

(Christian History) 1. the Early Church -Daily Life and Persecution

by David Guzik

Christianity emerged into a world already filled with religion, and its success is an incredibly unlikely story that can be attributed to its deep roots in historical events.

Scripture: Psalm 78:1-8, Matthew 6:33

Topics: "Early Church", "Christian Worship"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on Psalm 78 verses 1-8, which encourages the study of history and the passing down of God's works to future generations. The speaker emphasizes the importance of understanding that Christianity is rooted in historical events, particularly the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The sermon also discusses the significance of the communion service and describes it as a time of worship and prayer. The speaker concludes by highlighting the unique characteristics of Christian worship, which involve both normal and not normal aspects.

Transcript

I'm going to begin our study through church history, which again, I've organized into 20 lectures that will hopefully be somewhere about an hour each. But I'm going to begin this time just with a very brief scriptural introduction, even though I want to take pains to emphasize with you that church history is not scripture. We do not base our faith on church history.

We do not base our faith on what great men, even the great men of the church, have said in times past. So we really want to make a distinction in our mind between scripture and church history. Scripture is scripture, church history is church history.

But yet we can definitely learn from what God has done among men. And we can learn from what men have done towards God. I've got to say, the lessons are very often bitter and dark.

When you really understand church history, there's oftentimes more discouraging lessons than there are encouraging lessons. Sometimes the lessons are bright and glorious, but often dark and gloomy. Let's take a look here at Psalm 78, verses 1 through 8. To me, this psalm is just one of a few different passages in the Bible that give us sort of the permission to really have an interest in history and to study it.

He says, Give ear, O my people, to my law. Incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable.

I will utter dark sayings of old, which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, telling to the generation to come the praises of the Lord and his strength and his wonderful work that he has done. For he established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children, that the generation to come might know them, the children who would be born, that they may arise and declare them to their children, that they may set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments, and may not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation that did not set its heart aright and whose spirit was not faithful to God.

I just want you to notice two very quick things from this text. First of all, there's the encouragement to know when to learn history. I mean, I will utter dark sayings of old, which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us.

We will not hide them from their children, telling to the generation to come. And so this idea of relating what God has done in the past to understanding it for ourselves, of course, but also relating it to our children is a very, very important concept. But I want you to notice the closing verses here, and that they may not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation.

Again, I think the psalmist is sort of cluing us into something that we'll find as a persistent theme through church history, that you see a lot of stubborn and rebellious people throughout church history. And this will be a familiar theme that we come back to again and again. So we open church history with our eyes wide, wide open here.

We embark on this study here. We're taking a look at it fully understanding that God has done some incredibly wonderful things in the history of the church, but man has also done some dark and terrible things. So with that sort of out of the way, let's sort of consider where Christianity stands in the setting of world history.

And you'll understand what I mean by that as we go on. Christianity is a faith that concerns itself with big ideas. We would say that the Christian story is significant.

You could even say it's significant cosmically. We claim that this work of God is relevant not only for people of one faith, but for the entire earth. Indeed, we claim it's relevant for the universe.

I mean, even though our focus is going to be on the history of Christianity, and if I can make it even more specific, the history of Western Christianity, we believe that the big story has relevance for the entire world, because it's all going to be remade as part of God's eternal plan. Now, if you want to, you can divide the time before the emergence of Christianity into ten general periods. Now, whenever you see a list like this, take it with a grain of salt.

I mean, let's face it. You can make all different sorts of divisions and distinctions. Some people might have more things on a list, some people might have fewer, but the general idea, I believe, remains the same.

So here are ten periods of history that I would describe to you before Christianity. First, the period of innocence and the fall. Second, the period of Noah and the world that perished.

Third, the period of the patriarchs. Of course, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and including Joseph. Fourth, Israel and Egypt.

Fifth, the Exodus. Sixth, the time of the judges. Seventh, the united monarchy, covering the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon.

Eight, the divided monarchy. Nine, exile. And then ten, the 400 silent years, or what is sometimes referred to as the intertestamental period.

Now, after this, you could say begins the historical period of Christianity, beginning, of course, with the emergence of Jesus Christ on the scene. I mean, Jesus is the beginning of church history, even though we're going to talk very little about that, because that's really more adequately covered in a Bible study class, where you study the documents of the New Testament. And so we're really going to consider ourselves, in this class, very little of what we might consider biblical church history, even though I'm going to freely admit to you, that's the most important thing to study and to know.

If you could choose between really knowing church history in all the 20 lectures that I'm going to give to you in the next several days, if you could choose between knowing that and choose between knowing the book of Acts, forward and backwards, pick the book of Acts. The New Testament is more important for you to understand than the history of Christianity. Now, we're not saying that there's no value in understanding the history of Christianity.

There definitely is. But again, we just want to make this distinction between scripture and history that's very important for us to keep in mind. Now, at the time that Christianity came on the scene, there were four what we might call high civilizations representing higher culture.

These four civilizations were the Roman Empire, the Persian Empire, India, and China. In China, the Han Dynasty ruled China from about 200 BC to about 200 AD. And under the Han Dynasty, Confucianism was the state-supported religion, but there was also Taoism.

Now, Buddhism was introduced into China at the end of the Han Dynasty, but it didn't gain a large following until later. In India, Hinduism was strong, and Buddhism came five centuries before Christianity, but it also flourished in India. The Persian Empire was in constant competition with the Roman Empire.

The official religion of the Persian Empire was Zoroastrianism. But the Roman Empire is, of course, most interesting and relevant to us, first of all because one might argue that it was the most dynamic and influential empire upon the earth at that time. I mean, we don't want to say that China and India and Persia were unimportant in those times.

Of course, they had great significance. Of course, they had high culture, but they had nowhere near the subsequent influence that the Roman Empire had. But of course, it's also relevant to us because it's from within the Roman Empire that Christianity came forth.

Now, if you want to speak religiously, the Roman Empire at that time was marked by several religious and philosophical ideas that were generally joined together into a pluralistic system. This great empire, which encompassed so much of the civilized world, had a whole variety of religious expressions in it. So listen to me here.

First, there were the official religions of Rome. These were the ancient Roman cults to which were added the emperor. Then there were the philosophies of Greek origin.

So first, you had the official religions. Those would be the traditional pagan religions of Rome. Secondly, you had the philosophies of Greek origin, which you would include under them Platonism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, the Cynics, Neoplatonism, all these different philosophies of Greek origin.

But then thirdly, in addition to normal pagan religions and the Greek philosophies, you had the mystery religions from the east. These were mainly coming from Egypt, Syria, and Persia. You see, these mystery religions centered on a savior god who supposedly was slain by his enemies and rose from the dead, which we would, from a biblical perspective, regard as sort of a clever impersonation, a clever counterfeit is the right word, of Satan to sort of dilute the message of the Christian gospel.

Some of these mystery religions were built around Dionysus, others around Orpheus, others around Attis, or the great mother who loved him and mourned his death and affected his resurrection. Some had Adonis, some Osiris, and some Mithra at their center. And so these religious ideas, both the traditional pagan religions, the Greek philosophies, and the mysteries religions, filled the Roman Empire at this time.

You understand, Christianity came into a very religious world, right? It didn't come into what we would consider today secular Europe or the secular Western world. It came into a world that was already filled with religion. Now, the general condition of the Roman Empire, in many ways, made it a good place for the gospel to take root and to spread.

First of all, there was Roman political unity that ensured peace. I mean, it's the famous Pax Romana, right? This peace of Rome, where Rome was the dominant superpower of the world for, you know, well, almost 800 years, I guess you could say. It was an incredibly long period where Rome ruled over the Western world, and that political unity ensured peace, and it really allowed the gospel to spread.

Secondly, the Roman legal system ensured order. Isn't it remarkable? You see this in the Book of Acts, where Paul could appeal to his rights as a Roman citizen. That's because there was such an established political, or excuse me, a legal understanding in the Roman Empire.

Thirdly, there was widespread trade across and beyond the Roman Empire, including the trade of ideas. This whole idea of the trade and the merchants going back and forth, not only within the Roman Empire, but also outside of the Roman Empire, I mean, all of this ground, there was trade all over the place, both outside the Roman Empire and within it, but in that whole period there, these merchants who became Christians spread their ideas everywhere. Fourth, there was a generally common language in the Empire, and of course, that generally common language was Common Greek, or Koine Greek, not the same Greek of the philosophers, that's known as Attic Greek, but it was sort of a common tongue descended from that more philosophical language.

And therefore, when Peter stood up on the day of Pentecost, right, and he preached to this great crowd assembled, there were people there from a huge number of different nationalities, right? But yet Peter could address the crowd collectively in one language. And so this common language made a great environment for the Gospel to come into. Fifthly, the Empire was religiously pluralistic and generally tolerant.

Now, I quoted to you the different religious influences current in the Roman Empire at that time. Of course, I left out Judaism, which was a fourth important influence. But if you want to talk about the four influences of the Roman Empire religiously when Christianity came into it, you have the traditional pagan religions, the Greek philosophies, the mystery religions, and then Judaism.

That's a pretty diverse religious environment. And within this, it was conceivable that people were more ready to hear new ideas. And the Romans didn't really care.

The Romans weren't out trying to establish so much a state religion that would rule over everything. They were more interested in political order. This is a subject we'll get into in greater depth a little bit later on.

And then finally, number six, there were simply good roads and a good infrastructure for travel. You could travel around the Roman Empire more easily in the year 50 AD than you could in the year 650 AD, because the infrastructure was just good. It was superior.

There were good roads, a good system for travel by ship. It was just a good environment for the Gospel to spread readily. So when Christianity emerged into the Roman Empire, it emerged into it into a certain time and place that's important for us to understand.

First of all, you could say that Christianity begins with this distinct historical figure, who's Jesus Christ, of course, coming into what we would call a distinct historical setting. So at the time that Jesus came into the Roman Empire was young. These were the early days of the empire.

You could say that Jesus was born during the reign of the first Roman emperor. Before that, Rome had been a republic, and it wasn't ruled by kings or emperors, but it was ruled by their senate. But the first Roman emperor, Augustus, was the one who was king or emperor, I should say, more specifically, when Jesus was born.

So the Roman Empire was young. The Roman Republic had been around for several hundred years, but the Republic had sort of been absorbed into the Empire because of the different structure. The Empire was dominated by the Caesars, right? These great emperors, these great rulers.

The Republic was dominated by the Senate. So the Roman Empire was young. Secondly, Palestine, that's what the Romans called the biblical area of Judea, Palestine had been incorporated into the Roman Empire and ruled as an occupied territory.

And you could say that it seethed, man, it pulsed with resentment and unrest against Roman rule. These people who lived in Judea, again, you can go back and forth whether you use the name Palestine or Judea. In a modern context, we don't like necessarily the name Palestine because it can be interpreted as a denial to the right of Israel to live in the land.

But if you're speaking historically, that's what the Romans called it. By the way, the Romans called it that as an insult against the Jews, because they wanted to identify the area that they called Palestine with the Philistines. And Philistia, Palestina, it comes from the same idea in the Roman mind.

In any regard, this is what the Romans called it. And think of it as an occupied territory that, again, was just seething against Roman rule. Thirdly, you could say that the Jewish religious establishment, especially the temple, it was dominated by the party of the Sadducees.

Point four, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Sadducees were the ones who knew how to pull the political strings. They had the political connections.

They had the advantages. But then, fourthly, another prominent party were the Pharisees, who were the spiritual heirs of the movement to keep Judaism pure from the influence of Hellenism. And so you had Sadducees, you had Pharisees.

The Pharisees, look, I think we commonly misunderstand the Pharisees. You know what we would consider the Pharisees today? They would be a back-to-the-Bible holiness movement. That's exactly how the Pharisees were understood.

Man, they were very interested in the Scriptures, and they were very interested in holiness. We look at the New Testament and see how often the Pharisees are the bad guys, and they are. But we need to understand that they emerged from the context of being the back-to-the-Bible holiness movement guys who became corrupted.

And then, fifthly, we could also say that there were some minority ascetic movements, such as the Essenes, who were responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls. They had their thing out in the desert. But as much as anything, we need to understand about this historical environment of the first century that there was a real sense of messianic expectation.

Now, if you want a biblical example of this messianic expectation, do you remember in John chapter 4 when Jesus speaks with the Samaritan woman? Go back and read through that conversation one more time, and you'll notice she was expecting the Messiah. You think about that, that's awesome, isn't it? Here's an anonymous Samaritan woman that Jesus just happens to meet by a well. In Samaria, and she has a vital messianic expectation.

I can't explain why exactly. It may have well been the work of the Spirit of God preparing the world, but in the first century that Jesus came to, they were looking for the Messiah. And then, even though it had all of these advantages that we've spoke about, the political unity, the legal system, the widespread trade, the common language, the religious pluralism, the good roads and infrastructure for travel, the whole setup that we've just described in the last five or ten minutes.

I want you to see that despite all of that, we can say that the success of Christianity is still an incredibly unlikely story. In the period that we're going to talk about in the next several lectures, Christianity went from a despised, illegal, persecuted religion to become the dominant force of Western civilization and world civilization. You've got to admit that's a pretty remarkable story, isn't it? To go from a despised and persecuted religion, and we'll point ourselves to a time, again, we'll get to this in a future lecture, where in the early 300s it looked like Christianity would perish from the Roman Empire.

It honestly did. It looked like it might be totally finished. To go from that to being the dominant cultural and philosophical and just the dominant force of Western civilization, you have to admit, is an amazing story.

And so here we find this very impressive setting that Christianity comes from, and the success of Christianity really is almost despite these advantages, not necessarily because of them. So as we move on, let me make a second point, just to really emphasize with you the idea that Christianity, in its historical setting, we would have to say that Christianity is a religion, it's a faith, very much interested in history. Notice this, when Paul describes what the gospel is in 1 Corinthians 15, do you remember what he

describes there? This is for the gospel that I brought unto you and what he describes.

Do you remember what he says? He says, the death, the burial, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now what is it about those three things? Those are historical events. Christianity is deeply, deeply rooted in historical events.

It's not primarily about a teaching, right? It's not primarily about a philosophy. Christianity is primarily, first you have to deal with historical events. The idea of history is essential to Christianity.

If you look at the first few verses of the Gospel of Luke, where he says, I'm offering to you historical truth, things that were surely known among us. Well, along those lines, we should really be able to understand for ourselves that in ancient times, secular historians confirm very strongly the existence and the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, right? This is a very important idea. You should know that the record and the evidence for Christianity is not only found within the historically reliable documents we know as the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, but it's also found within several secular historians as well.

For example, the ancient historian Thallus. You can date him about the year AD 52. He mentioned Jesus and the historical events mentioned in the Gospels in a history that's lost, but was quoted by later writers like the Christian Julius Africanus in the year 221.

Thallus made specific mention of the darkness that came upon the whole world when Jesus died. And he explained it as an eclipse, although you have to admit, if you know much about astronomy, not that we would expect Thallus to know about it, but during the Passover, the moon is full. That's part of the way that they set the date for Passover, is by the full moon.

And it is astronomically impossible to have an eclipse during a full moon. It just doesn't work that way with where the moon is in the sky. This is what he said.

He said, On the whole world there pressed a most fearful darkness, and the rocks were rent by an earthquake, and in many places in Judea and other districts were thrown down. This darkness Thallus in the third book of his history calls, as it appears to me without reason, an eclipse of the sun. This is Julius Africanus, again quoting this ancient historian Thallus.

Unfortunately, the document of Thallus, his writing, is lost to history. We just don't have it. But we have it quoted in some later Christian writers.

Second, there's a letter from the Syrian Mara Bar-Sarafoin to his son where he mentions Jesus as a historical figure. He talks about Jesus in the context of the Athenians and Socrates. Well, let me just read. What advantage did the Athenians gain from putting Socrates to death? Famine and plague came upon them as a judgment for their crime.

What advantage did the men of Samos gain from burning Pythagoras? In a moment their land was covered with sand. What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise king? It was just after that that the kingdom was abolished. God justly avenged these three wise men.

The Athenians died of hunger. The Samonians were overwhelmed by the sea. The Jews, ruined and driven from their land, live in complete dispersion.

But Socrates did not die for good. He lived on in the teaching of Plato. Pythagoras did not die for good.

He lived on in the statute of Hera. Nor did the wise king die for good. He lived on in the teaching which he had given.

Now remember, this is a completely secular man. But yet, he mentions Jesus as being a completely historical figure on par with these other ones. And he mentions him in a way that he doesn't really need to explain the story of Jesus, right? He understands that his son knows who he's talking about.

Again, not a Christian man. But understanding this, it just helps us to understand that the history of Jesus, and that he was accepted as a historical figure, was widespread in this early historical period. Next, we have something from the Jewish historian Josephus.

He wrote about Jesus, and Josephus clearly spoke of Jesus as a historical person. By the way, Joseph also, Josephus, I should say, also confirmed the historicity of many New Testament events. This is a famous quote from Josephus, from his Antiquities of the Jews.

He says, Now there was about this time Jesus a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works. A teacher of such men has received the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles.

He was the Christ, and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him, for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold, and these ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him, and the tribe of Christians so named from him are not extinct at this day. Now you should know that some say that early Christians corrupted this quotation to their own advantage, but when Origen cited Josephus in 250 AD, and when Eusebius quoted Josephus in 324 AD, this is exactly how the quotation read in those early citations. By the way, Josephus also makes specific mention of John the Baptist, and of James the Just, who was James the one who wrote the book of James, and who was the half-brother of Jesus.

And so again, we find historical confirmation for the story of Christianity within secular history. Here's a fourth example here, Lucian. Lucian was a Roman comedian, and wrote a play mocking Christians, but in his play he treats Jesus as completely a historical figure.

This is the quote from Lucian, he says, Jesus was, quote, the man who was crucified in Palestine because he introduced this new cult into the world. Furthermore, their first lawgiver persuaded them that they were all brothers of one another, after they have transgressed once for all by denying the Greek gods and by worshiping that crucified sophist himself and living under his laws. Now you can see Lucian's attitude, right? Is he a supporter of Christianity? No, he mocks Christianity.

Nevertheless, he fully recognizes the historicity of Jesus Christ. And then for a final source here, we look to the Jewish rabbinical writings, well perhaps not a final source, but the Jewish rabbinical writings after the destruction of Jerusalem, that is the Mishnah. Several times mentioned Jesus as a historical figure.

Here's a quotation from the Talmud. It says, on the eve of Passover, Yeshua was hanged. For 40 days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, he is going to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and has enticed Israel to apostasy.

Anyone who can say anything in his favor, let him come forward and plead on his behalf. But since nothing was brought forward in his favor, he was hanged on the eve of Passover. Now we would say that this gets

the story somewhat wrong, but it certainly understands what happened, right? It certainly understands and agrees with the historicity.

Next, we could say that Justin Martyr, as he mentions the Roman historical documents, when he dialogues with a Jew named Trifo in AD 147, he could confidently say this, he says, you Jews knew that Jesus was risen from the dead and ascended into heaven as the prophecies did foretell was to happen. Justin Martyr also quotes a later document, supposedly called the Acts of Pontius Pilate. By the way, there's also an apocryphal book, I believe by that same name, it's not the same one mentioned.

Basically what it was, they saw that Justin Martyr referenced this document. They said, well, we can't find it, so let's create it, which is never a good idea. But some people have done that in the history of the church.

But yet he references the legal documents in the libraries of ancient Rome that record the legal proceedings having to do with Jesus and his trial before Pontius Pilate. Lastly, we can say that there is a detailed historical confirmation of both the Gospels and the Book of Acts. William Ramsey was a groundbreaking historian in the late part of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century.

And he actually set out to prove that the Book of Acts in particular was historically inaccurate. You guys know what like a historical novel is, right? They take a small historical truth, and then they build on it all this fiction and all this drama. Or as sometimes they call them in the world of film or television, a docudrama, right? It has some documentary truth, but then it's filled with a lot of filler.

Well, this is basically what William Ramsey thought that the Book of Acts was like, was yes, it has a little bit of history in it, but it's mostly just falsity and fluff. And so William Ramsey set out and for years, he toured around that part of the ancient world and applied all his historical critical skills to the job and researched whether or not the Book of Acts was historically accurate. And basically, he became a Christian because of it.

I mean, he confirmed over and over again, that the Book of Acts is a remarkably accurate historical document. Now, when this is all over, we come to a conclusion. And this is the conclusion that I want to quote to the great historical and biblical scholar FF Bruce.

He said this, he said, some writers may toy with the fancy of a Christ myth, but they do not do so on the grounds of historical evidence. The historicity of Christ is as axiomatic, that means without question, is as axiomatic for the unbiased historian as the historicity of Julius Caesar. It is not the historians who propagate the Christ myth theories.

Now, I just say this, because every once in a while, still, I will run across it where you'll find people who are skeptics and this and that, and they'll act as if it's, you know, sort of historically bold to question the history. Well, maybe Jesus never really existed, or this or that. It's complete nonsense.

Both, of course, the scriptures tell us that the scriptures being legitimate and valid historical documents, but not only that, we can also say that secular historians outside of the Bible also confirm it very richly. So leaving all of that sort of introduction, now we want to come into this period that we speak about the apostolic church. In our lectures through church history over the next several days, we're going to divide church history into five different categories.

Although I can't say I'm really pleased with these five different sections. They're very inexact. You can see one of these sections lasts for more than a thousand years.

That's really not a good way to divide. I should make several divisions within there. But just in sort of broad speaking, these are the divisions that we're going to have.

First of all, the apostolic church, AD 33 to 100. Secondly, the early church, AD 100 to 312. Third, the Christian empire, 312 to 1500.

Fourthly, the Reformation, 1500 to 1650. And then finally, Christianity in a more modern world, 1650 to present. So as awkward and inexact as these divisions are, we're going to consider them one by one.

And first, we're going to consider the apostolic church. Now, of course, the apostolic church is so named because it had within it the authoritative presence of the apostles and prophets. I mean, this is basically the church of the book of Acts.

And we're not going to deal with it much in this because I think you can better deal with it with an in-depth study of the book of Acts or perhaps the life of Paul. But this is, of course, a very important period within church history. Again, marked number one by the authoritative presence of the apostles and prophets.

And we have the subsequent history or subsequent teaching of this authoritative presence of the apostles and prophets for us recorded in the New Testament, do we not? I mean, this is where we find this. We are our heirs. We have the legacy of this authoritative presence of the apostles and prophets in that foundation that was laid by them in the New Testament.

Secondly, it was marked by a church life that was glorious and not so glorious. I say this just to remind ourselves that it is definitely possible to over-romanticize the apostolic church. When we talk about the New Testament church, sometimes our eyes kind of glaze over and we think, oh, it was heaven on earth.

Wait a minute. Have you taken a look at the books of 1st and 2nd Corinthians? Have you taken a good look at the book of Acts? Have you studied the New Testament documents carefully? True, there were glorious things in the New Testament church, but we don't want to forget that there were also many things that were not so glorious. That it was a mixed bag, right? There was an amazing work of the Holy Spirit going on.

There was the wonderful presence and influence of the apostles and the prophets of the first century. However, it was not perfect. And so it was glorious, but not so glorious.

Third, we could say that it was marked by a spreading gospel. And this is really wonderful to consider how the gospel spread within these first few decades of Christianity. I mean, if you understand sort of the basic broad outline of the Roman Empire, being sort of an empire that would surround the lake, if you will.

It's a huge lake, but you could say the Mediterranean Sea, if you just considered that to be a lake. All around the shores of that lake, you would have the Roman Empire. But in the first century, it didn't really extend throughout the entire Roman Empire.

The whole western area of the Roman Empire, Spain, Gaul, the lower part of Germany, Britain, much of North Africa, at least the western part of it, was not really touched by Christianity. But within it was all this area that was touched by apostolic Christianity. All of this in Judea and Samaria and Asia Minor and

Greece and Rome and much of the Egyptian area of North Africa.

And this remarkable spread of the gospel came within the apostolic period. During the first century, there were churches sprinkled all over this area. Some of them, you can just mark the many dots on the map that would mark these apostolic churches.

But understand that many of these apostolic churches were not started by deliberate missionary effort. Now, some of them were, of course, right? You think of the Apostle Paul touring around this part of the Mediterranean, you know, going to these different places, going to Thessalonica or Philippi, and with the deliberate idea of converting people to Christianity and starting a church. But many of these churches started somewhat spontaneously as people became Christians and simply traveled from place to place.

And so it was a mixture of deliberate evangelism and missionary effort and what we might call accidental evangelism and missionary effort. And so the gospel spread all over the place. I'll give you a good example of this non-deliberate spreading of the gospel would be, I would say, the church at Rome.

Paul writes to the Romans, and they already had an established church there. And no apostolic delegate had ever been there. And no, Paul himself had not started that church.

It seems to have been started by Jews who were converted and traveling around the Roman Empire and settled in Rome. And of course, there's several other examples of this throughout the course. When Paul met believers in these areas on his way up to Rome, as it's mentioned in the book of Acts, he found believers, what was it, three taverns at another place.

This indicates just this very natural spread of the faith. So it spread in this very organic way. Now, you could chart this spread of the gospel throughout the first century churches as going very much along the command that Jesus gave to the disciples in the book of Acts, where it said that it spread from Jerusalem to Judea, from Judea to Samaria, and then from Samaria to the uttermost parts of the earth.

About the year 150, and I know this is outside of the apostolic period, but about the year 150, the Christian wrote this to the Roman emperor about the growth of Christianity. This is what he says. He says, we are but of yesterday.

In other words, we've only come on the scene since yesterday. We are but of yesterday, and we have filled all that belongs to you, the cities, the fortresses, the free towns, the very camps, the palace, the senate, the forum. He says, we leave to you the temples only.

In other words, what he's saying is, listen, Roman emperor, you better wake up to the fact that there's Christians everywhere, everywhere. The only place where there's no Christians is in your pagan temples. We leave to you the temples only.

And that's a valid description of this remarkable spread of the gospel within the apostolic period. Now, another important marking point of the apostolic church, or characteristic of the apostolic church, I should say, is that it was marked by the transition from Christianity as a branch of Judaism to Christianity as a faith in its own right. The Roman empire reserved the right to declare some religions legal and some religions illegal.

If a religion was suspected of rebellion or subversion or of criminal or offensive practices, the Romans might declare it what they called an illicit religion, an unallowed or unpermitted religion. Now, Judaism in

the Roman empire was recognized as a licit religion. Did you catch a difference between those two words? Illicit and licit.

Licit means permitted. Illicit means illegal or unpermitted. Well, Judaism was recognized as a permitted religion.

And while Christianity was considered to be a branch of Judaism, it was okay. And you could understand how this would be the perception at the beginning, right? Christianity as being a sect or a group within Judaism. But then, as we know from the book of Acts, the gospel started going to the Gentiles.

And it wasn't very long after that, that there became more Gentile believers than there were Jewish believers within the church. You see, as time went on, Judaism distanced itself from Christianity and Christianity distanced itself from Judaism. You can say that many of the leading Jews said, listen, those Christians are no part of us.

And many Christians had to admit, listen, we're not Jewish. We have a Jewish root. We have a Jewish foundation, but we are a different faith than Judaism.

So, as this became more clear over time, Christianity had to have its own status before the Roman Empire. And Christianity was declared an illicit religion, an unpermitted religion. Now, we have to say that for the most part, Jewish people in that time were offended that this group of Christians found legal protection under their umbrella.

Just think about this. Think as if you lived in a nation where all cults were outlawed, but Christianity was accepted. And then the Jehovah's Witnesses found legal protection by claiming they were Christians.

Many Christians would find that offensive, wouldn't they? Many Christians would go to the government and say, they're not real Christians, they're Jehovah's Witnesses, right? And so it was sort of that same dynamic, of course, not along the same analogy, but that same dynamic at work in the early days of apostolic Christianity. And so it was marked by this transition from Christianity as a branch of Judaism to Christianity as a religion in its own right. But then fifth, it was the beginning of state-sponsored persecution.

Now, I make a big difference here, right? There is a difference between official and unofficial persecution. Every Christian who is a true Christian should, at some time or another, face some kind of unofficial persecution, right? You should face some kind of social ostracism. You should face some kind of rejection for the sake of the gospel.

This is just something to be accepted among Christian believers. We find this in the Book of Acts all the time. We find the apostles who are harassed by religious officials or angry mobs.

But listen, in the Book of Acts, are the apostles persecuted by officials of the Roman Empire? Never, right? Instead, oftentimes, Paul found his protection under officials of the Roman Empire. So understand, there was definitely persecution against Paul and the apostles in the Book of Acts, but it was not official persecution. It was unofficial persecution.

But in this period of apostolic Christianity, state-sponsored persecution began, and it began in a big way with the burning of Rome. On July 19th, AD 64, fire broke out on the working-class section of Rome. For seven days, this fire raged, and it destroyed block after block of crowded tenement housing.

Now, legend has it that Caesar Nero fiddled while Rome burned, and many people in his own day thought that Nero himself had set the fire. Many modern historians believe that this was Nero's brutal attempt at what we might call urban renewal, because he took much of the area that was burnt over and built upon it for himself. Whether he set the fires or not is a question for historians to debate, but what we do know is that he blamed it on the Christians.

Therefore, Nero promised to hunt down and to kill Christians. The Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus, who wrote about the year AD 115, he wrote about Nero's persecution of Christians. And this is a notable quote from Tacitus here.

He says, accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty. Now, when I say pleaded guilty, what did they plead guilty to? They pleaded guilty to the crime of being Christians, right? Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty. Then, upon their information, and in Rome, an immense multitude was convicted.

Again, I need to pause here. It would be nice to read the whole quote through, but I just need to pause. Do you understand what it says here? Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty, right? Who admitted to being Christians.

Then, upon their information, and in Rome, an immense multitude was convicted. Upon their information? Do you understand what that means? These people who pleaded guilty, these people who admitted to being Christians and who were arrested, were basically tortured until at least some of them gave up the names of other Christians. That's the first thing they would do.

They would arrest you. Are you a Christian? Yes, I'm a Christian. Okay, great.

They would arrest you. Then, basically, they would horribly torture you until you would admit to being a Christian. Well, excuse me.

They would torture you until you gave up the names of fellow Christians. Then, they would go out and arrest them. All right, so back from the beginning.

Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty. Then, upon their information, and in Rome, an immense multitude was convicted. Not so much on the charge of arson as because of their hatred of the human race.

Again, stop right there. What did Tacitus say Christians were guilty of? Hatred of the human race. We'll go on to that.

Okay, but going on here. Besides being put to death, they were made to serve as objects of amusement. They were clad in the hides of beasts and torn to pieces by dogs.

Others were crucified. Others set on fire to serve to illuminate the night when daylight failed. So, what they would do is they would take Christians and they would sew them up in leather bags and they would throw them out in the arena and then allow dogs or other wild animals to just devour them.

Or, as what Tacitus says, Cesar Nero would take Christians and cover them in tar in pitch and light them on fire and use them to light his garden at night. I mean, this was a horrible, horrible persecution. Tacitus himself saw that Christians were being destroyed, I'm quoting here from him, not for the public good but to

gratify the cruelty of an individual.

Tacitus could see this and Tacitus said, listen, it wasn't for any great public good that the Christians were being persecuted, but it was because of Nero's own sick depravity. That's the reason why they were persecuted. Now, tradition tells us that both Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome during this time of persecution under Nero.

But again, I want you to remember one phrase from here that we're going to touch on later. Remember here, he says, as because of their hatred of the human race. Isn't that interesting? Don't you find that fascinating that that's what Christians were accused of? Christians were accused of being haters of the human race.

All right. Now, really, that ends our very brief survey of the Apostolic Church. With the time remaining in this first lecture, we're going to take a few steps into the period of the Early Church.

But again, I want to remind you, there's a difference between the Apostolic Church and the Early Church, right? When we say the Early Church, we're talking beyond the biblical period, right? Beyond the year, and we give it a rough number. We say the year AD 100, right? There's no exact date. We think that perhaps the Apostle John lived perhaps to maybe the year 100.

We don't have a definite date on that, of course. So these dates are approximate. But when we say, when we make the distinction between the Apostolic Church and the Early Church, we're making the distinction between the Church of the Book of Acts in the New Testament and the early Christians beyond the Book of Acts in the New Testament.

So, first of all, I want you to consider, how did the Christians meet and worship within this period of the Early Church? What was it like to be a Christian in this period of the Early Church? Well, first of all, we would say that Christians mainly met in homes. Now, towards the end of this Early Church period, if you want to talk about it being up till the year about 312, somewhere in the middle of the 3rd century, that would be about the year 250 or so, is our earliest evidence of church buildings. But the earliest Christians met in homes.

Meetings were held in homes, not so much because they thought that was better, but because those were the only meeting places possible. When Christians were given permission to buy land and to build buildings, they did. Sometimes there's this over-romanticism of this Early Church, saying, oh, look, they met in homes.

That's the godly way to do it. We should be meeting in homes today. And listen, if you want to have your church in a home, God bless you.

But nobody should misunderstand the historical aspect of this. The Early Church met in homes because they had to. When they had the opportunity to build their own buildings, they did.

I don't know how to put it any more strongly than that. They weren't sitting around saying, oh, aren't we spiritual because we meet in homes and not in our own buildings. No, they wanted to build buildings.

The only thing that prevented them from building buildings was practical necessity. But it is true that for most of this period of the Early Church, Christians met in homes because those were the buildings available to them. I think we have a wonderful early description of Christian meetings by a guy named

Pliny the Younger.

Pliny was the governor over an area called Bithynia in Asia Minor, some of the territory that's described in Acts 16 and 1 Peter 1. Pliny wrote about the year 112, and it's really a wonderful quote he says here. He says, On an appointed day, the Christians are accustomed to meet at daybreak and recite or sing a hymn to Christ as to a God, and to bind themselves by an oath to abstain from theft and robbery, adultery and breach of faith. After this, they depart and meet again to take food.

To find out the truth concerning them, I applied torture to two maidservants who were called deaconesses, but I found nothing but a depraved and extravagant superstition. This quote from this Roman official is very interesting. First of all, you kind of respect the Roman tradition for honesty, right? He's not going to make up something bad about the Christians if there's nothing bad there.

So he's honest, right? Look, they're harmless. They meet together, what do they do? They meet together on the appointed day, they meet at daybreak, they sing a hymn to Christ as to a God, they bind themselves by an oath to abstain from theft and robbery, adultery and breach of faith. After this, they depart to meet again to take food.

What he's seeing here is he's seeing just normal Christian fellowship, the teaching of the word, singing together, the community of the saints, and then it says they enjoy a meal together later on. He's probably talking about communion there, where he says they meet again to take food. But then you also see the cruelty of the Romans, right? How matter-of-factly does Pliny says, to find out the truth concerning them, I applied torture to two maidservants who were called deaconesses.

I just took a couple of maidservants, and well, they're leaders in the church, deaconesses, let's torture them and find out what the real story is. But don't you see, this is just a very simple gathering of believers. Let me show you another early description of Christian meetings by a man named Justin Martyr.

And what I mean by that is, listen to what he says here. He says, at the end of the prayers, we greet one another with a kiss. Then the president of the brethren is brought bread and a cup of wine mixed with water.

And he takes them and offers up praise and glory to the Father of the universe through the name of the Son and of the Holy Ghost and give thanks at considerable length for our being counted worthy to receive these things at his hands. When he has concluded the prayers and thanksgivings, all the people present express their joyful assent by saying, Amen. Now this, of course, is describing sort of the communion service.

What you need to understand is when he says, at the end of the prayers, prayers there is probably a broad term describing the worship service preceding that. Not only including prayer, but what we would call prayer, worship, a time in the word, perhaps a brief sermon. And so here, just another very simple description of a church service.

And when we read this, we sort of look at this and we say, well, we love this. We love the simplicity of this. We love the idea of these believers just gathering together and loving one another and strengthening one another in their Christian life.

I would say, again, that Christians, a fourth characteristic of how Christians met and worshipped, is that Christians were both what we would call normal and not normal. And for that idea, I want to quote to you

from the letter to Diognetus by an unknown Christian. This would be about 150 to 180, and I think it shows this idea of how Christians were both normal and not normal.

I love this quotation. He says, For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind in country or customs. For they do not live somewhere in cities of their own, or use some distinctive language or practice a peculiar manner of life.

Though they follow local customs in dress and food and the rest of their living, their own way of life which they display is wonderful and admittedly strange. They take part in everything like citizens and endure everything like aliens. Like everyone else they marry, they have children, but not a common bed.

They remain on earth, but they're citizens of heaven. Do you understand what I mean by this? By saying that Christians were normal but not normal, right? He says, listen, we don't have our own country, we don't have our own customs, we don't have our own cities, we don't have our own language. But yes, we follow local customs and dress and food and the rest of our living, but yet other aspects of our life are, and you love how this, is wonderful and admittedly strange, right? And that's just sort of this tension, right? They weren't like the Amish, so to speak, right? Where they were completely separated from life and culture and all this.

No, not at all. But on the other hand, they weren't sold out to the world. Wouldn't you look at this and describe this perfectly as what Jesus described as being in the world, but not of the world.

I have to say that in large measure the early church fulfilled that ideal very, very well. Well, the last subject we want to cover here at the end of this very first lecture is the nature of persecution against Christians in the early church. We already touched a little bit on the idea of persecution in the apostolic church and how that was the beginning of what we would call official or state-sponsored persecution.

But here in the early church, not only was the persecution official and state-sponsored, but it was much more severe. But there's many things that people misunderstand about persecution in the early church. First of all, it's important for us to understand that persecution was never universal or constant.

If you picture in your mind a map of the Roman Empire, okay, can you picture that in your mind? Think about all that land throughout the Roman Empire. There was never a time when all the Christians in all the Roman Empire were being persecuted. Now listen, some persecutions were bigger than others.

Some of them were very local affairs. Some of them were much larger than local affairs. But look, there was never a time when all the Christians in all the empire were being as well.

There was also never a time, excuse me, let me rephrase that. Also, we should say that persecution during this period of the early church from 100 to 312, it came in periods. It came in waves.

Sometimes in our mind, we sort of imagine 212 years of constant persecution. It wasn't like that. Persecutions would sort of ebb and flow like the tide.

It would depend on who the emperor was. And then the emperor would usually delegate the job of persecution to his regional administrators. And then it would depend upon the regional administrator.

So persecution was never universal or constant. And local governors had a lot of authority to determine how energetically Christians would be persecuted. Persecution could also take many different forms.

You know, the most common form of persecution was not violent. The most common form of persecution was usually economic and social. Now there were several significant periods of persecution that we should consider here.

There were four major persecutions. And I say there's four major ones. There were many, many smaller persecutions in between these guys.

Nobody should take a look at these four Roman emperors and say, oh, those were the only periods of persecution. No nonsense. I don't know if any of you ever heard of or ever seen this movie *Gladiator*, right? And this old Roman emperor at the beginning of the movie, what's his name? Marcus Aurelius.

Well, he was a real Roman emperor. He reigned from about 161 to 181 AD. And he was regarded as one of the more enlightened emperors.

Nevertheless, he commissioned a few specific persecutions, especially in the area of Lyon, France. Now he didn't commission a widespread persecution over much of the empire, but yet even this enlightened Roman emperor, who's not on this list, he commissioned certain persecutions at certain times in certain places. So what I'm trying to say is, even though we mark these four persecutions, nobody should think for a moment that there weren't a lot of smaller ones in between them.

And first you have Nero on this list in the year 64. His persecutions were not particularly widespread, but they were famous both for their sadism and for their very notable victims. Secondly, you have the emperor Decius, that's the year 249 to 251.

Decius embarked on what you might call a revival of paganism. And he started the first empire-wide persecution. During his persecution, the offering of incense to the image of the emperor was demanded.

This would be a Roman, what they would consider it to be a political custom that we'll discuss just in a little bit. Then there was Valerian, 257 to 260. Under him, persecution was mostly economic and legal.

Christians had their property confiscated and were denied the right to legally assemble for worship. Then you had Diocletian, 303 to 311. His reign saw Christians suffer the worst persecution of all.

Churches were destroyed, Bibles burnt, all civil rights of Christians were suspended, and sacrifice to Roman gods was commanded. This was probably the worst persecution of all, which is a very important thing. I want you to remember this last persecution of Diocletian, 303 to 311, probably the worst one of all.

Keep that in your mind because we're going to refer to it later. Now, why is it that Christians were mostly persecuted? Well, do you remember what we saw that statement from Tacitus a while back? Why did he say that Christians in the days of Nero were persecuted? What was the phrase he used? Haters of mankind, right? You and I would say, listen, Christians are all about love, right? How could Christians be considered haters of mankind? Well, I'll tell you how they could be considered that. Because they did not participate in and approve of all the different things that were going on in the Roman Empire, right? They didn't participate in the pagan worship.

They didn't participate in the sacrifice to idols. They didn't participate in the sexual immorality. They didn't participate in the mistreatment of slaves.

They didn't participate in the pagan culture and in the pagan society. Therefore, Christians were considered to be haters of mankind. You must hate us because you don't participate in the same things that we do.

They were also considered unpatriotic. Now, why would Christians in the Roman Empire be considered unpatriotic? Because at certain times in the Roman Empire, they demanded that all the citizens of the empire do what the Romans would have considered to be a pledge of allegiance. And you know how they did it? They didn't stand before a flag and put their hand over their heart and say, I pledge allegiance to the Roman flag.

No, this is how they did it. They would take a pinch of incense. They would go before a statue of the Roman Emperor with some burning coals in front of it.

And they would burn a pinch of incense before the statue of the Roman Empire and say, Caesar is Lord. And then once they said that, they would get a certificate from a government official. Okay.

You burn the pinch of incense and you said, Caesar is Lord. You can go your way. Here's your certificate.

And that's fine. Without that certificate, you could be persecuted. Right? And so basically, the government would come in and set an office, everybody in the village, everybody in the town, wherever, would have to come through one by one and take this oath and burn the pinch of incense.

Now, the Christians couldn't do it, right? The Christians said, I'm not going to do a sacrifice, which was what symbolically the pinch of incense was, right? I'm not going to do a sacrifice to Caesar. And secondly, I'm not going to say Caesar is Lord, because Jesus Christ is Lord. And the Romans officials would beg with the Christians, they would plead with them.

They would say, please just do it. They'd say, look, I don't have anything against you. But if you don't have this certificate saying that you did this, you're going to get in a lot of trouble.

Check it out. What if you were a Christian? And the Roman official said, because this happened a lot, the Roman official said, Okay, look, I know you don't want to do this. I know you have some crazy superstition that says you can't do this.

All right, fine. I don't care. You give me, you know, the Roman equivalent of 50 bucks.

Don't do it. And I'll give you the certificate that says that you did. If you're a believer, do you take that? And what a question though, right? You could see how this would be a challenge.

Because you could say, well, look, I didn't do it. All I did was I paid 50 bucks. But then again, I received a piece of paper that said that I did do it.

But then again, this piece of paper means I'm not going to be killed. What a challenge for the early church, right? And so this whole business of being unpatriotic. Now you need to understand, the Christians saw this as a religious issue, right? The Romans didn't see it as a religious issue at all.

The Romans wondered why the Christians were being so stubborn, so obstinate. Why can't they just do this? But for the Christians, it meant something. Again, the Romans saw this as a political offense, where Christians just saw it as being faithful unto God.

Well, let me just conclude with a quick story here about Ignatius, an early Christian leader. When Ignatius was an old man, the Roman Emperor Trajan, who ruled from 98 to 117, he made a visit to Antioch, and he was told that the bishop of the despised and hated Christians wanted to see him. So Trajan allowed Ignatius to see him, and Trajan spoke to Ignatius very bitterly.

Trajan said this, there you are, wicked devil, deceiver of men, Ignatius said, not an evil spirit, but I have Jesus Christ in my heart. Trajan said, Jesus Christ within you? Do you mean the one who was crucified by Pontius Pilate? And Ignatius said, yes, he was crucified for my sins. After this, the Emperor, without any further legal proceedings, condemned him to be taken to Rome and thrown to the wild animals before cheering Roman crowds.

And this is how it happened. I said one final example there. No, one more final example.

Pliny was this Roman government official that we've already looked at some of his writings. Pliny had questions on what to do with this persecution of the Christians. And so he wrote the Emperor Trajan.

Pliny had found that what he called the insanity of Christianity had infected many of all ages and ranks, and that the temples were almost empty. Pliny says that it was hard to sell food for the sacrificial animals because nobody was sacrificing to the gods anymore. Now, all of this surprised him.

And so he arrested Christians and he executed some who refused to burn a pinch of incense to Caesar. And this is what Pliny writes. He says, this is the course I have adopted.

I ask them if they are Christians. If they admit it, I repeat the question a second and third time, threatening capital punishment. If they persist, I sentence them to death for their inflexible obstinacy should certainly be punished.

Christians who are Roman citizens, I reserve to be sent to Rome. I discharge those who are willing to curse Christ, a thing which is said genuine Christians cannot be persuaded to do. So again, do you see what Pliny does? He brings, are you a Christian? Yes, I am.

Are you really a Christian? Yes, I am. All right, I'm going to kill you if you're a Christian. You're going to be under the death penalty.

Are you really a Christian? Yes, I am. Okay, great. Take him away.

He's going to die. And then he says to other ones, if he senses a softening, are you a Christian? They don't say anything, or they give an uncertain answer. He says, curse Jesus Christ.

And if they curse Jesus Christ, he says, well, I know they're not a Christian. In his response, Trajan told Pliny, don't seek out Christians for arrest. But when you find out they are, when an informant tells you when they're exposed, then deal with them, just as you said.

But Trajan said, don't bother seeking them out. We've got other things to worry about. This was the character of persecution within the early church.

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