitianus and Vespasian - previously named by Domitian as first and second in line for the throne - were never heard from again. Acilio's wife was named Priscilla. Besides persecution in Italy and Asia province, at least one trial is reported from Judea. 40,000 Christians were killed in less than 2 years, per Christian sources. After Domitian was killed, Nerva restored lands to Domitilla and Priscilla, both of whom gave them to the church in Rome - the first catacombs.

Later, usually lesser, persecutions of Christians occurred under Trajan, Hadrian (117-124 AD, before he pursued Jews; 10,000 Christians died, again per Christian sources), Antoninus, Marcus Aurelius, Septimus Severus, Maximus the Thracian, Valerian (perhaps 3000 killed), and Aurelian.

Systematic persecutions were undertaken by Decius & Gallus (249-253 AD), and in Diocletian's 40-year long Great Persecution (284-324 AD). They systematically arrested every elder, bishop, deacon, and anyone with copies of Scripture. They tortured them until they died, sacrificed to some god other than Jesus, and/or betrayed the names of other Christians; then the empire did the same thing to those people. Their property was confiscated. Spies watched catacombs and other cemeteries, and recorded the names of those who entered. To avoid persecution, people had to carry a specific paper, called a *libellus*, confirming that they had sacrificed to the emperor. Only the ascent of Constantine ended these persecutions.

Yet remember, the Church was not just located in the Roman Empire. After Domitian and before Constantine, the Church had arrived in Hesse, Slovenia, the Danube valley, and in the Arab peninsula, including Bahrain. And, the Church faced persecution from Zoroastrians in Parthia, from Berbers just south of the Roman borders of Africa, and from Goths and Vandals. In 260 AD, bishop Dionysius of Caesarea, Cappadocia, was paying ransoms to liberate Christians captured by Goths and the same year, Chocras, a chief over 60,000 Goth troops, killed 6,266 Christians in Clermont, Gaul; however, the Gospel kept advancing. By 311 AD, a few Goth chieftains were minting coins that contained the Cross, proclaiming their conversion to Christ - and this was 49 years before Ulfilas wrote the first translation of the Bible into Gothic/German.