

Great Controversy Series  
03 Persecution in the First Centuries of Christianity

Jesus never said that His followers, that is Christians, would be the political head of the world. Jesus did not start a political movement. He didn't say that Christianity would grow and become the world's dominant religion. O.K., then what did He said.

Matthew 10:16-22 <sup>16</sup> "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. <sup>17</sup> "But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues. <sup>18</sup> "You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. <sup>19</sup> "But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; <sup>20</sup> "for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you. <sup>21</sup> "Now brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father *his* child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. <sup>22</sup> "And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.

Matthew 24:9 <sup>9</sup> "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake.

Matthew 24:21-22 <sup>21</sup> "For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. <sup>22</sup> "And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened.

Do these verses imply that Christianity would be popular? No, instead they paint a dark picture.

Who would persecute the Christians? Yes, Christians would be persecuted by the Jews. But these persecutions were relatively short and generally happened because Rome closed her eyes to it. In the appearance of Christianity, paganism saw a great threat and it pulled the sword from the sheaf to crush it.

The first attempt on Jesus' life didn't come from the Jews but from Rome. While Jesus was still a baby, King Herod tried to kill him.

Matthew 2:13 <sup>13</sup> Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him."

Matthew 2:16 <sup>16</sup> Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men.

Herod, who tried to kill Jesus was a Roman king. This terrible event is portrayed in the book of Revelation in a more symbolic manner.

Revelation 12:1-6 Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars. <sup>2</sup> Then being with child, she cried out in labor and in pain to give birth. <sup>3</sup> And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great, fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. <sup>4</sup> His tail drew a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born. <sup>5</sup> She bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up to God and His throne. <sup>6</sup> Then the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, that they should feed her there one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

Who is the child? Who would rule all nations with a rod of iron? Who would be caught up to God and to His throne? Yes, Jesus Christ. Who is the woman? Some people will say Mother Mary. But we can make a more comprehensive interpretation. In the Holy Scriptures, God people are shown as the bride of God in the Old Testament and the bride of Christ in the New Testament.

2 Corinthians 11:2 For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present *you as* a chaste virgin to Christ.

God's people appear as the bride of Christ, that is as a woman. Let's return to the verses in Revelation. There is a moon under the feet of the woman in Revelation. The moon has no light of its own. The moon can only reflect the light of the sun. In the Old Testament there are prophecies and the sacrificial system that point to Christ. The Old Testament only reflects the light of Christ. Jesus is the Savior of the world. Jesus is the light of the world. See John 9:5. The woman in Revelation is clothed with the sun. This points to the time of Jesus, the time of the gospel. So the woman in Revelation represents God's people in general of whom Mother Mary was a part.

Who was trying to devour the child born? Yes, the dragon was trying to devour it. Who is the dragon?

Revelation 12:9 So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.

Who is trying to kill Jesus? The dragon who is Satan. But who is Satan's agent? The Roman king Herod. We see a Bible interpretation principle here. Satan and his agent appear as one. There is no difference. In later lessons this principle will be very important because Satan is behind the world's capricious, apparently meaningless horrible massacres, wars and other events. But why? What goal does Satan have in mind by doing these things? We will take a look at that. And we will see Satan's main agents.

Who nailed Jesus to the cross? Pagan Rome. Yes the Jews carried a large responsibility in it. The Jews arrested Jesus and turned Him over to Pilate to be killed. But Pilate was a Roman governor. When Stephen was stoned the Jewish high court of the Sanhedrin had no right to administer the death penalty. Israel was being occupied and only Rome had the right to administer the death penalty. When Saul was having Jesus's followers thrown into jail and executed he had no right in the Roman empire. Then how did it happen? Rome was closing their eyes to it. King Herod, not the Herod that tried to kill Jesus as a child, killed James. Pagan Rome was persecuting Christianity.

In spite of this, Christianity spread and persecution kept pace. Paul was imprisoned many times in Roman cities. In Ephesus, those who made idols lost a lot of money because of the gospel and a large crowd gathered in the theater against Paul. Paul had to escape from there. Years later when the Jews tried to kill Paul, he fell once again into Roman hands. The Jews accused Paul in front of governors Feliks and Festus and king Agrippa. In the end, Paul was sent to Emperor Nero.

While Paul was a prisoner he was allowed to talk with people and write letters. Some of the family of Nero heard the gospel and believed in Jesus.

Philippians 4:22 All the saints greet you, but especially those who are of Caesar's household.

But the Emperor Nero didn't like the spread of Christianity especially to his own household. In 64 AD from July 18 to 19 when a huge fire broke out in Rome, nearly half of the city burned. After the fire the emperor made sacrifices to the gods and made ceremonies and banquets. The pagan historian Tacitus wrote the following:

But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiations of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order. Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judæa, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; [most likely tortured to render their confessions] then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.

Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a

feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed.

Nero, who murdered his own mother, his wife and in order to take the throne murdered the heir who was his step brother, cruelly put to death thousands of Christians based on lies and false testimony.

The large persecutions beginning with Nero and continued with varying intensity for centuries. In the New Testament we see verses like these witnessing to persecution:

1 Corinthians 4:12 And we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure;

2 Thessalonians 1:4 so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure,

Revelation 1:9 <sup>9</sup> I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.

Yes Rome banished the apostle John to the island of Patmos as a prisoner. In general historians have identified 10 major persecutions against Christians. John was sent to Patmos during the persecution of 90-96 during the reign of Domitian. The 10 major pagan Roman persecutions are as follows:

Nero 64  
Domitian 90-96  
Trajan 98-117  
Hadrian 117-138  
Marcus Aurelius 161-181  
Septimus Severus 201-211  
Maximus the Thracian 235-251  
Decius 249-251  
Valerian 257-260  
Diocletian 303-311

Persecution was seen in Izmir. There was a church leader named Polycarp. The date that he was martyred is not known precisely but it is believed to be between the years 155 and 177. According to a document believed to have been written about the same time, when a man named Germanicus was thrown to wild animals in the stadium, the crowd cried, "Down with the atheists!" Because Christians wouldn't worship Roman gods they were considered atheists. The crowd shouted, "Arrest Polycarp!" When Polycarp heard that Germanicus was martyred he did not want to escape but his friends urged him. A few days later he was captured and taken to the stadium. The Roman governor said to him, "Have respect for your old age, swear by the fortune

of Caesar. Repent, and say, 'Down with the Atheists! Reproach Christ, and I will set you free!'" Polycarp said to him, "Eighty six years have I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?" They tried to burn Polycarp in the stadium but the fire didn't do the job for some reason. He was killed with a spear and then his body was burned. Polycarp was said to be the 12<sup>th</sup> martyr in Izmir.

In the year 303 the last and most extensive pagan persecution of Christians took place. A reference from Vikipaida (The Turkish Wikipedia) said the following:

According to Christian sources in the first years of Diocletian's reign Galerius incited the persecution. But Diocletian also appropriated the persecution with equal pleasure. In the years 299 -300 Christianity was accused of being the reason that an appropriate prophecy could not be received from sacrifice to the gods. Diocletian said that if any Christian state official or soldier would not participate in the sacrifices they would lose their positions. In this period a prophecy from Apollo in Didim was interpreted that the Christians should be persecuted.

On February 24, 303 Diocletian made the first decree against the Christians. According to this all Christian books and places of worship in the empire were to be destroyed. It was outlawed for Christians to come together for worship. After a fire in the palace in Nicomedia and uprisings in Anatolia, Diocletian made harsher restrictions against Christians and ordered the arrest of all church leaders. All captives could be released if they would demonstrate their rejection of Christianity by making sacrifice to the gods. This persecution was most keenly felt in the eastern portion of the empire and continued until 313. This was the year that the Edict of Milan was put into effect by Constantine and Licinius.

According to one estimate during this time 3000-3500 Christians were killed. Others were thrown into prison and tortured. The persecution was so intense that the Alexandrian church reckoned Diocletian's reign as the Time of martyrs. One result of the persecution was that a man named Marinus escaped to the Titano mountain and founded the Marino republic.

How many people were killed no one knows. Some estimates are even higher than the one in the article we just read. The words of Jesus were completely realized. But when Constantine was supposedly converted to Christianity on one hand we can say that Christianity came to a period of ease and dominance. But as we will see next time, actually Christianity was about to enter what the Bible shows as the most terrible time of persecution.

Heaven and earth will pass away but Jesus' words will never pass away. Jesus said, "You will be hated by all nations for My name's sake." His followers would be persecuted and will be persecuted. Are you ready? Satan's hatred of Jesus hasn't waned and will not wane until his death. Satan can't touch Jesus who is in heaven and for this reason he persecutes His followers.

Satan's agents can be individuals or states, it doesn't matter. People full of hate are in Satan's hands.

How can we prepare for persecution? The preparation is a spiritual preparation.

Matthew 10:28 "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

I will share one more verse with you. It comes from the message to the Izmir church that John wrote when he was banished to the island of Patmos. Look, who would throw the believers into prison?

Revelation 2:10 "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw *some* of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

It will be the agent of Satan who throws people to prison. In Polycarp's time it was pagan Rome. It can be something else in our day. It doesn't matter. Your work is to remain faithful. Be decided. Do not look to your own strength but rely on Jesus' power.