

The Gates Of Hell Shall Not Prevail...

Lessons from The Story Of The Church

1: Blessed Are You When Men Hate You

“Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man’s sake. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven.”

Luke 6:22 – 23

Maybe it is because we have lived through a time when Christians have had it easy that we forget. Maybe it is because we have never seen it up close that we find it hard to take it in. The fact is that all throughout the 2000 years of Christ’s reign his followers have had to face fierce persecution. It was that way right from the beginning.

First It Was The Jews

It started with the Jews. The first Christians were, of course, Jews themselves. For a while they continued to worship in the Temple and attend the synagogues but before long the conflict between Jewish practice and Christian faith became apparent. Tensions brewed and boiled over into open hostility. The persecution that followed had the effect of driving some of the first believers out of Israel and sending the gospel to other parts of the Roman Empire (Acts 8:1 – 5, 11:19).

The Jewish War

In AD 66 the Zealots, who had risen to power in Jerusalem, led a Jewish revolt against the Roman Empire that lasted for seven years. Rome reacted with typical barbaric fury and, according to the Jewish historian Josephus, 1.1 million Jews were killed, 97,000 were taken captive and sold as slaves or put to death for sport in Roman arenas and Jerusalem was utterly destroyed.

Christians, in obedience to Luke 21:20 – 24, had fled to safety before it happened but the church lost its home in Jerusalem and any ties it had with its Jewish roots were completely severed. Jewish Christians were regarded as traitors because they had not stayed to fight and the Pharisees, who came into power after the destruction of Jerusalem, added a curse on all Christians to the liturgy of Jewish worship, so that it became impossible for Christians to worship in the synagogues.

The Church Grew Anyway

Throughout the second century the church grew and its influence spread. Local congregations were established throughout the Empire, first in the main trade centres and larger towns. Contact between them was kept up, mostly by travelling preachers and teachers, but each was independent and appointed its own bishops, presbyters¹ and deacons.

Believers met in houses, rented rooms or in the open air. Their emphasis in worship was on the reading and preaching of the Scriptures, prayer and the Lord’s Supper. Singing did not play a major role and musical instruments were not used until much later stage in the history of the church. Standing for worship was the usual practice and, while praying, believers

¹ At first “bishop” and “presbyter” were considered to be different titles that applied to the single office of elder but in time it came to be that a distinction was made between bishops and presbyters, the bishop being the senior elder who ruled the church with presbyters serving under his authority.

appear to have stood with arms spread out, palms turned upward and eyes open, looking toward heaven — at least that is how the pictures portray them.

Then It Was The Romans

In the early years the Romans were generally friendly or indifferent toward the church but Christians inevitably came into conflict with Roman society because pagan religion was part of almost everything that happened. They became unpopular with neighbours who considered them self-righteous and anti-social, viewed them with suspicion and blamed them for making the gods angry. It became common for Christians to be made scapegoats for any local calamity or disaster. A Christian writer called Tertullian wrote:

“If the River Tiber rises as high as the wall of the city of Rome, if the River Nile does not send its waters over the fields, if there is an earthquake, or famine, or pestilence, immediately the cry is, ‘The Christians to the lions’.”

It was not until the year 250 that the first Empire wide persecution began but before that local persecutions, some of them horrendous, broke out from time to time, usually on the whim of local governors or magistrates who were influenced by the ups and downs of popular anti-Christian feeling.

The first organised persecution by the Roman authorities came in AD 64 in the time of the Emperor Nero. That year a fire destroyed most of the city of Rome and it was rumoured that Nero himself had set the fire so he could redesign the capital.

“To kill the rumours [that he had started the fire] Nero charged and tortured some people hated for their evil practices — the group popularly known as Christians. The founder of this sect, Christ, had been put to death by the governor of Judaea, Pontius Pilate, when Tiberius was emperor. Their deadly superstition had been suppressed temporarily, but was beginning to spring up again — not now just in Judaea but even in Rome itself. First the authorities arrested those who confessed to being Christians. Then, on information obtained from them, the courts convicted hundreds more, not so much for starting the fire as for their anti-social beliefs. In their deaths they were made a mockery. They were covered in the skins of wild animals, torn to death by dogs, crucified, or set on fire so that when darkness fell they burned like torches in the night. Nero opened up his own gardens for this spectacle and gave a show in the arena, where he mixed with the crowd, or stood dressed as a charioteer on a chariot. As a result, although they were guilty of being Christians and deserved to die, people began to feel sorry for them. For they realised that they were being killed, not for the public good but to satisfy one man’s madness.”

The Roman historian Tacitus

Nero’s persecution was limited to the city of Rome. It is likely that both Peter and Paul died in it. The Emperor Domitian unleashed a persecution against the church in AD 96. It was at that time that John was exiled to Patmos and the book of the Revelation was written. The worst period of persecution in the second century began in AD 177. It led to the death of many Christians in Lyons and Vienne in the south of France. An eyewitness account has survived from those days.

“The whole fury of crowd governor and soldiers fell with crushing force on Sanctus, the deacon from Vienne: on Maturus, very recently baptised but heroic in facing his ordeal: on Attalus, who had always been a pillar and support of the church in his native Pergamum: and on Blandina through whom Christ proved that things which men regard as mean, unlovely and contemptible are by God deemed worthy of great glory.

We were all afraid, and Blandina’s earthly mistress (herself facing the ordeal of martyrdom) was in agony in case she should be unable to make a bold confession of Christ due to her bodily weakness: but Blandina was filled with such power that those who took it in turns to subject her to every kind of torture from morning to night were exhausted by their efforts and confessed

themselves beaten: they could think of nothing else to do. They were amazed that she was still breathing for her whole body was mangled. and her wounds gaped: they declared that torment of any one kind was enough to part soul and body, let alone a succession of torments of such extreme severity. But the blessed woman, wrestling magnificently, grew in strength as she proclaimed her faith, and found refreshment, rest and indifference to her sufferings in uttering the words, 'I am a Christian. We do nothing to be ashamed of'."

"Blandina was hung on a post and exposed as food for the wild beasts which had been let loose in the arena. She looked as if she was hanging in the form of a cross, and through her ardent prayers she aroused great enthusiasm in the other martyrs who were undergoing their ordeal. In their agony they seemed to see in their sister the One Who was crucified for them. As none of the wild beasts had touched Blandina, they took her down from the post and returned her to prison, keeping her for a second ordeal..."

"On the last day of the sports they brought Blandina in again and with her Ponticus, a boy of about 15. Day after day the authorities had taken them in to watch the others being punished and tried to make them swear by the pagan idols. When they stood firm and treated these efforts with contempt the mob was infuriated with them. The boy's tender age called forth no pity, the woman's tender sex called forth no respect. They were subjected to every horror and every punishment in turn. The mob tried again and again to make them swear by the gods, but in vain. Ponticus was encouraged by his sister in Christ, so that the pagans saw she was urging him on and stiffening his resistance, and he bravely endured every punishment till he gave back his spirit to God. Last of all, like a noble mother who had encouraged her children and sent them ahead of her in triumph to the King, blessed Blandina herself passed through all the ordeals of her children and hastened to rejoin them, rejoicing and exulting in her departure as if she had been invited to a wedding supper rather than thrown to wild beasts.

After whipping her, giving her to the beasts, and burning her with hot irons, the authorities finally dropped her into a basket and threw her to a bull. The beast gored her again and again, but she was now indifferent to all that happened to her because of her hope, her firm grip on all that her faith meant and her communion with Christ. Then she too was sacrificed. The pagans themselves admitted that they had never known a woman suffer so much or so long."

How Do We Know These Things?

You might wonder how we know about these things. Some is gleaned from the writings of historians of the day: Josephus, Tacitus and others but most comes from letters written by the men known as the apostolic fathers. They were the first generation of church leaders after the apostles. Men like Clement of Rome who wrote a letter to the church at Corinth about AD 96 (the Corinthians were still fighting among themselves even then). Ignatius, bishop of the church in Antioch for forty years, wrote letters to several churches as he was being transported to Rome to be thrown to wild animals in the Colosseum in AD 110 — "butchered to make a Roman holiday." Polycarp, a disciple of the apostle John who became bishop of the church in Smyrna, wrote a letter to the church in Philippi. He was burned to death in AD 155. When given the opportunity to deny the Lord and escape death he replied, "Eighty and six years I served Christ and He has done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my King who has saved me? You threaten the fire that burns for an hour and is then quenched; but you know not of the fire of the judgement to come, and the fire of the eternal punishment. Bring what you will."

These and others like them have left a record for us of what it was like to be a Christian in the second century.

There Is More

There are many other stories of great heroism from these early days. If you want to read more there are lots of books available. Among the most readable are, *Sketches From Church History* by S M Houghton and , for more detail, *2000 Years Of Christ's Power* by N R Needham.

How Would You Fare?

To be a Christian is no easy option. It calls for great courage. Jesus told us to expect persecution in this world and much of the teaching in the New Testament is geared to help us face it.

Speaking of the last days, the days in which we live, Jesus said

“But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and persecute *you*, delivering *you* up to the synagogues and prisons. You will be brought before kings and rulers for My name’s sake.”

Luke 21:12

“Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also’.”

John 15:20

Paul warns in his letter to Timothy:

“Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.”

2 Timothy 3:12

But along with the warnings God has also given us many words of encouragement:

“Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel’s, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time — houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions — and in the age to come, eternal life.”

Mark 10:29 – 30

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? *Shall* tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?”

Romans 8:35

“Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great *is* your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Matthew 5:12

“Rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.”

1 Peter 4:13

Some Questions For Discussion

1. What can we learn from the example of the second century church?
2. Why do we have such an easy time as Christians these days?
3. Should we be preparing for future persecution?
4. How can we prepare ourselves and our children?

For Further Study

To help you think further about these things, read and meditate upon Hebrews 11:35 – 12:3.