

Faith Under Fire: Persecution & Christian Martyrs

Biblical View of Suffering

- Acts 5:40-41 - Persecution viewed as an honor
- Mk 10:38-39 – Suffering equated with rites of Eucharist and baptism (drink cup, receive baptism)
- Rom. 8:18 – Sufferings not equal to glory to be revealed
- Rom. 8:33-39 - Martyrdom viewed as spiritual warfare against the devil, not as battle against humans.
- Phil. 1:21 - to live is Christ, to die is gain.
- Phil. 1:29 - granted to us to suffer for Christ.
- Mt. 24:9 - Jesus says we will be persecuted for the faith.
- James, brother of John the beloved - martyred in 30 AD (Acts 12:1)
- Stephen - stoned for the faith. Portrays martyrdom as completing process of perfection (Acts 7)

Martyrdom in the Early Church

- *Martyreo* - to witness of the faith. Later came to mean to die for the faith.
Reference: Water, Mark, Compiler. The New Encyclopedia of Christian Martyrs. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2001)
- A theology of suffering - martyrdom equated as baptism of fire or baptism in blood.
Demonstrated in writing and in iconography:
 - Perpetua & Felicitas - p. 103, sect. 18 - Felicitas came forth rejoicing ... about to wash after childbirth in a second baptism.
- Hippolytus, The Apostolic Tradition, xix:2 Catechumen is justified by martyrdom (p. 30 in Chadwick edition).
- Saturus in Perpetua & Felicitas - views his suffering as a second baptism (p. 105, sect. 21).
Also, p. 103 - the day of their death is called the day of their triumph.
- Tertullian - the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

Why the Romans distrusted the Christians

- They considered Christianity a mystery religion
 - Mystery religions had secret rites, esoteric knowledge, and exclusive membership.
 - Past history of mystery religion of the Manae who worshiped god Bacchus had resulted in women worshipers who physically tore men apart. This led to mystery religions being considered illicit or unsanctioned by the government.
 - Accusations made against Christians - that they committed incest, cannibalism, drank blood, and ate babies (Thyestean feast).
- Christians were considered atheists by Romans because they didn't worship the Roman gods.
- Christians were viewed as unpatriotic and traitors because they wouldn't offer pinch of incense for the emperor.

The Cult of the Martyrs/Confessors

- The respect paid to those who died for the faith gradually gave rise to viewing martyrs as intercessors with God on behalf of believers (eventually became the saints of the Catholic church).
- Confessors - those who refused to curse Christ or offer incense for the emperor. (Later gave rise to Donatist controversy in 4th cent).
- Graves of the martyrs became places of pilgrimage. Later body parts of martyrs were seen as having healing power.

The Roman Persecutions

- Roman persecutions tended to be regional rather than empire-wide:
 - Ten persecutions of early Christians by emperors –
 - Nero 64-68 AD;
 - Domitian 81-96 AD;
 - Trajan 98-117 AD;
 - Marcus Aurelius 161-180 AD;
 - Septimius Severus 193-211;
 - Maximinus 235-238 AD;
 - Decius 249-251;
 - Valerian 253-260 AD;
 - Aurelian 270-275 AD;
 - Diocletian 284-305 AD.
 - Only two empire-wide persecutions were under Decius and Diocletian.