**CPC SUNDAY SCHOOL**

Study in the Book of Acts

#2 of 4

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**THE PERSECUTION OF THE CHURCH AND**

**THE MARTYRDOM OF STEPHEN**

**Main Idea**

Christians now begin to gather and form small communities. They start to organize but they are persecuted, hounded and killed. Stephen was one those who were martyred.

**Background Scripture**

Acts 5:17 – 6:15 -Followers of Jesus are

persecuted

Acts 7:54 – 8:3 -The stoning of Stephen. Saul

enters.

**Preparatory Readings for Leaders**

**Why were Christians persecuted?**

How was it that the church underwent such sacrifices? The Roman religion was not intolerant; Rome had accepted into its pantheon deities from the Italian tribes and from Asia Minor. In the provinces, the great territorial gods—such as Saturn in North Africa and Jehovah among the Jews—were accepted as “legal religion” on the grounds that their rites, even if barbarous, were sanctified by ancient tradition. Countless local gods and goddesses, worshiped by the ordinary inhabitants of the Greco-Roman world, were often provided with a classical equivalent name and worshiped as “Roman” deities.

Despite this toleration, by the early second century the Roman governor of Bithynia (on the Black Sea) had no hesitation in sending to immediate execution those who had been denounced as being Christians. The name alone was a sufficient death warrant.

Reasons for the persecution emerge from the record of Christianity’s first three centuries.

TWO REASONS -

**One - Fratricidal** (denoting conflict within a single family or organization) **Strife**

Persecution did not begin with the Roman authorities. The New Testament writings tell of fratricidal strife between Jews and Christians, the latter challenging the Jews by claiming to be “the New Israel.” In the early chapters of Acts, Stephen (7:57) and James, the brother of John the disciple (12:2), became victims of the Jerusalem mob and of King Herod Agrippa, respectively. Indeed, the writer of Luke-Acts appears to go out of his way to reassure the Roman authorizes of the loyalty and general value of the Christians and the hostility of the Jews toward them.

The persecutors and their motives changed in A.D. 64. On July 19 that year a great fire engulfed much of Rome; only four of the fourteen quarters of the city escaped damage. Suspicion immediately fell on Emperor Nero: was this a madcap way of clearing part of the city to make room for new, magnificent streets and buildings in his honor? Nero, however, managed to deflect blame first, apparently, on the Jews, who had a reputation for large-scale arson but also had friends at court; and then onto the Christians. Many Christians (perhaps including Peter) were seized, tortured, and done to death in the arena.

Tacitus, writing in c. 115, included an account of the incident in his *Annales* (XV, 44). Except for the manner of the Christians’ deaths, which he thought excessively cruel, he showed no sympathy for the Christians. Recording that “Christus, from whom the name [Christians] had its origin” was executed by “one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate,” Tacitus described the Christians as a “class hated for their abominations” and guilty of “hatred of the human race,” an accusation he also made against the Jews. Theirs was not a “religion” but a “deadly superstition,” and hence worthy of repression. Though there was no immediate sequel to Nero’s persecution, the fire forfeited any chance Christians might have had of being recognized as “legal religion” (*religio licita*) separate from Judaism.

**Two - Imperial Policies**

Another 30 years pass before we hear of further action against the Christians, and then the evidence is not watertight.

Emperors were extremely suspicious of anything that seemed like “superstition” (for example, carrying a memento given by a Druid priest cost one Roman officer his life!). In 95–96, the emperor Domitian acted drastically against some members of the Roman nobility accused of “atheism” and “lapsing into Jewish customs.” It is not sure that Christianity was meant. However, Domitlla, the emperor’s kinswoman (*neptis*) who was exiled to the island of Pantelleria [near Sicily], was believed to have been a Christian. The accusation of “atheism”—denial of the existence and power of the gods—might point in that direction.

The veil is lifted, however, about 15 years later. In c. 112, Pliny was sent by the emperor Trajan (98–117) to Bithynia to restore the province from ravages caused by maladministration and corruption. He toured the province and when he reached the far east end, near Amastris, he encountered Christians. Pliny, though a lawyer by profession, had never been at a trial of Christians. The procedure he used was the same as for the vast majority of criminal cases in the province: *cognitio extra ordinem*, an arbitrary system of trial before a magistrate for offenses that fell outside the range of “statutory crimes” such as treason, forgery, or adultery.

As already mentioned, Pliny condemned to immediate execution those who confessed to being Christians, “for I held no question that whatever it was that they admitted, in any case obstinacy and unbending perversity deserve to be punished.” Christianity itself was punishable, but the defiant, martyr-attitude of the accused left Pliny in no doubt that his action was right.

Pliny’s difficulties arose when individuals agreed that they had been Christians once but were so no longer, and his letter to the emperor indicated his preference for lenience toward them. Trajan responded in an ambiguous but fair-minded way. Christians were “not to be sought out” (i.e., treated like common criminals). If they recanted and “worshiped our gods,” they were to be freed, but those who persisted must be punished. Anonymous denunciations, however, were to be rejected as being “a bad example and unworthy of our times.”

Twelve years later (in 124–125), Christian gained a further concession. Anti-Christian riots had broken out in the province of Asia (western Asia Minor) in 122–123, and the governor had written to Emperor Hadrian for advice. In response, Hadrian’s rescript (imperial order) allowed cases against Christians to be brought to trial, but ordered that the Christians had to be proven guilty of illegal acts before they could be condemned. Once again, “slanderous attacks” against Christians were forbidden. The rescript helped protect Christians, for now the emphasis was less on their name than on specific misdeeds. Christians might be unpopular, and their cult technically illegal, but it would take a bold man to file an accusation that, if in any way flawed, could rebound with serious consequences. An accuser also had to await the arrival of the one senior of ficial (the proconsul) able to try a capital case in the large province of Asia. No wonder Justin Martyr attached the text of Hadrian’s rescript to the end of his *First Apology*, written c. 155.

**Note:** The reading comes Christianity Today – here’s the link for further reading.

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-27/persecution-in-early-church-did-you-know.html>

**Leading the Session**

1. Gathering:

* Welcome/ Share stories
* Sing a hymn or song
* Prayer

1. Starting the Lesson:

* Share with the class the theme of the study.
* Guide the class in answering the questions in the Participants Guide.

1. Close in prayer.

**Participants Guide** (The Persecution of the Church and the Martyrdom of Stephen – Lesson 2 of 4)

**Acts 5: 17-28 -The Apostles are arrested**

Questions:

1. Describe the scene when the apostles were miraculously released from jail.
2. Why were the apostles arrested by the high priest (then sent to the Sanhedrin). What was their crime? Explain.

**Acts 5: 29-42 -A Pharisee named Gamaliel presents an**

**Argument.**

1. What argument did Gamaliel present to the Sanhedrin?
2. In verses 41-42, how is suffering and persecution worthy of Christ’s name?

**Acts 7: 44-59, 8: 1-3 -Stephen is martyred. Saul (Paul) is introduced.**

Questions:

1. What do we know about Stephen?
2. Reading Acts 7: 44-53, how is this offensive to the members of the Sanhedrin?
3. In v.59, what was the prayer of Stephen? In what part of the Bible did you hear this declaration? Comments.

**Assignment – read Acts 9: 1-31/ 10: 19-30**

* The conversion of Saul (Paul).
* The spread of the church.

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