

The History of Christianity Series, Part I: Martyrdom in the Roman Empire

1st Century — Nero and the First Major Persecution

c. 64 AD — Persecution under Nero

After the Great Fire of Rome, Nero blamed Christians.

According to Tacitus:

- Christians were tortured,
- crucified,
- burned alive,
- killed in spectacles.



Tradition associates this period with the martyrdoms of:

- Peter the Apostle
- Paul the Apostle.

2nd Century

Who Was Ignatius?

Ignatius was:

- bishop of Antioch,
- probably in the late 1st and early 2nd century,
- one of the most important post-apostolic Christian leaders.

Antioch was a major Christian centre:

- one of the earliest Gentile churches,
- associated with Paul,
- and according to Acts, the place where believers were first called “Christians.”

Arrest and Condemnation

The exact reason for Ignatius' arrest is unclear.

Likely context:

- increasing Roman suspicion of Christians,
- refusal to participate in imperial religion,
- local pressure against Christian communities.

Tradition places his arrest during the reign of:

- Trajan (c. 98–117 AD).

Ignatius was condemned to death and sent under guard from Antioch to Rome for public execution.

Death by Wild Beasts

The account says Ignatius was:

- thrown to wild beasts,
- probably lions,
- in the amphitheater.

Ignatius wrote:

I write to all the Churches, and impress on them all, that I shall willingly die for God, unless ye hinder me. I beseech of you not to show an unseasonable goodwill towards me. Suffer me to become food for the wild beasts, through whose instrumentality it will be granted me to attain to God. I am the wheat of God, and am ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of God. Rather entice the wild beasts, that they may become my tomb, and may leave nothing of my body; so that when I have fallen asleep [in death], I may not be found troublesome to any one. Then shall I be a true disciple of Jesus Christ, when the world shall not see so much as my body. Entreat the Lord for me, that by these instruments I may be found a sacrifice to God. I do not, as Peter and Paul, issue commandments unto you. They were apostles of Jesus Christ, but I am the very least [of believers]: they were free, as the servants of God; while I am, even until now, a servant. But when I suffer, I

shall be the freedman of Jesus Christ, and shall rise again emancipated in Him. And now, being in bonds for Him, I learn not to desire anything worldly or vain.

May I enjoy the wild beasts that are prepared for me; and I pray that they may be found eager to rush upon me, which also I will entice to devour me speedily, and not deal with me as with some, whom, out of fear, they have not touched. But if they be unwilling to assail me, I will compel them to do so. Pardon me [in this] I know what is for my benefit. Now I begin to be a disciple. And let no one, of things visible or invisible, envy me that I should attain to Jesus Christ. Let fire and the cross; let the crowds of wild beasts; let tearings, breakings, and dislocations of bones; let cutting off of members; let shatterings of the whole body; and let all the dreadful torments of the devil come upon me: only let me attain to Jesus Christ.

All the pleasures of the world, and all the kingdoms of this earth, shall profit me nothing. It is better for me to die in behalf of Jesus Christ, than to reign over all the ends of the earth. "For what shall a man be profited, if he gain the whole world, but lose his own soul?" Him I seek, who died for us: Him I desire, who rose again for our sake. This is the gain which is laid up for me. Suffer me to obtain pure light: when I have gone thither, I shall indeed be a man of God. Permit me to be an imitator of the passion of my God. If any one has Him within himself, let him consider what I desire, and let him have sympathy with me, as knowing how I am straitened.

The prince of this world would fain carry me away, and corrupt my disposition towards God. Let none of you, therefore, who are [in Rome] help him; rather be ye on my side, that is, on the side of God. Do not speak of Jesus Christ, and yet set your desires on the world. Let not envy find a dwelling-place among you; nor even should I, when present with you, exhort you to it, be ye persuaded to listen to me, but rather give credit to those things which I now write to you. For though I am alive while I write to you, yet I am eager to die. My love has been crucified, and there is no fire in me desiring to be fed; but there is within me a water that liveth and speaketh, saying to me inwardly, Come to the Father. I have no delight in corruptible food, nor in the pleasures of this life. I desire the bread of God, the heavenly bread, the bread of life, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became afterwards of the seed of David and Abraham;

and I desire the drink of God, namely His blood, which is incorruptible love and eternal life.

Early 2nd Century — Christianity as Illegal but Tolerated

A key moment comes under Trajan.

Pliny and Trajan (c. 112 AD)

Pliny the Younger wrote to Trajan asking:

“What should I do with Christians?”

Trajan’s reply is extremely important.

He says:

- Christians should **not be actively hunted**,
- anonymous accusations should be rejected,
- BUT if formally accused and refusing sacrifice to Roman gods, they should be punished.

This becomes a kind of unofficial policy for a long time.

So Christianity occupied an unstable position:

- not fully legal,
- often tolerated,
- vulnerable to accusation at any time.

Why Romans Distrusted Christians

Christians were often viewed suspiciously because they:

- refused sacrifice to Roman gods,
- rejected emperor worship,
- met privately,
- called each other “brother” and “sister,”
- celebrated the Eucharist (“body” and “blood”).

Rumours spread accusing Christians of:

- atheism,
- cannibalism,
- immorality,

The Roman state cared deeply about:

- religious unity,
- civic loyalty,
- ritual participation.

Christian exclusivity looked politically dangerous.

3rd Century — Christianity Becomes Too Large to Ignore

By the 200s:

- Christianity had spread widely,
- bishops had social influence,
- churches owned property,
- converts included educated elites.

The empire increasingly saw Christianity as a major social force.

The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas

Time

Around:

203 AD

during the reign of:

- Septimius Severus.

Place

The events occur in:

Carthage

in Roman North Africa, one of the great centers of early Christianity.

Background

A group of catechumens (people preparing for baptism) were arrested for being Christians.

Among them:

- Perpetua,
- Felicitas,
- Revocatus,
- Saturninus,
- Secundulus,
- Saturus.

Perpetua

Perpetua was:

- young,
- educated,
- from a relatively noble family,
- recently a mother with an infant son.

This is important because Roman society strongly valued:

- family loyalty,
- paternal authority,
- civic religion.

Her conversion to Christianity disrupted all of these expectations.

Felicitas

Felicitas was:

- Perpetua's slave,
- pregnant at the time of imprisonment.

The text is striking because martyrdom spiritually unites:

- noblewoman and slave,
- socially unequal persons made equal in Christ.

This reflects an important early Christian ideal.

Imprisonment

The Christians were imprisoned awaiting public execution.

The prison conditions were harsh:

- heat,
- crowding,
- chains,
- uncertainty.

Perpetua especially suffers over separation from her baby.

Eventually her infant is allowed to remain with her in prison for a time.

Perpetua's Father

One of the most emotionally powerful aspects of the text is Perpetua's conflict with her pagan father.

He repeatedly begs her:

- renounce Christianity,
- save herself,
- think of her child,
- preserve family honor.

He appears devastated.

Perpetua refuses.

A famous exchange occurs when she points to a vessel and says:

Can it be called by any other name than what it is?

Her father says no.

She replies:

“Neither can I call myself anything other than what I am — a Christian.”

This reflects the absolute identity early Christians attached to the faith.

The Arena

The prisoners are condemned to public spectacle in the amphitheater.

This was part of Roman entertainment culture:

- executions,
- beast fights,
- gladiatorial games.

Martyrs often died before crowds.

The Christians enter joyfully, almost ceremonially.

The text presents them not as defeated criminals but as victorious athletes of Christ.

Treatment in the Arena

The men are exposed to wild beasts.

Perpetua and Felicitas are exposed to a wild cow — likely chosen mockingly because they were women.

Perpetua is thrown violently but described as:

- calm,
- composed,
- modest even in suffering.

One striking detail:

after being tossed, she adjusts her clothing and hair to preserve dignity.

The narrative emphasizes:

- spiritual nobility,
- courage,
- self-possession.

Final Execution

Many victims survive the beasts initially.

The martyrs are then executed by sword.

Perpetua reportedly guides the trembling hand of the inexperienced gladiator to her throat.

The text portrays:

- fearless acceptance,
- voluntary witness,
- imitation of Christ.

Account:

Now dawned the day of their victory, and they went forth from the prison into the amphitheatre as it were into heaven, cheerful and bright of countenance; if they trembled at all, it was for joy, not for fear. Perpetua followed behind, glorious of presence, as a true spouse of Christ and darling of God; at whose piercing look all cast down their eyes. Felicity likewise, rejoicing that she had borne a child in safety, that she might fight with the beasts, came now from blood to blood, from the midwife to the gladiator, to wash after her travail in a second baptism. And when they had been brought to the gate and were being compelled to put on, the men the dress of the priests of Saturn, the women the dress of the priestesses of Ceres, the noble Perpetua remained of like firmness to the end, and would not. For she said: For this cause came we willingly unto this, that our liberty might not be obscured. For this cause have we devoted our lives, that we might do no such thing as this; this we agreed with you. Injustice acknowledged justice; the tribune suffered that they should be brought forth as they were, without more ado. Perpetua began to sing, as already treading on the Egyptian's head. For whenever they spoke together of their desire in their martyrdom, Saturninus for his part would declare that he wished to be thrown to every kind of beast, that so indeed he might wear the more glorious crown.

249–251 — Decian Persecution

Under Decius

This was a major turning point.

For the first time, an emperor required **all inhabitants** (except Jews in many cases) to perform sacrifice for the welfare of the empire.

People received certificates called *libelli* proving compliance.

Christians faced choices:

- sacrifice,
- obtain forged certificates,
- flee,
- or die.

This was not aimed only at Christians, but Christians were uniquely vulnerable because of exclusive monotheism.

257–258 — Valerian Persecution

Under Valerian persecution intensified again.

According to later Christian tradition, Lawrence was martyred in Rome around 258 AD by being roasted on a gridiron during the persecution under Valerian.

The famous line attributed to him is:

“Turn me over; I’m done on this side.”



A Period of Relative Toleration

Under Gallienus (260s)

Christians experienced substantial peace.

Churches:

- rebuilt,
- expanded,
- organized more openly.

This “little peace of the Church” helped Christianity grow rapidly.

303–311 — The Great Persecution

Under Diocletian

The most systematic persecution in Roman history.

Edicts ordered:

- destruction of churches,
- burning of Scriptures,
- imprisonment of clergy,
- compulsory sacrifice.

Intensity varied regionally:

- harsher in the East,
- less severe in some Western regions.

Why it happened:

- Diocletian wanted religious unity,
- traditional Roman religion was tied to imperial stability,
- Christianity’s growth seemed threatening to imperial order.

Christian Response

Responses varied:

- martyrdom,

- hiding,
- compromise,
- handing over Scriptures (*traditores*).

Afterward, major disputes erupted over:

- purity,
- forgiveness,
- legitimacy of clergy who compromised.

This especially shaped the later Donatist controversy in North Africa.



Depiction of St. Catherine

311 — Toleration under Galerius

Astonishingly, one of the persecutors, Galerius, issued an edict ending persecution.

He admitted persecution had failed and allowed Christians to exist legally if they prayed for the empire.

This is one of the great turning points in Roman religious history.

312–313 — Constantine and Imperial Favor

After the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Constantine the Great increasingly favored Christianity.

313 — Edict of Milan

Issued by Constantine and Licinius.

It granted:

- religious liberty,
- restoration of confiscated church property,
- legal recognition.

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