

Pastor's Papers | Ronald H. Gann
Bible/Apologetics

The Martyrdom Of Paul

A Survey Of The Life & Ministry Of The Apostle Paul (Part 9)
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“**S**ilence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from his prison cell in Berlin, Germany. “Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”¹

Detained as an anarchist by the Gestapo in April of 1943, Bonhoeffer was the leading voice among German Protestant theologians who objected to National Socialism. His intoxicating words were directed toward a sober Church in Germany whose silence in the face of Jewish genocide was anything but inconspicuous.

A pacifist early in the war, Bonhoeffer was among the first German evangelicals to raise the battle-cry against Adolph Hitler’s anti-Semitism. He wrote to Erwin Sutz on September 11, 1934, “We must finally stop appealing to theology to justify our reserved silence about what the state is doing—for that is nothing but fear. ‘Open your mouth for the one who is voiceless’—for who in the church today still remembers that that is the least of the Bible’s demands in times such as these?”²

Within months, Bonhoeffer’s activism had graduated into espionage. Serving as a double agent inside the military intelligence unit—a position he acquired through family connections—the Lutheran pastor used his post to finance the escape of German Jews to Switzerland. Above and beyond their rescue, the Jewish refugees were the device by which Bonhoeffer kept his Allied contacts apprised of the growing Nazi resistance movement. Later, on July 20, 1944, he went so far as to collude with several high-ranking Third Reich officers to overthrow Hitler’s regime.

Bonhoeffer formulated his social theology and ethics in the crucible of a long and ultimately fatal struggle with the Nazi regime. His complicity in the coup d’état, together with his advocacy for the Jews, cemented his legacy as a zealot and all but sealed his fate as a twentieth century martyr.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in German-controlled Breslau, in south-western Poland, on February 4, 1906. He and his twin sister, Sabina, were two of eight children born to Karl Bonhoeffer, a leading professor of psychiatry and neurology at Berlin University. Owing to their father’s academic success, the Bonhoeffer children enjoyed a privileged childhood amid Germany’s more affluent class. But while the family’s financial portfolio was vast, their spiritual education was minimal.

Despite supportive parents, Bonhoeffer’s siblings were skeptical when Dietrich announced at the age of fourteen that he aspired to be a Christian pastor and theologian. Whereas his siblings were on the precipice of distinguished careers in the sciences, an adolescent Bonhoeffer had developed a love for Christian history and theology. An older brother attempted to dissuade him, arguing that the Church was “selfish and corrupt” if

not impotent, inane, irrelevant, and unworthy of any young man's lifelong commitment. But Dietrich could not be derailed. "If the church is really what you say it is," he replied sternly, "then I shall have to reform it."³

Less than ten years later Dietrich Bonhoeffer was well on his way to making good on his promise. At the age of twenty-one, he received his doctorate from Berlin University. His 1927 doctoral dissertation, *The Communion of Saints*, earned him accolades for his Christ-centered approach to theology and his exaltation of the New Testament. It was a paper that the renowned neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth called "a theological miracle."⁴ Bonhoeffer's imposing acumen and command of the language were evident in his writing, marking him as one of the preeminent theologians of his generation. Yet before beginning his career as a noted lecturer at Berlin University, he spent a year overseas—from September 1930 to June 1931—studying at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

In America, Bonhoeffer was moved by the plight of the Negro church and the travail of those hit hardest by the Great Depression. Amid such turmoil, he found stimulus in the emotional power of the black church of Harlem and in their repertoire of rich spirituals. Yet the European theologian was quick to denounce the abuses of American religion, even coining the phrase 'cheap grace' to describe the allergic reaction that many American Christians showed toward 'the cost of discipleship.' He summarized the nation's lackadaisical approach toward evangelicalism as "Protestantism without the Reformation."⁵

Back home in Germany, banks collapsed and the democratic experiment that was the Weimar Republic sputtered. The Nazi Party was gaining alarming political momentum, and its anti-Semitic sirens were blaring. Bonhoeffer began to feel a growing disconnect between himself and his native country. Writing to Reinhold Niebuhr, an American-German theologian, Bonhoeffer affirmed: "I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America. I shall have no right to take part in the restoration of Christian life in Germany after the war unless I share the trials of this time with my people."⁶

By the time Bonhoeffer had returned a second time to New York's Union Theological Seminary in 1939, Hitler's dictatorship was in full swing. The Führer's desire for total control required the elimination of all other forms of manipulation that could potentially impede Nazi indoctrination, especially trade unions, evangelical churches, and rogue political parties. Those critical of Hitler's agenda, particularly evangelicals, were suppressed or intimidated. Through Germany's Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs, operated under Hanns Kerrl, the Nazis sought to eliminate *individualism* by forcing recalcitrant churches to merge with the state-controlled Reich Church.

In response to those who surrendered their theology to the Protestant Reich Church, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, along with Karl Barth and Martin Niemöller, established the underground Confessing Church in August of 1933. Bonhoeffer wrote pensively, "Christ is looking down at us and asking whether there is anyone who still confesses him."⁷

The Confessing Church, while muddled with liberal and conservative theology, was socially dynamic. They called for wider church resistance to Hitler's treatment of the Jews and provided aid and comfort to political dissidents and fellow Christians

persecuted by the regime. As an antiestablishment church, they believed in spreading the gospel, calling attention to the plight of the Jews, and rallying public opinion against Nazism. Serving as the seminary president for Confessing Church pastors at Finkenwald, near Berlin, was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. His attitude was simple: “Only those who cry out for the Jews may also sing Gregorian chant.”⁸

The culmination of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s theological and political activism came to a head in 1943. As Germany’s military prowess rapidly decreased on the eastern front, opposition to Adolph Hitler within the Third Reich had increased steadily. Hitler’s supposed invincibility had weakened. Thus, plans for a coup d’état, code-named *Valkyrie*, were put in motion in 1943. The most stalwart conspirator was Lieutenant Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg, who personally carried out the assassination attempt.

On July 20, 1943, while attending a top-level meeting between Hitler and his military aides at the Wolf’s Lair headquarters—the Nazi command post in Rastenburg, Prussia—Stauffenberg left a briefcase booby trapped with explosives sitting unnoticed next to the Führer. Stauffenberg then conveniently slipped from the room minutes prior to the bomb’s detonation at 12:42 PM. Bad luck and indecisiveness, however, thwarted the assassination attempt. An attending officer had nudged the briefcase out of his way to the far side of the massive oak support of the conference table, which thus shielded Hitler from the full force of the explosion. A stenographer and three officers died from the blast, but Hitler escaped with only minor injuries to his arm.

In a countercoup at the Berlin headquarters, the Gestapo arrested a few of the known conspirators. Those implicated in the conspiracy were subsequently shot or forced to commit suicide. In subsequent days, the Gestapo rounded up the remaining conspirators who, under torture, implicated their confederates. Ultimately, about two hundred plotters, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer, were apprehended. Some were hanged and, in some cases, viciously strangled with piano wire. Still others were hung up on meat hooks to die a gruesome and painful death as a public spectacle meant to prevent treason.

For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Christianity meant facing the cost of authentic discipleship as a matter of natural course. His most famous thought highlights the sacrifices required of the Christian: “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”⁹

In Flossenbürg, a Nazi concentration camp near Czechoslovakia, the great German theologian was incarcerated while awaiting his execution. His final act as a pastor was to commemorate Communion with some of his fellow prisoners. On Sunday, April 8, 1945, after conducting the service, two Nazi guardsmen came calling: “Prisoner Bonhoeffer,” they said, “make ready and come with us.”

Witnesses reported that Bonhoeffer submitted to the order peaceably. As he left the barracks, he whispered to another prisoner, “This is the end—but for me, the beginning of life.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer was unceremoniously hanged the next day, less than a week before the Allied forces liberated the camp. Today the tree from which he was hung bears a plaque with the following inscription: *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a witness to Jesus Christ among his brethren.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the apostle Paul share similar theology and martyrdom. Although the apostle was far from politically-minded, his inspired writings and personal life-story tell the tale of a man willing to pay the cost of true discipleship; a concept

Bonhoeffer reintroduced to the twentieth century and paid for with his life. Like Bonhoeffer, Paul was steered by godly principles. His two Roman imprisonments and subsequent execution on the Ostian Road is a testament, along with Bonhoeffer, “to the obedience that comes from faith” (Rom. 1:15).

The Cost Of Discipleship

Throughout the span of two millennia, the Christian Church has certainly been no stranger to harassment. Beginning with an assortment of Roman emperors who, in the aftermath of the Church’s inception, waged war against Christianity and up to the twentieth century and the rise of communism, the Church has been subject to broad persecution. That the evil world system vents its fury on the Church should surprise no student of Scripture, for that is how it treated Jesus Christ.

The terrifying violence directed at the first followers of Christ failed to retard the Church’s growth. Even though many of its early leaders died horrible deaths, Christianity flourished throughout the Roman Empire, due in large part to the suffering and scorned work of the apostle Paul. Yet he was no exception to the Lord’s admonition that, “Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me ... If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (Matt. 24:9; John 15:20).

Criticized by friends (2 Cor. 10:10–15), buffeted by Satan (2 Cor. 12:7), and sneered at by authorities (Acts 26:24, 28), Paul’s hardships are virtually unparalleled in Scripture. He had received from the Jews five sentences of thirty-nine whiplashes each for preaching the gospel. He had been shipwrecked a total of four times while traveling abroad. Three times he was scourged with rods and once he was bitten by a snake. Moreover, he had been stoned at Lystra; falsely imprisoned and flogged at Philippi; undermined in Galatia by the Judaizers; pitied as a fool in Athens; harassed out of Thessalonica; plotted against at Corinth; rejected by his kinsman at Pisidian Antioch; revolted against at Ephesus; marooned on Malta; then physically assaulted and arrested at Jerusalem. Adding to his adversity was the widespread backbiting from so-called Christians who called into question the authenticity of his apostleship.

Grace was the key word associated with Paul. Indeed it was the fuel that propelled him through his arduous ministry. He rejoiced continually in knowing that “The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 1:14). He had “received grace and apostleship” (Rom. 1:5) to become “a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power” (Eph. 3:7).

With his Pharisaic credentials and his Roman citizenship, Paul certainly could have boasted. But it was only through the grace of God that he fulfilled his destiny. He wrote, “*But by the grace of God I am what I am*, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—*yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me*” (1 Cor. 15:10, emphasis added). Thus, his encounters with pain and hardships, floggings and imprisonments, ridicule, persecution and eventually death, were all viewed through the apostle’s lens of grace. He knew that his present situation, chained

and awaiting imminent death, was all within God's sovereign plan. Thus, to Paul, "To live is Christ and to die is gain" (Php. 1:21)

Paul's First Roman Imprisonment

Paul had left Caesarea as a common criminal only to arrive at Rome as an uncommon celebrity. His voyage was anything but comfortable. Earlier, in a risky attempt to reach and winter in a more favorable harbor on Crete, the apostle's ship had been caught in a dreadful northeaster. That violent storm had driven the vessel across the Mediterranean Sea to the islands of Malta. There the crew attempted to beach the ship, but it ran aground and was destroyed by the pounding surf. Miraculously, all 276 passengers on board managed to reach the shore safely. Stranded on Malta, Paul had enjoyed considerable success preaching the gospel, due mostly to his miraculous recovery from a snake bite and countless healings performed among the natives. After enduring a two year prison term in Caesarea, a terrifying fourteen-day sea journey in the eye of a tempest, surviving his fourth shipwreck, and then spending three months marooned, Paul once again found himself a prisoner, remanded to Rome.

The apostle finally arrived in Italy, albeit four months later than intended, in the custody of Julius, the Imperial Regiment centurion. Rome's population easily surpassed 1.5 million in Paul's day—the majority of whom were indentured slaves—making it the capital of the ancient world. Captivated by the city's immense size and her glamour, including the roar of the bustling street crowd, the traumatic events on Malta now seemed like a distant memory to the apostle. Almost certainly he found the city to be breathtaking.

Rome was the center of a vast and powerful empire whose boundaries spanned from Britannia, throughout southern and central Europe, northern Africa, and deep into the recesses of the Middle East. So vast was its capital city that it was virtually impossible to take in all its tourist attractions in one day. Certainly Paul was impressed by the monuments that garlanded the capital's streets, including the Roman Forum, the Domus Aurea, the Pantheon, Trajan's Column, Trajan's Market, the catacombs, and the Circus Maximus. (The landmark Roman Coliseum—the largest amphitheater of antiquity built as the main venue for gladiator contests—was probably still under construction when Paul arrived). All the impressive architecture, as Paul saw it, was a resounding testament to Rome's cultural ingenuity.

But Paul was a prisoner; not a sightseer. Manacled to the wrist of a Roman centurion while under house arrest, his confinement was relatively lenient. He was allowed to stay in private quarters, write letters endlessly, and entertain eager visitors who sought his apostolic council. His time in Rome was beneficial, despite the legal constraints that kept him there, and his candor so winsome that the gospel was able to penetrate political factions throughout the capital.

Paul's internment certainly did not go without effect on those in close proximity to him. In fact, each member of the Praetorian Guard—a platoon of sentries assigned to watch the apostle—recognized that Paul was indeed a political pawn, innocent of any crime except for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ (cf. Php. 1:13; 4:22). Others in

imperial service also took a liking to him. Addressed in his epistle to the Philippians as “Caesar’s household” (4:22), those who worked on behalf of the Emperor—including courtiers, custodians, stablemen, soldiers, food-tasters, musicians, cooks, and judges were subject to his tireless preaching; many of whom were likely converted.

The apostle conducted a restricted but successful ministry as he awaited trial. He was permitted to receive the Jewish leaders of the Roman synagogue as guests (cf. Acts 28:16–29) and to minister to churches abroad by way of letters which he was free to write. In fact, it was while in Rome under house arrest that he penned some of his greatest works. These canonical letters—specifically Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon, and Philippians—eventually became known as Paul’s ‘Prison Epistles.’

Because heretical doctrine was creeping into the church at Colosse, the church’s senior pastor, Epaphras, apparently made the 1,300-mile journey to Rome to appeal to Paul’s apostolic authority. The apostle had never passed through Colosse on his three previous missionary journeys (cf. Col. 2:1),¹⁰ but it seems that he had developed a long-distance relationship with the Colossians through Epaphras. Seemingly impervious to Paul’s situation, Epaphras had other pressing matters beyond homage that brought him to Paul’s jail cell. He implored the apostle to dictate a critique on the hypostatic nature, person, and work of Jesus Christ so as to debunk Gnostic influences that fomented within the congregation. Moreover, a concoction of humanism, Jewish legalism, and asceticism also threatened to scatter the Colossians. On word of their doctrinal scuffle, Paul was all too happy to intercede on behalf of Epaphras and to retaliate on parchment (cf. Col. 1:7; 4:12).

Also with Paul in Rome was Tychicus, a native of Ephesus and a ministry companion, together with a runaway slave named Onesimus. A recent convert of Paul’s, Onesimus was an indentured slave and petty thief on the lam from his master. The slave served the apostle faithfully during Paul’s incarceration, probably as an errand-runner and liaison to the Roman church. Because the apostle was obligated to return Onesimus to his rightful master—a Christian named Philemon—he wrote a letter to his owner, expressing his desire to retain Onesimus’ valuable services while awaiting trial. He beseeched Philemon in his letter to treat Onesimus kindly upon his arrival; to love him as a Christian brother rather than a slave and to grant him a safe return to the apostle in Rome (Phm. vv. 8–10). Since Tychicus would be transporting Paul’s Colossian epistle to the church at Colosse, where Philemon was a member, Paul sent Onesimus back with him expecting Philemon’s cooperation.

The itinerary that Tychicus and Onesimus would logically travel to Colosse would take them through the port city of Ephesus in Asia Minor where Paul had ministered for three years on his third missionary journey. Paul had been prevented from revisiting them, owing to his arrest in Jerusalem (Acts 21:27–33), and he missed the Ephesians dearly. He wrote to them so as to accomplish what he could not do personally; to strengthen and confirm them in the grace of God and the gospel of Christ, and to expound upon works of service that God had ordained they should follow. He seized the opportunity to address the church of Ephesus while in Rome so that Tychicus could then deliver the letter on his behalf while on route to Colosse.

While still under house arrest in Rome, Paul received yet another visitor by way of Macedonia. Epaphroditus, a delegate from the Christian community at Philippi, came to Paul bearing a care package from the church. He informed Paul that the Philippians

were praying for, and were therefore expecting, a favorable outcome to his trial before the imperial court and were anxious about his well-being. Ever the gentleman and moved by their generosity, Paul was prompted to write the last of his imprisonment epistles. In his letter to the Philippians, he thanked them for their kindness, updated them on his status and his pending trial, and strengthened them in the hope and joy that was theirs in Christ.

Paul's detention in Rome eventually drew to a close after two years. Little is known about the court proceedings other than the studied opinion that he was apparently acquitted of all charges and allowed to pursue future missionary work. Paul's own words to Timothy a short time later lend insight: "At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me ... But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength ... And I was delivered from the lion's mouth." (2 Tim. 4:17b).

While the exact particulars of Paul's release have been lost to history, John MacArthur wisely surmises:

Since two provincial governors had found him innocent of wrongdoing, it is reasonable to assume the Emperor would have too. But a more likely scenario is that the Jewish leaders from Palestine never showed up in Rome to prosecute the case, and Paul won by default ... Roman law took a dim view of poorly substantiated cases. And the Jews had achieved their goal by getting Paul out of Palestine and into Roman custody. Commentators differ over whether there was a two-year statute of limitations in Paul's day. But even if there were not, Paul's case would likely have been dismissed when it came to trial if no one was there to press charges.¹¹

Church tradition and ancient Latin papyri support the notion that Paul traveled abroad shortly after his release. Clement of Rome (50–100), a pupil of the apostle (cf. Php. 4:3) and later a bishop of Rome, indicated in a letter to the Corinthians, "After preaching both in the east and west, [the apostle Paul] gained the illustrious reputation due to his faith, having taught righteousness to the whole world ... to the extreme limit of the west."¹² The second-century Muratorian Canon elaborates on Clement's reference to "the west" by suggesting that the apostle ventured into the Latin territories—"proceeding to Spain"—where he fulfilled a long-desired ministry there (cf. Rom. 15:23–24, 28). Likewise, Eusebius (263–339), the third century Church historian, and John Chrysostom (347–407) cite as an undisputed historical fact that "St. Paul, after his residence in Rome, departed to Spain."¹³

Extrapolating from the apostle's Pastoral Epistles written to Timothy and Titus only a few years later, scholars have pieced together Paul's final months as a free man. He apparently returned to the Aegean Sea region, particularly Crete, Macedonia, and Greece, for further ministry in preparation for Spain. During this time, he commissioned Timothy as his apostolic representative in Ephesus, and Titus as his ambassador to Crete. Nothing else can be known for certain about the events that comprised the apostle's ministry thereafter except that it was not long after reaching Spain that, apparently once again, he found himself in the crosshairs of Caesar's indignation. And this time, sadly, the lion's mouth of Rome would not be so sparing.

Paul's Second Roman Imprisonment

Only a few years removed from the events of Pentecost, Christianity had reached the epicenter of Italy in the form of a growing offshoot of Judaism popular among Rome's lower class. Although apostolic leadership had yet to set foot in Rome, prior to Paul's first Roman imprisonment (as the church was presumably started years earlier by pilgrims on return from Pentecost),¹⁴ Christianity's expansion across the Roman Empire was explosive. Encouraged by their growing numbers, Roman Christians protested openly against the deification of Caesar and the perversity of Greek mythology. Christian allegiance to a resurrected Messiah hailing from Nazareth—touted as the divine emperor of some theocratic kingdom no less—was seen as an act of treason by Rome that undermined the sovereignty of Caesar and the imperial senate.

Not surprisingly, Christianity was banned throughout the Empire and its adherents deemed as mavericks. Those who oversaw Rome's bureaucratic and political affairs, including the various Caesars who reigned during the Church's first two hundred years, waged a war of persecution and propaganda against the Church to thwart her appeal. Followers were lampooned and harassed mercilessly, often playing the scapegoat to the injustices of a once-reputable legal system now gone awry. To that end, the mere fact that Christians spoke of eating the body and blood of Jesus in Communion, compounded by their greeting one another with a customary kiss, was alien to many of Rome's affluent citizens. Their misplaced interpretation of these traditions brought charges of cannibalism and incest against Christians.¹⁵ So detested were the followers of Christ during the latter years of Paul's life that later archeological excavations in Rome produced a sketch of a man nailed to a cross, adorned with a donkey's head.¹⁶ This blasphemous portrait of Christ showed the measure of contempt leveled by Italian aristocrats toward the object of Christian worship.

The brutal acts of discrimination perpetrated against the Church were endemic. The secular historian Tacitus (56–117), a contemporary of Paul's, spoke of Christians as a "class hated for their abominations" who infested the world with their "deadly superstition."¹⁷ His thoughts summarized the thinking behind a new and unprecedented wave of state-sponsored terror. For Rome to safeguard the hearts and minds of its people from Christian proselytizing, an intensive police effort began in earnest.

The persecution of the Church was organized, widespread, and incredibly barbaric. What began as isolated acts of aggression by Jewish extremists toward Christianized Jews in Israel, particularly Jerusalem, gradually escalated into state-sponsored executions by the Roman government. Indeed, Christian suffering was elevated to epic proportions during the reigns of Emperors Nero (54–68), Domitian (69–96), Valerian (253–260), and Diocletian (284–305) before the trend was eventually reversed with the conversion of Emperor Constantine and the Edict of Milan in 313.

The apostle Paul did not escape Rome's fury. During his second interment in Rome—this time in the Mamertine Prison on the Ostian Way—a tyrant ruled the known world. Championing himself as 'an enemy of God,' this Roman emperor is viewed by

many historians as one of the most despicable rulers to ever reign from an imperial throne. The man was Claudius Drusus Germanicus; otherwise known in history as Nero.

Nero assumed the throne of the Roman Empire in 54 AD at the age of sixteen. Still a juvenile, he was appointed the empire's seventh emperor only after his mother, Iulia Agrippina, conspired to murder her husband, the former Emperor Claudius. Political intrigue, debauchery, and bloodshed were Nero's legacy. With his mother to guide him and an empire to spoil him, he grew to become the premier arch villain of Christianity.

Educated under Seneca, the celebrated Stoic philosopher and poet (who, along with Nero's mother, served as regent over Rome until the adolescent Nero was of sufficient age to govern), Nero wasted no time in eliminating any threat to his kingdom. His co-regency came to a bloody end when he forced Seneca to commit suicide. Not long after, Nero ordered the murders of his mother, his half brother Britannicus, his wife Octavia, and his mistress Poppaea, in a paranoid delusion that they would collude against him. No one was safe from the ruler's maniacal paranoia.

Nero's indulgences are legendary. He spared no expense in gratifying his personal impulses or lavishing upon himself the forbidden fruits of iniquity. He urbanized the use of fishing nets laced with gold; he adorned his mules with silver; and he refused to wear the same magisterial robe twice. At best, Nero was an eccentric whose personal avarice was legendary. At worst, he was a full-fledged psychopath; a stain upon human history.

Contemporary historians describe the Emperor as repellent in almost every way. The fair-haired, blue-eyed ruler had a fat neck, a potbelly and a body that was covered with freckles. Unattractive, both physically and psychologically, he used the weight of his position as emperor to force himself sexually upon maiden women and adolescent boys, including his own brother, Britannicus, whom he also had murdered. Similarly, he is alleged to have been involved in an incestuous relationship with his mother prior to her murder. His life story is tainted by viciousness and sexual perversity—including homosexuality and pedophilia—and demonstrated a demonical hatred toward anything ethical; Christianity in particular.

Nero's sadistic escapades reached their apex in 64 AD. Owing to his ambitious scheme to remodel Rome to suit his own desires, he deliberately set ablaze the entire city with the aid of certain cabinet members. The Emperor was of the opinion that, in order to modernize the city, its districts must first be demolished to create room for the expansion effort. As a result, the Great Fire of Rome erupted on the night of July 18, in the midst of the clustered shops in the Circus Maximus. Rome suffered horrific wreckage at the hand of Nero's torch and burned for six days and seven nights, consuming almost three quarters of the legendary metropolis.

The deranged Emperor showed a callous if not quirky disregard for the events that transpired that night. Historians are quick to note that he apparently found the whole catastrophe amusing. In fact, instead of distributing aid and relief to those left homeless from the inferno, Nero is said to have sang from the tower of Maecenas, watching as the fire consumed his kingdom.¹⁸ The Roman senator and historian Dio Cassius (150–235) reported that Nero “climbed on to the palace roof, from which there was the best overall view of the greater part of the fire and sang, ‘The Capture of Troy.’” Likewise, the historian Tacitus, who was nine years old at the time, noted in his later

journals, “At the very time that Rome burned, [Nero] mounted his private stage and, reflecting present disasters in ancient calamities, sang about the destruction of Troy.”¹⁹

That Caesar was liable for the fire was not a baseless accusation tossed about without merit. His reconstruction effort aroused the people’s suspicion since the new architecture was extremely pretentious and appeared to cater to his personal predilections, especially his Golden Palace. Indeed, his new citadel conspicuously displaced the temple of the much-revered Emperor Claudius (which, at the time of the fire, was under construction). Many residents of Rome were infuriated.

Despite his unpopularity, Nero was mindful of public perception. Therefore, in an effort to deflect accusations and to placate the people’s doubts, he looked for scapegoats on whom the fire could be blamed. He found such an alibi in an obscure new religious sect—the Christians. Lending color and credibility to the charge, he accused the Christians of having conspired to burn the city in order to fulfill their own eschatological prophecies, namely the destruction of the world by fire. To the middle and upper-classes of Rome, who were largely ignorant of Christian doctrine, this accusation seemed plausible.

The Emperor ordered the arrest of a few members of the sect who, under torture, accused other fellow believers until a large portion of the Christian population in Rome was implicated. Despite the fact that Nero’s persecution was confined to the vicinity of Rome, it had a ripple effect that reached outlying provinces. Presumably, attacks on Christians spread throughout Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia.

According to Tacitus, as many of the religious sect that could be found were rounded up and put to death “with the most exquisite punishments.”²⁰ Christians were ordered to wear animal skins and, when they refused to recant their faith or confess their complicity in Rome’s fire, were thrown to wild dogs as live bait. Moreover, much to Nero’s hilarity, believers were impaled on spikes or cross beams in his garden and lit on fire to illuminate his evening circuses (all the while the Emperor is said to have mingled incognito among the watching crowds). Some Christians were coated alive in wax while others met their deaths by the sword.

It was into this spectacle of political mayhem and brutality that the apostle Paul was thrown; incarcerated for the second time in Rome as an outlaw preacher of the gospel. Unlike his first Roman imprisonment six years earlier, this time he was not allowed the luxury of house arrest or the opportunity to interact with friends or entertain ministry needs. Instead, he was confined in the cold Mamertine Prison (2 Tim. 2:9; 4:13), with no hope of deliverance (4:6). Abandoned by virtually all of those close to him for fear of persecution and facing imminent execution, Paul’s time was at hand, and he knew it (cf. 1:15; 4:9–12, 16).

The aged and rugged apostle was set to complete his race. The situation in Rome had grown bleak. Nero’s vendetta against the Church had reached a fevered pitch, spanning much of the Roman world, where countless Christians had fallen victim to his mania. Among them was the apostle Peter, who was crucified upside-down on a cross on orders from the Emperor himself. Paul was keenly aware that it was only a matter of time before his second imprisonment in Rome ended in a similar way.

No longer could Paul look forward to fruitful ministry, and most of his friends found it convenient to be elsewhere. Yet the apostle to the Gentiles remained self-assured. He was not ashamed to suffer for the gospel (Rom. 1:16 cf. 2 Tim. 1:12) and he

was bent on finishing his race with strength and dignity. Even while condemned to a dank dungeon infested with mildew and rodent feces, the apostle took solace in the fact that he had been faithful to Christ and—even more importantly—that Christ himself is faithful. Paul had confidence that the One who in the past had rescued him from death was certain to rescue him through death for eternal life.

The Death Of The Apostle Paul

Throughout history there have been many champions of the Christian faith who have bravely withstood persecution in the name of Jesus. Some have even paid the ultimate price with their lives. Whether from the sword of Roman persecution during the first three centuries, or on burning stakes during the Protestant Reformation fifteen hundred years later, martyrdom is a sad back-story in the glorious, yet somewhat sordid, tale of the Christian Church. Yet nothing, not even imprisonment, torture, or death could make the truly devout forswear their Lord or their doctrinal principles; and the course of history was forever changed as a result.

Against the backdrop of Nero's persecution, the conduct of the apostles serves as a great example of godliness. They preached and wrote to their constituencies in tender eloquence, encouraging the persecuted Church to look to Christ as "an example" and "follow in his steps" when in great travail (1 Pet. 2:21b). To their way of thinking, the exemplar of Christian suffering was God Himself.

In a complete breach of justice, Jesus had been crucified as a criminal (Isa. 53:9; Matt. 27:38) even though he was innocent of any wrongdoing. Yet he had endured his punishment in abject humility and serenity. The Son of God suffered under repeated provocations from his accusers while never compromising his virtue (cf. Matt. 26:57–68; 27:11–14, 26–31; John 18:28–19:11). His attackers had hoped to bully him to the brink of despair by their mockery and abuse but could not (Mark 14:65; Luke 22:63–65). He did not get angry at or strike back against his accusers; instead he cried out, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

The apostle Peter drew upon Christ's suffering for inspiration in overcoming his own hardships. He wrote two epistles encouraging his readers that if any of them should suffer as a Christian, he or she should not be ashamed but should glorify God (cf. 1 Pet. 4:16). His words recalled his own actions years earlier when, after being flogged by Jewish authorities for preaching the gospel, he and his fellow ministers left the court council "rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name" (Acts 5:40–42).

James, the apostle and half-brother of the Lord, also remarked: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance" (James 1:2–3). Likewise, the apostle Paul asserted, "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).

The message of the apostles did not fall on deaf ears. Their point was profound but simple: persecution tends to purify the persecuted (1 Pet. 1:7). Moreover, undergoing hardship for the sake of the cross has, historically, demarcated the truly

devout from the merely casual, wherein the faith of the believer is ultimately strengthened. It was the personal experience of each apostle that suffering indeed resulted in God's praise, glory, and honor and earned a unique inheritance for the sufferer (cf. Rev. 20:4).

Certainly the apostles were not immune to persecution, and they knew firsthand about that which they wrote. The Bible only mentions the deaths of two disciples: James, the brother of John, who was put to death by Harold Agrippa I in 44 AD (Acts 12:2), and Judas Iscariot, who took his own life shortly after his betrayal of Christ (Matt. 27:3–10; Acts 1:18). Apart from these biblical facts, however, the fates of the remaining apostles can only be found in the sketchy traditions of the patristic fathers. They contend that each of the apostles died a martyr's death.

A victim of the Neronian persecution, the apostle Peter was crucified in Rome in 67 AD, upside-down on an x-shaped cross, in fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy (cf. John 21:18). The early Church fathers, Tertullian (160–230) and Origen (182–251), attest that Peter regarded himself as unworthy to die in the same manner as his Lord, and was therefore, at his own request, crucified with his head downward.²¹ Moreover, in a heartless attempt to exacerbate his torment, the apostle was forced to witness the death of his wife. Tradition asserts that upon watching her nailed to a cross opposite him, he "rejoiced because of her summons and her return home, and called to her very encouragingly and comfortingly addressing her by name, and saying, 'O thou, remember the Lord.'"²² Not long thereafter Peter followed his wife into eternity.

The apostle James, the Lord's half-brother, was also a victim of persecution. Certain Pharisees, scribes, and hostile Jews in Jerusalem approached the apostle and ordered him to stop preaching the gospel. They demanded he stand atop the temple—during Passover when the crowds were at their fullest—and denounce the Lord publicly. According to tradition, the 94-year-old James apparently conceded. But his rooftop rant was not what the Pharisees had intended. He is said to have shouted from on high, "Why do you ask me of Jesus the Son of Man? He sitteth on the right hand of the Most High, and shall come in the clouds of heaven ... Hosanna to the Son of David."²³ To the Pharisees' regret, the Passover crowd cheered him on.

Outwitted by an elderly man, the Pharisees were incensed and pushed James over the temple roof. But the soft sand apparently cushioned his fall. Finding him still alive, a small mob of Pharisee sympathizers began to stone him. Tradition suggests that James mustered one final breath before his passing. He whispered softly, "O Lord God, Father, I beseech thee to forgive them, for they know not what they do." Despite the impact of his fall and the pelting stones, "one of those who were present, a fuller, took an instrument, wherewith they did use to beat and purge cloth, and smote the just man on his head; and so he finished his testimony."²⁴

Andrew was crucified in Greece on a cross; the two ends of which were fixed transversely in the ground. After being whipped severely by a platoon of soldiers, his body was harnessed to the cross with cords to prolong his agony. His followers later reported that, when he was escorted to his death, Andrew saluted the cross with the words: "I have long desired and expected this happy hour. The cross has been consecrated by the body of Christ hanging on it." He languished on that tree for two whole days, tirelessly preaching to his captors before eventually dying.

The apostle John faced his own martyrdom in Rome, but inexplicably survived. He was cast into a cauldron of boiling oil during the Neronian persecution only to escape by miracle. Apparently unable to stoke the oil hot enough, the Romans opted to exile him to the mines on the prison island of Patmos. There he made his home for years writing his apocalyptic masterpiece—the Book of Revelation.

Having successfully preached the gospel in Ethiopia for decades, the apostle Matthew met his demise by the sword. Bartholomew, also known as Nathanael, spread the gospel throughout India, Mesopotamia, and Persia before being cruelly beaten and flayed alive by Indian pagans affronted by his denunciation of idolatry. Matthias, the apostle chosen to replace the traitor Judas Iscariot, was stoned and then beheaded in Jerusalem. The apostle Thomas, who preached the gospel in Parthia and India, excited the rage of the pagan priests there and was run through with a spear. After enjoying a booming ministry in Mauritania, Africa, Simon the Zealot was crucified in Britannia in 74 AD. Jude, also known as Thaddeus, was crucified in 72 AD in the city of Edessa. Likewise, the apostle Philip was scourged, imprisoned, and afterwards crucified in Heliopolis in 54 AD, after preaching throughout the communities of Phrygia.

Even those close to the apostles felt the brunt of Jewish and Roman persecution. Barnabas, one of the seventy disciples dispatched by Christ and a former missionary partner of Paul's, preached throughout Italy and Cyprus. He was stoned to death at Salonica. Mark, Barnabas's cousin and one-time ministry partner and attendant of Paul's (Col. 4:10; Phm. v. 24), was dragged to his death by horses in Alexandria, Egypt, in front of Serapis, a pagan idol. And Luke, Paul's biographer, was hung from an olive tree in Greece.

Christian persecution is a horrific chapter of the Church's story beginning with her inception at Pentecost and lasting for nearly three centuries. Notwithstanding the two thousands Christians who suffered martyrdom in Jerusalem shortly after Stephen's stoning in 34 AD (Acts 7:54–60), eleven of the twelve apostles, and untold numbers of the other early disciples, were murdered on account of their devotion to Christ. Even God—a victim Himself of persecution in the person of the incarnate Christ—recognized the severity of the Church's suffering. He lamented prophetically through Jeremiah: "Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people" (Jer. 9:1).

The Bible is conspicuously silent concerning the martyrdom of the apostle Paul. For reasons unknown, neither Luke, nor the Holy Spirit who guided him, saw fit to record the events surrounding his death. What can be ascertained from the concurrent writings of ecclesiastical antiquity, however, is that Paul had fallen victim to the atrocities perpetrated by Emperor Nero.²⁵ While the details are wanting, tradition records the apostle's obituary rather effectively.

It was an early June morning as the sun came to life and stretched its rays through the dancing clouds. One can easily imagine the song of birds chirping in concert as they welcomed the beautiful Italian dawn. But for the apostle Paul, who awoke in the gloom of the Mamertine Prison in Rome, the new day's greeting came with a flurry of emotion. This was the day of his scheduled execution.

The Mamertine Prison served as a place not of punishment but of solitary confinement for condemned criminals. It was located twelve feet below the ground on the northeastern slope of the Capitoline Hill and had been partly excavated from rock, and constructed with tufa blocks. According to the ancient Roman historian Sallust (86–34 BC), its two mildew covered chambers—one situated above the other—were “neglect, [where] darkness and stench [made] it hideous and fearsome to behold.”²⁶ It was into this dismal abode that the preacher of grace had been tossed; an alleged criminal suspected of high crimes against the imperial state. But now was the day that the apostle would be set free; delivered from the shackles of Caesar and into the loving embrace of his God.

Almost certainly Paul started his morning in supplication, preparing his heart for the difficult events ahead. Anxious and far removed from the warmth of the summer breeze outside, he knelt along the cold slab he called his bed and began to worship. It is possible the apostle offered up his favorites stanzas from the psalms of David, particularly Psalm 23, as a token of his undying trust in the Lord. He probably recited aloud the familiar words that had comforted him so often during his nearly three decades as an apostle: “Yea though I walk through the valley of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4, KJV). Expressing God’s care and goodness, the hymn consoled the apostle in his darkest hour and reminded him of where his trust lay.

The rattle of keys and the unlocking bolt on the cage eventually interrupted the apostle’s vigil. The rats scurried for darkness, alarmed at the sound of the approaching intruders. At the cell gate stood the Praetorian Guard, adorned with imperial garb and weaponry, come to escort Paul to the gallows. Paul had made his peace with the Lord and was now prepared to follow the Guard submissively.

It was customary for criminals of prominence to be executed several miles out of the city so as to avoid the hysteria of fanatical crowds. Paul, being a well noted Roman citizen, was given his due privacy. They marched him through the city gate and beyond the fortification wall that surrounded Rome, past the pyramid of Cestius and onto the Ostian Way. From there he was led to his slaughter, alone and without fear, and with little fanfare from those who happened to pass by.

The three-mile march from the prison bloc to the execution site was no doubt a long one for the apostle. There a team of centurions stood ready for their next appointment. Most likely as Paul made his way down the road, images of the Lord’s own arduous trek with the cross to Golgotha flickered in his mind. It was in those images that Paul found solace. Concerning Paul’s last walk, Bible teacher and commentator Charles Swindoll envisioned:

The manacled prisoner, walking stiffly, ragged and filthy from the dungeon, did not wince in shame or degradation. The squad of determined soldiers never noticed, as they frowned and stared ahead, that there was a faint smile on their prisoner’s face. He was on route to a triumph. ... No axe across the back of his neck would rob him of his joy-filled destiny. In fact, it would initiate it!²⁷

A.T. Robertson (1895–1934), a former Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, imagined the following:

Paul, as a condemned criminal, would be the victim of the rabble's sport. He would have no defender. We do not know if Luke was with Paul to the very last. We may at least hope so. If he could, he would surely walk along as near Paul as would be allowed. But no band of Christians followed with him now. He was going out of Rome on his way to the true Eternal City. He knew Rome well, but his eyes were fixed on other things. Outside the city the busy, merry life of the time went on. The crowds flowed into town. Some were going out. Paul was only a criminal going to be beheaded. Few, if any, of the crowds about would know or care anything about him.²⁸

When Paul arrived at the site of his execution, a little pine wood in a clearing, he was met by the ominous stare of a hooded Roman executioner. The hired killer, standing aloof from the centurions with axe in hand, scrutinized the man he was about to slaughter; a prisoner whom he had certainly heard all about. The executioner probably found it remarkable that such an unimpressive individual, short and gawky, could be the cause of so much commotion in the Roman territories. No doubt Paul returned his stare with all the love he had within him, emulating Christ until the very end. But the executioner—seemingly nonchalant and indifferent to Paul's overture—simply honed the blade of his weapon in wait.

Paul was led to the chopping block hidden off in the distance from the Ostian Way. There he was forced to his knees and his head rammed down on a freshly-cut stump that served as an improvised guillotine. The Roman guards stripped him of his clothing and harnessed him to the trunk so as to expose his vulnerable neck. When he was fixed firmly in place, they brandished whipping rods and struck him repeatedly, inciting laughter and mockery. When the beating was finally over, one of the Roman centurions called for the executioner. Paul's time had come.

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith," he had written to his beloved Timothy only months earlier (2 Tim. 4:7). He had also told his friends in Caesarea before his arrest "I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die ... for the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 21:13). And with those words recalled in his mind, the axe of the executioner was raised high in the air above him and then thrust down upon his neck swiftly. And the head of the greatest preacher that the Church has ever received rolled upon the ground.

Finally—after dedicating twenty-five years to perilous missionary journeys, innumerable hardships abroad, natural disasters while traveling, insufferable persecution at home, and inner turmoil from within the infant Church, the apostle Paul was finally at rest in the presence of Christ. "Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness," he wrote to Timothy, "which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me" (2 Tim. 4:8). In the twinkling of an eye he was no longer a stench in the nostrils of an unforgiving world or the chief herald of the Great Commission. Instead, his spirit soared into the heavens, liberated and glorified, and the humble recipient of a long-awaited crown.

The apostle Paul—the theological architect behind such sacred doctrines as Justification by Faith Alone, the Divine Sovereignty of God in Election, Original Sin, the Atonement, and the nuclear Body of the Church—completed his mission with high honors. Like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul paid the ultimate cost for his discipleship. Few men, if any, can stand shoulder-to-shoulder with his body of work or the character in which he carried out his duties. He was the premier preacher; prolific writer; a faithful servant and steward; a loyalist Jew; an inspired apostle; and the consummate Christian. Indeed, the apostle Paul was a Hebrew of all Hebrews.

—Ronald H. Gann

¹ Cited at www.quoteland.com

² Cited at www.randyalcorn.blogspot.com

³ Cited www.victorshepherd.on.ca

⁴ MacDonald, G. Jeffrey. www.usatoday.com; 1/31/2006

⁵ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, "Protestantism without the Reformation," in *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes, 1928-1936*, ed. Edwin H. Robertson, trans. Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden (London: Collins, 1965), pp. 92–118.

⁶ Robinson, Joseph. www.utsnyc.edu

⁷ Cited at www.victorshepherd.on.ca

⁸ Robinson, Joseph. www.utsnyc.edu.

⁹ MacDonald, G. Jeffrey. www.usatoday.com; 1/31/2006

¹⁰ Colossae was located a hundred and twenty miles east of Ephesus in the Lycus River Valley in ancient Phrygia, part of the Roman territory of Asia Minor. It was one of a triad of cities in the area (along with Laodicea and Hierapolis), resting at the foot of Mount Cadmus.

¹¹ MacArthur, John. *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Acts 31–28*, [Moody Press, 1996], 376.

¹² First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians, Chapter 5.

¹³ www.biblestudy.org

¹⁴ Acts 2:9–10

¹⁵ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p.559.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* pp.559–61

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p.556.

¹⁸ The fable that Nero was to have famously "fiddled while Rome burned" is an expression that appears to have appeared as late as the seventeenth century. The instrument had not been introduced to the Romans of Nero's day.

¹⁹ Cited at www.roman-empire.net.

²⁰ Brians, Paul, *Reading About the World, Volume 1*, [Harcourt Brace Custom Publishing, 1999].

²¹ The Catholic Encyclopedia. Robert Appleton Co. 1911. p.751.

²² William McBirnie, PH.D. *The Search for the Twelve Apostles*

²³ John Foxe, *Foxes Book of Martyrs* (Springdale: Whitaker House, 1981), p.11.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p.11.

²⁵ The death of Paul is recorded by his contemporary Clement, in 1 Clement, Chapter 5; also by the Roman presbyter Caius (about 200 AD) (who alluded to the Ostian Way as the site of Paul's martyrdom); by Tertullian, Eusebius, Jerome, and many subsequent writers.

²⁶ Cited at www.sacred-destinations.com

²⁷ Swindoll, Charles R. *A Man of Grace and Grit: Paul* (Insight for Living, 2003), 193.

²⁸ Robertson, A.T. *Epochs In The Life Of Paul*, pp. 316–317.