

# Early Christianity Growth & Persecution

*AD 1–100*

Why on earth does history matter, anyway? History matters because it's the story of how God works among his people in his world!

In the first century AD, two specific historical events—a fire in Rome and the fall of Jerusalem—caused Christians to be seen as a separate and dangerous sect. Roman governors and emperors mocked Christians, threw them to the beasts, and burned them at the stake. Yet, no matter what anyone did, God remained present among his people, working at every turn to cause the gospel to spread through the testimony of the church.



# Outline

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## 1. History Matters Because:

- a. The gospel matters. The gospel is rooted in historical events.
- b. God's Word matters. The better we understand history, the better we can apply God's Word.
- c. God's work matters. History reminds us that God's work includes more than our own generation.

## 2. What Happened after Acts 28?

- a. Persecution after the fire in Rome, AD 64 (Nero)
- b. Division after the fall of Jerusalem, AD 70 (Vespasian, Titus); Christians fled Jerusalem.
- c. Deification of emperors in their lifetimes, AD 81–96 (Domitian); Christians refused to worship the emperor.
- d. Deepening persecution of Christians; Ignatius, Polycarp, and Blandina martyred.

## Roman Emperors

Emperor	Reign	Description	Death
Nero	AD 54–68	The first part of his reign was peaceful, but in the second part he ordered the deaths of his chief advisors, many wealthy nobles, and even his own mother. When a massive fire in Rome struck in AD 64, he avoided culpability by blaming the Christians for it and ruthlessly persecuting them. Paul and Peter are believed to have been martyred during Nero's persecution.	Committed suicide
Vespasian	AD 69–79	Ruler after Nero who was instrumental in quelling a Jewish uprising in Jerusalem and eventually ordering his son Titus to destroy Jerusalem and the temple.	Died of illness
Titus	AD 79–81	One of Vespasian's sons, who as a military leader before becoming emperor, destroyed the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70.	Died of illness
Domitian	AD 81–96	Vespasian's youngest son, he is known for being the first emperor to demand the title "lord and god" of himself. (Traditionally, emperors were deified after their death.) He severely persecuted Christians in the later part of his reign.	Assassinated



*Relief on the Arch of Titus showing Roman soldiers carrying off temple treasures after Titus' destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.*

# Know More About...

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The first question often asked about church history is, “What’s the point?” In other words, why does it matter? One historian responds to this question in this way: “Christianity is not an ethereal, eternal doctrine about God’s nature, but rather it is the presence of God in the world in the person of Jesus Christ. Christianity is incarnation, and, therefore, it exists in the concrete and the historical” (Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*).

## The First Christians

In the first few decades of the Christian faith, followers of Jesus struggled to help people around them understand what it really meant to be a Christian. The first Christians were Jewish, and were viewed by the Roman Empire as members of a sect of the Jewish religion. They continued to worship in the temple and practice Jewish feasts and customs. They saw faith in Jesus as the fulfillment of the hopes and dreams of Israel. Peter explained this in early sermons found in Acts 2:14–36 and Acts 3:17–25. Read these passages carefully, considering how early Christians explained their faith to the people around them in the first century.

Explaining the Christian faith is important today as well. How would you explain what it means to be a Christian to someone unfamiliar with Christianity?

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## Nero’s Persecution of Christians

Following the tide of popular opinion, Roman Emperor Nero deepened negative perceptions of Christians by recognizing them as a religion separate from Judaism, then by initiating the first official persecution of Christians.

On the night of his arrest, Jesus prophesied such persecution: “Remember the word that I said to you:



*Roman Emperor Nero, reigned AD 54–68*

‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me” (John 15:20–21).

How did the first followers of Jesus respond to persecution?

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**The Martyrdom of Polycarp**

Polycarp the bishop of Smyrna was hunted, captured, and killed because of his faithful witness to Jesus. After being captured by the Roman authorities, Polycarp instructed his disciples to feed the soldiers that had come to arrest him while he spent an hour in prayer. After such a show of hospitality and hearing his words of faithful prayer, it is said that “his guards repented that they had been instrumental in taking him” (*Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*). Polycarp rested in the righteousness of God, even when he was being treated unjustly. Some of Polycarp’s final words were, “Eighty-six years, I have served Christ, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my king, the one who has saved me?”

How can you provide a clear witness to the gospel, even when you are being treated unfairly or even persecuted?

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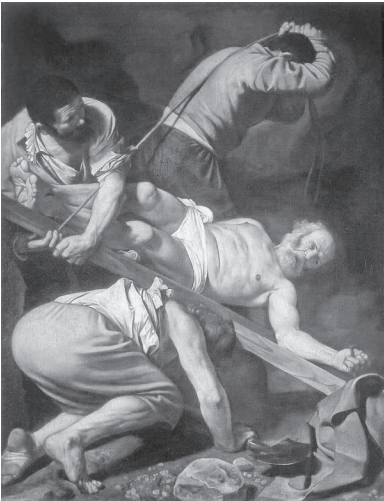
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# Words from the Ones Who Were There

## The Apostle Peter

Peter was martyred during the reign of Nero. Peter had this to say about the suffering and persecution faced by the followers of Christ during this first wave of persecution:

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you... Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name” (1 Peter 4:12–14, 16).



*According to tradition, the apostle Peter was crucified upside-down, saying he was not worthy to be crucified in the same manner as his Lord Jesus.*

Throughout the centuries that followed Peter’s writing of these words, many believers faithfully followed the words and example of Peter and suffered and died for their faith.

How does Peter instruct believers to respond to trials experienced because of their faith?

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**First-Century Pagan Writers**

The practices of the early church were often shrouded in mystery because some portions of their services were not open to those who were not Christians. The reason why unbelievers could not witness the Lord’s Supper (Communion) and baptism was because early Christians saw baptism and the Lord’s Supper as special ordinances. They did not want to risk any unbeliever partaking in these ordinances or trying to imitate these ordinances in a pagan context. There were frequent misunderstandings concerning their practices and beliefs. An anonymous pagan writer who obviously misconstrued the Lord’s Supper imagined what the Christians might be doing during this ordinance:

“An infant is covered with dough, to deceive the innocent. The infant is placed before the person who is to be stained with their rites. The young pupil slays the infant. Thirstily, they lick up the blood! Eagerly they tear apart its limbs. After much feasting, they extinguish [the lights]. Then, the connections of depraved lusts involve them in an uncertain fate” (Quoted by Minucius Felix, Octavius 9).

Even today there are beliefs and practices of Christians that are misunderstood by the world. What are some misunderstood teachings or practices?

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Read John 15:18–25. What does Jesus have to say about hatred and persecution from the world toward Christians? Summarize Jesus’ teaching in the space below.

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**Tertullian**

Believers who defended their faith against rumors and misunderstandings were known as apologists. One first-century apologist, Tertullian, made this statement concerning those who viciously and ignorantly attacked Christians:

“So we maintain that they are both ignorant while they hate us, and hate us unrighteously while they continue in ignorance.... The proof of their ignorance, at once condemning and excusing their injustice, is this, that those who once hated Christianity because they knew nothing about it, no sooner come to know it than they all lay down at once their enmity. From being its haters they become its disciples. By simply getting acquainted with it, they begin now to hate what they had formerly been, and to profess what they had formerly hated” (Tertullian, *Apology*).

Tertullian argues that ignorance and fear lead to hate, but knowledge and understanding lead to faith. How can Christians today best help people who despise the gospel to understand the gospel?

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## Family Time

*Get Together:* Think of people who are accused or persecuted unfairly in your family’s favorite films. List as many examples as you can.

*Read Together:* James 1:2–4 and 1 Peter 1:6–9. How does God use unfair persecutions and false accusations to bring glory to himself?

*Learn Together:* John Foxe wrote of Christianity that “the history of the church may almost be said to be a history of the trials and sufferings of its members, as experienced at the hands of wicked men” (*Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*). While the stories of the early Christians and martyrs are horrific, the words and actions of those believers are often full of grace, joy, strength, and forgiveness. Discuss together what you would hope to say as a testimony to the gospel if you were facing persecution for your faith.

*Pray Together:* “Heavenly Father, thank you for the testimony of your faithfulness to your children that we see in the lives of early Christians. Even in the face of persecution, you strengthen our faith through Jesus Christ and bring glory to yourself. Cause us by your Spirit to rest in your joy when we face trials, so that your kingdom multiplies on the earth. Amen.”



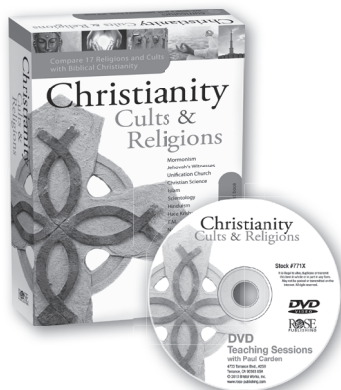
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Christians need to know what they believe. This excellent six-session DVD small group study teaches what the Bible says about God, Jesus, salvation, and more. It compares it to the teachings of other religions and cults. Covers Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and more. Sessions led by Paul Carden, Director of The Centers for Apologetics Research and former co-host of "Bible Answer Man" radio program.

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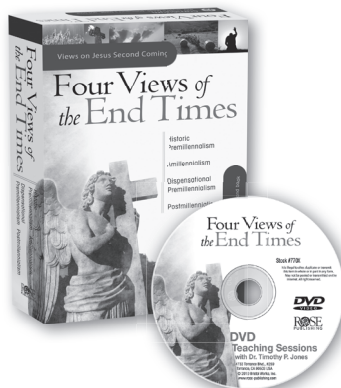


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## Feasts of the Bible

Connect the Hebrew roots of Christianity and the symbolism within each feast

Some Christians miss the importance of the biblical feasts, seeing them as merely "Jewish" holidays, but Scripture says these are the Feasts of the Lord God, established for all people for all time. Now you can connect the Hebrew roots of Christianity and the symbolism within each feast that points to Jesus Christ. The Feasts and Holidays of the Bible will also show you how to conduct your own Christian Passover Seder, where you will learn how all the Old Testament Passover activities point symbolically to Jesus.

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