

Surviving Roman Persecution

Objectives

To learn about the “Era of Roman Persecution”, the reasons behind it, and how Christians survived it

References

Coptic Diocese of Southern USA, Servants/ Preservants program (History)

Scriptural Verse

“But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew” (**Exodus 1: 12**)

Lesson Outlines

Roman Persecution

- ❖ The Roman governors considered Christianity a denomination of Judaism and that’s why they didn’t care about Jewish persecution to Christians (**Acts 23: 28- 29**).
- ❖ Roman persecution to Christians started around the year 64 when Christianity invaded Rome and the Roman Empire realized that it is not part of the approved Judaism.
- ❖ Persecution started with Nero who killed St. Peter and St. Paul and ended with the cruelest Diocletian whose reign in 284 marks the calendar of Martyrs in the Coptic Church.
- ❖ Roman persecution lasted for around 250 years as it stopped officially with the Edict of Milan in 313 AD signed by 1st Christian Emperor Constantine the great and was powered by the prayers of St. Peter the seal of Martyrs.
- ❖ The tortures were severe and cruel: mentally (insults, degrading from positions and no legal protection as they refused paganism), physically (well known) and emotionally (especially for virgins and ladies).

Diocletian Persecution

- ❖ “As never before, the motive of the Great Persecution which began in 303 was the total extirpation of Christianity: it was a struggle to the death between the old and new orders” Michael Grant (historian)
- ❖ “This was the nineteenth year of the reign of Diocletian in Dystrus [March] when the feast of the Saviour's passion was near at hand, and royal edicts were published everywhere, commanding that the churches [should] be razed to the ground, the scriptures destroyed by fire, those who held positions of honor degraded, and the household servants, if they persisted in the Christian profession, be deprived of their liberty. And such was the first decree against us. But issuing [other] decrees not long after, the Emperor commanded that all the rulers of the churches in every place should be first put in prison and afterwards compelled by every device to offer sacrifice.” Eusebius.
- ❖ In 297/298 AD He issued an edict forcing all soldiers and administrators to worship idols and anyone who refused to do so would be fired.
- ❖ In 303 AD he issued another edict that mandated the destruction of all churches and Christian Scripture in the empire.

- ❖ Two more edicts that year ordered Christian clergy to be put in prison until they offered sacrifices to idols and to torture them till they renounce their faith.
- ❖ The 4th edict was then issued to wipe out Christianity from the Roman Empire and the persecution and torture of all Christians who would not renounce the faith.
- ❖ Persecuted the church for 2 years and 2 months from 303-305 AD.
- ❖ Maximinus Daza, who was Ceasar of Egypt and Syria continued the persecution till 313 AD.
- ❖ This era of persecution was the most brutal
- ❖ 800,000 martyred the last of whom was Pope Peter the 17th, aka “Seal of the Martyrs.”
- ❖ Martyrs of that time: Tadros of Shotep, Dimiana, Abanoub

Other Persecuting Emperors

- ❖ Nero (64-68 AD)
- ❖ Domitian (81-86 AD)
- ❖ Trajan (98-117 AD) – more moderate
- ❖ Marcus Aurelius (161-180 AD) – wholesale slaughters in amphitheaters, one of the bloodiest
- ❖ Septimius Severus (193-211 AD) – forbade the conversion to Christianity
- ❖ Maximinus (235-238 AD)
- ❖ Decius (249-251 AD) – general persecution of the whole church
- ❖ Valerian (253-260 AD)
- ❖ Aurelian (270-275 AD)

The Fate of the Persecutors

- ❖ Nero – suddenly disappeared and his burial place unknown – possibly committed suicide
- ❖ Domitian – murdered by his enemies
- ❖ Decius – slain by Barbarians and his body was left to be devoured by animals
- ❖ Valerian – tortured and imprisoned by the Persians
- ❖ Aurelian – assassinated by friends before his edict reached the more distant provinces
- ❖ Diocletian – suffered from mental and bodily disorders and committed suicide
- ❖ Maximianus Heraculus – committed suicide

Why did the Roman Emperors persecute Christians?

Christianity was a threat to the Roman religion, tradition and way of life

- ❖ It was an understood religion (Logic do not approve paganism) and came with different meaning than those already known.
- ❖ It is an Ecumenical religion for everybody from everywhere and put the stranger above the citizen (it was a shame for a Roman to be like others).
- ❖ It presented itself as the only true and accepted religion refusing all form of Paganism.
- ❖ It teaches to separate religion from politics and that contradicts their regime.
- ❖ It showed great interest to the spiritualities over social activities (Pagan feasts).

How did our great fathers withstand these horrible sufferings?

The martyrs gave up everything of this passing world out of a great love for the Lord Jesus Christ the savior who endured much more sufferings on the cross (**Romans 8: 35-39**) and despite all the trials to oppress them and destroy their courage, they were always strong, happy and comforted (**Acts 6: 15**) due to the following:

1- New Concept of suffering

- ❖ It goes willingly after love (wherever the cross is, there is also love).
- ❖ It is a spiritual gift (**Philippians 1: 29**).
- ❖ It shares with the Lord Christ's sufferings to be glorified with Him (**Philippians 3: 10**).
- ❖ It is a gain to die with the Lord Christ (**Philippians 1: 21**).

2-Motives of Martyrdom

- ❖ This world is limited compared to Eternity.
- ❖ Christians felt stranger in this world.
- ❖ This world is full of tribulation but there, Eternally, God will wipe away all tears from their eyes (**Rev. 21: 4**).
- ❖ Limited sufferings will lead to eternal glory (**2Corinthians 4:17**).
- ❖ Great feeling to be persecuted for the noblest cause.

3-Support and strength during martyrdom due to

- ❖ The divine help as the promise of the Lord (**Luke 21: 12-19**).
- ❖ Prayers of the whole church on their behalf (**Acts 12: 5 and 4: 31**).
- ❖ They saw the previous martyrs and the wonderful miracles that accompanied their martyrdom.
- ❖ The glorious vision that was revealed to them (**Acts 7: 55 and 56**).

Conclusion

Martyrdom in Christianity is not craziness, foolishness or suicide but a beloved desire to live with the Lord Jesus Christ forever. It is a great courage denoting the power of the faith that shut the mouth of the hungry beasts and quenched the blaze of fire. It is Evangelizing of the 1st degree and a proof of the validity of Christian faith and its virtues.

Activities /Discussion Points

1. How does martyrdom in Christianity differ than martyrdom of people who blow themselves for the sake of the religion or those who starve themselves to humiliate their bodies?
 - † Motive of martyrdom is the love of God and not to fight others.
 - † The martyr do not defend himself and do not hate others (**Acts 7: 59- 60**).
 - † The martyr makes it easy for the persecutors to kill him to avoid damage as much as possible (Martyrdom of St. Peter the seal of Martyrs).

- ✝ The martyr do not insist to be a martyr (St. Anthony wanted it eagerly but didn't insist) and do not provoke others to kill him, that's why there is a refuge in the monasteries.
2. How did the martyrs succeed to attain this high spiritual level that allowed them to offer willingly and happily themselves to the Lord and what should we do to be ready to offer as they did?

The key is: **Every day** struggle against the sin and continuous growth in grace and virtues by:

- ❖ Following the commandments
- ❖ Entering through the narrow gate
- ❖ Fighting pleasures and lusts
- ❖ Getting away voluntarily from most loved things
- ❖ Holding on tightly to the dogmas of the church and never let it go

NB: Our beloved church trains us to be ready for martyrdom through fasting, controlling lusts, prayers and mostly confession when we lower ourselves and step on our pride to obtain forgiveness.