

The Church Emerging Triumphantly From Persecution

by J.B. Galloway

The sermon explores the persecution of Christians in ancient Rome and the significance of early Christian martyrs and theologians in shaping the church's understanding of holiness and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture: Matthew 5:10, John 15:18, Acts 5:41, Romans 8:35, Philippians 1:29, 2 Timothy 3:12, Hebrews 10:32, 1 Peter 3:14, 1 Peter 4:12, Revelation 2:10

Topics: "Early Church", "Persecution"

Description

J.B. Galloway preaches about the early persecutions faced by Christians, starting with Jewish hatred and escalating to Roman enmity, leading to brutal persecutions with the sword, flame, and wild beasts. Despite the challenges, Christianity continued to grow. The sermon also highlights the significant contributions of the Church in North Africa, particularly the church in Alexandria, and the lives of influential figures like Gregory Thaumaturgus, Julius Africanus, Methodius, Victorianus, and Dionysius of Rome.

Transcript

From the time that our Saviour hung upon the cross it was dangerous to profess Christianity. Stephen and James were killed in the early chapters of Acts. The first enmity was from Jewish hatred, and even the attacks upon St. Paul were stopped by the Roman power. Gradually this protection gave place to an enmity from Rome greater than that from the Jews. After the great fire at Rome in A.D. 64, Nero was suspected of causing it, and he sought to recover favor again by accusing the Christians of setting the city on fire. From this time on the sword, the flame, and the wild beasts were used to quench the zeal and faith of the followers of Christ. It became a crime to profess Christianity apart from any accusations against them. The persecutions were carried on with horrible brutality. Rome was soon drunk with the blood of the saints. The persecution under Domitian (A.D. 81-96) was personal, and he sought to remove any who were dangerous or obnoxious to him. His own cousin, Flavius Clemens, was executed; and Domitilla, the wife of Clemens, was banished. And on the other hand, when the grandsons of Jude, the Lord's brother, were brought before him as those who might be claimants of the throne, he dismissed them contemptuously when he found that they were only simple peasants. In all there were ten great Roman persecutions. Usually they were temporary and local; but beginning with Decius, A.D. 250, they were systematic attempts to exterminate Christianity itself.

The charges against the Christians were, first, that they rejected the gods and their images; a more serious charge was that of a want of patriotism. They refused to worship the emperor's image, and this was felt to be an unpatriotic act. They were expecting the speedy return of Christ and shrank from public offices. Lastly they were charged with immorality; their secret meetings in which they talked of love, sacrifice, blood, and body gave rise to rumors that were not seriously believed.

In spite of all the persecutions, the more they were tortured the faster they grew. Tertullian says, "We are of yesterday, and yet we have filled everything that is yours, your cities, islands, fortresses, towns, assemblies, your very camps, tribes, regiments, palace, senate, forum; we have left to you nothing but the temples."

The Church at Alexandria

Christianity is greatly indebted to the church in North Africa. One of the early Christian schools was located at Alexandria. The moral grandeur and predominance of the See of Alexandria was conspicuous in early Christian thought. Here arose Pantaenus, Clement, Origen, Gregory Thaumaturgus, Dionysius, Julius Africanus, Peter of Alexandria, Alexander, Athanasius, and other characters.

Gregory Thaumaturgus

His surname means wonder-worker, and he was believed to be gifted with the power to work miracles. He was born about A.D. 205 at Neo-Caesarea. He was born of heathen parents who had moderate wealth, and he lived like other Gentile boys until the death of his father; then he was placed by his brother under an accomplished teacher of rhetoric. He was a student in the celebrated law school of Berytus, but became a Christian under the teaching of Origen. He was made a bishop about A.D. 244. He shrank from the episcopal office, and those who sought to ordain him had to use stratagem and ordain him in his absence. So well did he perform his duties that it was said of him that when he entered the city as a bishop there were only seventeen Christians there and when he died there were only seventeen pagans in the city. He died about

A.D. 270. His labors were divided between authorship, administration of church affairs, and evangelistic work. So great was his zeal and so exemplary his life that some of his contemporaries attributed to him marvelous powers.

Gregory Thaumaturgus On Holiness

Perfect Image of Perfection

From his A Declaration of Faith, a creed on the doctrine of the Trinity, we read:

And there is one Holy Spirit, having His subsistence from God, and being manifest by the Son, to wit to man: Image of the Son, perfect image of the Perfect; Life, the cause of the living; Holy Fount; sanctity, the Supplier, or Leader, of sanctification; in whom is manifested God the Father, who is above all, and in all, and God the Son who is through all.

Here he recognizes that the Holy Spirit is a Perfect Image of the Perfect, the Supplier of Sanctification.

A Personal Sanctifier

A Sectional Confession of Faith, edited in Latin by Gerardus Vossius, is attributed to him. This document shows that the Holy Spirit is a person and the One who sanctifies. In chapter four we read:

One therefore is God the Father, one the Word, one the Spirit, the life, the sanctification of all. And neither is there another God as Father, nor is there another Son as Word of God, nor is there another Spirit as quickening and sanctifying.

Fountain of Sanctification

From chapter five we read:

That man, consequently, belies the fountain of sanctification, the Holy Spirit, who denudes Him of the power of sanctifying, and he will thus be procluded from numbering Him with the Father and Son; he makes nought, too, of the holy ordinance of baptism, and will no more be able to acknowledge the holy and august Trinity. For either he must apprehend the perfect Trinity in its natural glory, or we shall be under the necessity of speaking no more of a Trinity We must also not number what is sanctified with the Sanctifier.

Julius Africanus

Another great Christian scholar from the school at Alexandria, he was born in Libya, and made his home at Emmaus near Jerusalem from A.D. 195 to 240. His greatest work is a chronology from creation to A.D. 221. His other works are: The Epistle of Aristides, Narrative of Events Happening in Persia at the Birth of Christ, and The Martyrdom of Symphorosa and Her Seven Sons. He is said to be a man of unspotted character, giving evident proof of honesty and integrity.

The Story of Symphorosa and Her Seven Sons

A digest of this story will reveal the the spirit of the martyrs of the early centuries of the Church.

Adrian had built a palace and wished to dedicate it with wicked ceremonies of sacrifices to idols. The widow Symphorosa and her seven sons were accused of praying to God. Adrian ordered her to be seized and brought with her sons and commanded them to offer sacrifices to the idols. She replied: "My husband Getulius and his brother, when they were tribunes in the service, suffered different punishments in the name of Christ, rather than consent to sacrifice to idols; like good athletes they were overcome by death. . . . They enjoy eternal life with the King eternal in the heavens."

Then Emperor Adrian said to her, "Either sacrifice along with thy sons or I will cause thee to be sacrificed to the gods." She replied, "Thy gods cannot take me in sacrifice." Again he demanded that she choose. And she replied: "Thou thinkest that my mind can be altered by some kind of terror; whereas I desire to rest with my husband."

The emperor ordered her to be led to the temple and first to be beaten, then suspended by the hair. When he could not persuade her to change, a large stone was tied to her neck and she was thrown into the river.

On another day the emperor ordered all her sons to be brought, and challenged them to sacrifice to the idols. When he saw that they yielded to none of his threats and terrors, he ordered that seven stakes be fixed around the temple of Hercules and commanded that they be stretched on their backs there. Crescens, the first, he ordered to be cut in the throat; Julian to be stabbed in the breast; Nemesius to be

struck through the heart; Primitivus to be wounded in the body; Justin to be struck in the back with a sword; Stracteus to be wounded on the side; and Eugenius to be cleft in twain from the head downwards. The next day he ordered that their bodies be carried together and cast into a deep pit. And after this, persecution ceased for a year and a half, and the bodies of the holy martyrs were honored.

Methodius, The Last Martyr Of The Persecutions

We do not know the date of his birth, but he suffered martyrdom about the year A.D. 312, at Chalcis, Greece. Some think it was a city of the same name in Syria. He was bishop of Olympus, but afterwards moved to Tyre in Phoenecia according to Jerome. He was a contemporary with Porphyry, the heathen philosopher whom he opposed. He is known chiefly for his antagonism to Origen; yet he was greatly influenced by Origen's method of allegorical interpretation of scripture. Epiphanius calls him "a very learned man and a strenuous asserter of the truth."

The only complete work of his that has come down to us is his Banquet of the Ten Virgins. This is a dialogue praising the virginal life. We have parts of his treatise On the Resurrection, and On Things Created, and On Free Will.

Methodius On Holiness

At the close of his dialogue, The Banquet of the Ten Virgins, Discourse II, chapter two, we have Thekla singing a hymn with the rest of the ten virgins, the Church, the spouse of God, pure and virgins. In the hymn are twenty-four stanzas, each followed by the same chorus.

Stanzas two, three, and four with the chorus read as follows:

Thekla. 2. Fleeing from the sorrowful happiness of mortals, and having despised the luxuriant delight of life and its love, I desire to be protected under thy life-giving arms, and to behold thy beauty for ever, O blessed one.

Chorus. I keep myself pure for thee, O bridegroom, and holding a lighted torch I go to meet thee.

Thekla. 3. Leaving marriage and the life of mortals and my golden home for thee, O King, I have come in undefiled robes, in order that I may enter with thee within thy happy bridal chamber.

Chorus. I keep myself pure for thee, O bridegroom, and holding a lighted torch I go to meet thee.

Thekla. 4. Having escaped, O Blessed One, from the innumerable enchanting wiles of the serpent, and, moreover, from the flames of fire, and from the mortal destroying assaults of wild beasts, I await thee from heaven.

Chorus. I keep myself pure for thee, O bridegroom, and holding a lighted torch I go to meet thee.

Victorinus

We do not know much about him. He was a native of Africa but went to Rome about A.D. 200 to teach rhetoric; for he was a Latin teacher of grammar, rhetoric, and philosophy. He became a Christian in late life and was a teacher of Jerome. His Commentaries on some of the books of the Bible and his Polemics against the Arians and Manichaeans are worthy of attention, but his chief fame is as a grammarian.

Victorinus On Holiness

From his Commentary on the Apocalypse, chapter 4:6, we read, "The burning torches of fire signify the gift of the Holy Spirit."

White Robes

From chapter 6:9 we read: "And for a solace to their body, there were given unto each of them white robes. They received, says he, white robes, that is, the gift of the Holy Spirit."

From these comments we see that he believed in the gift of the Holy Spirit and was trying to make a spiritual application of the symbolical facts found in the Book of Revelation.

Dionysius, Bishop Of Rome

He was Greek by birth, and a good representative of the spirit and orthodoxy of the Greek fathers. Even before he became the Bishop of Rome he must have been one of the most distinguished members of the church there, for his namesake at Alexandria addresses two letters to him. He was the Bishop of Rome from A.D. 259 to 269. At this time the churches were beginning to look to Rome as superior. Dionysius of Rome reviewed the teachings of Dionysius of Alexandria on the Trinity, and a letter was sent to the Egyptian churches. He did much to reorganize the Church after the severe persecution through which it had come.

A fragment of one of his epistles of treatise, Against the Sabellians, exists today.

Dionysius Of Rome On Holiness

From his Against the Sabellians we quote where he is arguing against the creation of the Son of God, these words:

But why should I discourse at greater length to you about these matters, since ye are men filled with the Spirit, and especially understand what absurd results follow from the Opinion which asserts that the Son was made?

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