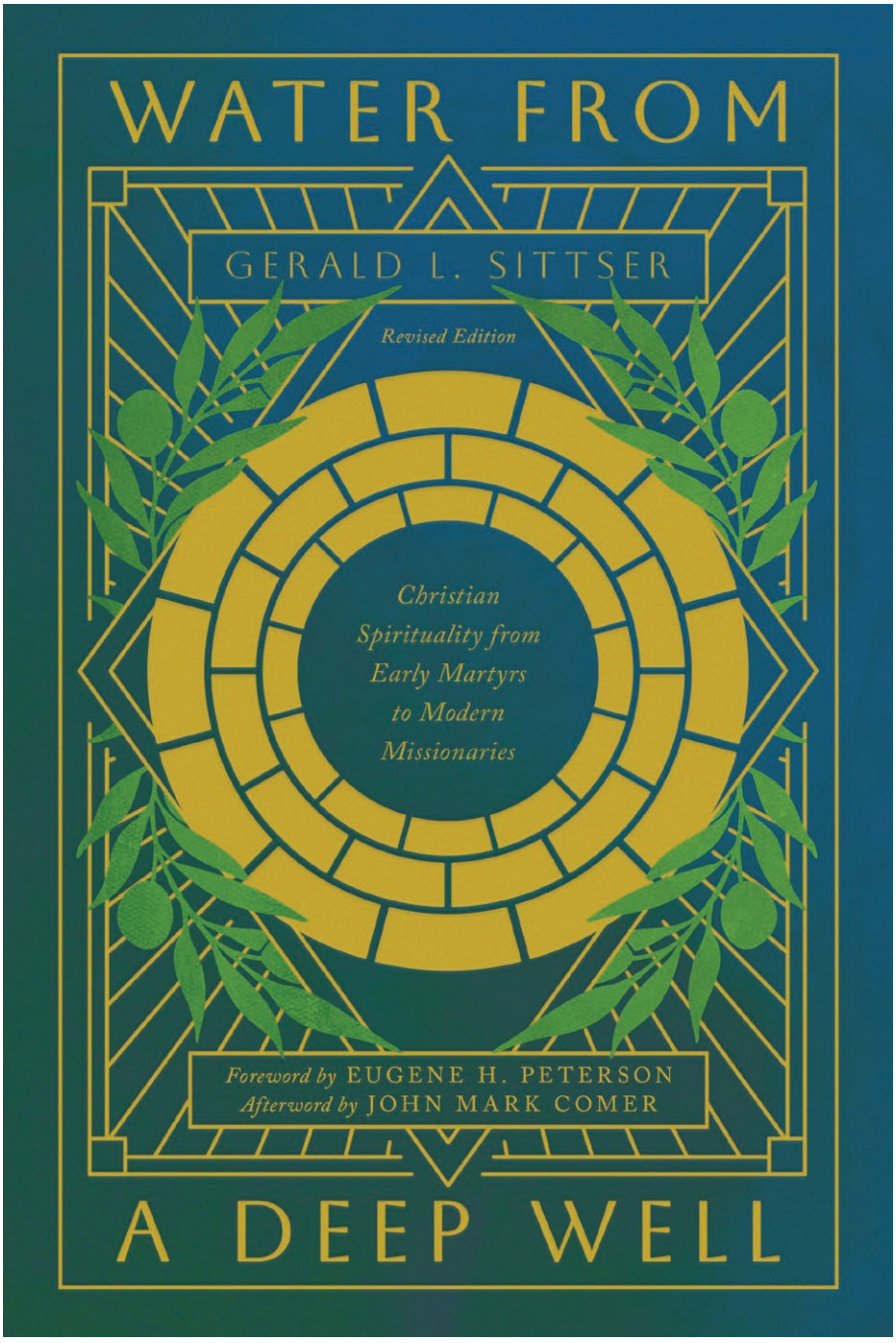

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1

WITNESS

The Spirituality of the Early Christian Martyrs

There is salvation in no one else, for there is
no other name under heaven given among
mortals by which we must be saved.

Acts 4:12

A visit to the Roman arena might seem like a strange place to begin this book. Yet it is where we must begin, for the ancient arena is the place where early Christians bore courageous witness to their faith in Jesus Christ and demonstrated their determination to remain faithful to him, no matter what the cost. Arenas in the ancient world functioned much like our modern arenas do, as places of entertainment. But the entertainment back then was cruel, brutal and bloody. Gladiators fought to the death, charioteers raced to victory or died trying, wild beasts mauled slaves, prisoners and enemies of the state. Victors won the crowd's admiration, and perhaps even achieved fame or freedom; losers were maimed for life, if they survived at all.

Christians met their death in the arena too. Their suffering satiated the bloodlust of the mob, which assembled to watch them being torn apart by animals or run through with a gladiator's sword. The martyrdom of Christians was a public event that provided entertainment for average citizens and warned the faithful that they could be next.[1] Ironically, this persecution achieved the opposite result for which it was intended. Rather than snuff out the Christian movement, persecution fanned it. The blood of the

Christians, as Tertullian said so long ago, became seed, inspiring believers and impressing—or enraging—pagans (that is, those who practiced the ancient religions or participated in foreign cults). Spectators wondered where these Christians found their courage and what kind of religion could inspire such sacrifice.[2]

We will never understand Christian spirituality—what it is and what makes it unique—unless we grasp the significance of martyrdom. The early Christians died because they confessed Jesus Christ as Lord. His lordship challenged all other ultimate claims on their lives—wealth, status, power and Rome itself. They believed that Jesus tolerates no rivals. When forced to choose, they chose to follow Jesus, no matter what the price. The early martyrs paid an extreme price, their very lives. But the value of their example is not in the martyrdom itself, however noble and courageous, but in their commitment to Christ's lordship. That we might not have to die for Christ is irrelevant. How we *live* for Christ is the real issue.

Persecution in the New Testament

Considering the story line of the New Testament, the martyrdom of Christians during the early Christian period should not come as a complete surprise to us. Persecution, suffering and death are at the heart of the Christian message. The cross, an instrument of gruesome execution, became by A.D. 500 the primary symbol of the faith because it reminded believers then, as it does to this day, of Jesus' ignominious sacrifice on the cross. The New Testament recounts story after story of persecution and suffering, not only in the Gospel accounts, which narrate the story of Jesus' life, but also in the book of Acts, which tells the story of the early church. Stephen was the first Christian to be martyred, and the apostle James faced a similar fate only a few years later. Paul encountered opposition wherever he traveled. His life was one long experience of suffering—beatings, imprisonment, shipwrecks, betrayals, sleeplessness and deprivations of every kind, all for the sake of the gospel.[3]

The New Testament addresses the issue of persecution so often that it begins to sound like static on a radio, always buzzing in the background. It is easy to grow accustomed to the noise and thus to ignore it, especially if we find it difficult to identify personally with the actual experience of persecution. Jesus taught his disciples, "Blessed are you when people revile you

and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account" (Mt 5:11-12). Before sending his disciples out on their first missionary journey, he warned them:

> See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves. . . . Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. . . . and you will be hated by all for my name. (Mt 10:16-18, 22)

Paul reminded the Christians of his day that they should regard persecution as a necessary aspect of discipleship. "Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim 3:12). Paul even suggested that his suffering somehow helped to complete the sufferings of Christ. "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Col 1:24). He claimed that his entire life embodied a kind of martyrdom. "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:19-20). He saw life in Christ as nothing but gain, even if it required death. "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain" (Phil 1:21). Peter exhorted the churches in Asia Minor to prepare for the inevitable. "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." He referred to the suffering of Jesus as an example worthy of imitation. "But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. . . . Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear his name" (1 Pet 4:12-13, 16).

We are often at a loss to know how to respond to these texts, largely because our faith has followed a drastically different course, one far more agreeable to our creature comforts. Most of us rarely think about persecution and martyrdom, and for an understandable reason. We have never had to face it, nor have the vast majority of Christians living in the West. Thus when we read contemporary accounts of persecutions in countries like Indonesia, Vietnam, India or Nepal, we are never quite sure what to think about them. Two Whitworth students recently attended a graduation ceremony of a seminary located in a non-Western country. Several of the

graduates performed a dramatization of the biblical story of the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. They were not being playful or irreverent but solemn and serious. At the end of the ceremony the students with one voice pledged to remain faithful to God even in the face of the threat of martyrdom, for they knew that at least a few of them would most likely suffer a fate similar to Stephen's. Our experience is far different. Considering the suffering of Christians around the world today, it is probably the exception too. Discipleship implies suffering, leads to persecution, tests mettle, demands steadfastness, requires endurance and even leads to death. It demands that we confess Jesus as Lord.

Not that we should glorify or seek martyrdom as a good in itself, as if the Christian faith validates or even encourages the use of violence. Much of the martyrdom we read about today, especially in the form of suicide bombing, is the complete opposite of the martyrdom that Christians suffered in the first few centuries. These modern "martyrs"—if we dare even use the word to describe such horrific acts—bear witness to a God of vengeance, hate and murder, not a God of love. The early Christian martyrs were victims of such hate, not perpetrators. They absorbed violence; they did not inflict it. They were called to martyrdom; they did not force it on innocent people, which is what suicide bombers do today. In early Christianity martyrdom was only one of many ways to bear witness to the truth of the gospel. Not every Christian was—and is—called to literal martyrdom; still, every Christian is called to surrender his or her life to God.

I have never known a person who suffered martyrdom. But I am acquainted with people who have personally known martyrs, and I have heard their stories. For some reason these stories linger in my memory like vivid dreams that refuse to fade over time. In one case two young pastors, traveling on motor scooters to do their pastoral work in a neighboring village, were accosted by a mob and beaten to death for no other reason than that they were Christians. Their story does not make me want to die a martyr's death; it is too gruesome and horrible for that. But it does make me want to live a martyr's life, for they had the courage to give their lives completely to Jesus Christ. Their faith in Christ puts a fire in me to honor Christ, "whether by life or by death," as the apostle Paul put it. It is that passion to live for Christ that makes the stories of martyrdoms, both ancient and modern, so compelling and convicting.

Stories of the Martyrs

The Christian movement got its start in the Roman world, a massive empire wrapping itself like a garment around the Mediterranean Sea. At first Christianity appeared to be little more than a sect within the ancient religion of Judaism. After all, both religions claimed the same holy city, quoted the same Scripture, spoke the same language and followed many of the same rituals. But Christianity soon reached out to Gentiles and spread throughout the Roman world, gradually separating from Judaism. By the year A.D. 100 this fledgling faith had planted a church in most of the major cities of the Roman Empire. Unlike Judaism, Christianity was from the very beginning a missionary faith, intent on winning converts. Its members were so exhilarated by the message of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus that they could not keep quiet. What the movement lacked in size, prestige and power it made up for in enthusiasm and courage. This was good news—gospel—that had to be shared!

Christianity was not the only new religion to arrive on the scene, not by far. The Roman Empire became a grudging host to dozens of new religions, most of which came from the East. Christianity was perhaps the newest, but certainly not the wealthiest or largest. It is hard to imagine, therefore, why people in positions of power even bothered with it, let alone thought it deserving of persecution. As late as the year A.D. 200, scholars say, the church did not comprise much more than 1 percent of the population. Rome was actually quite tolerant of these new religions. Yet Rome persecuted the Christians. There was something about this one religion that set it apart, making it an obvious target.[4]

The earliest nonbiblical stories of martyrdoms, which date from the second century, serve as powerful reminders of how Christians in the early centuries were willing to pay a high price to bear witness to a faith they considered priceless. Eyewitnesses recorded the events as they saw them, and then church officials (usually bishops) edited, expanded and sometimes embellished these stories before circulating them among the churches. Their purpose was to inspire Christians to be faithful, courageous and bold, to remind them of the truth of the gospel, and to challenge them to live for Christ.[5] Scholars are unsure of the exact number of Christians executed during this early period, from the close of the apostolic age to A.D. 313, when Emperor Constantine issued an edict that gave Christianity legal

protection. Estimates vary from perhaps three thousand to ten thousand. In any case, the number does not appear to be very high, if numbers alone concern us. Then again, the total number of Christians was not very high either. Besides, Rome tended to target church leaders for martyrdom, hoping that their deaths would intimidate their fellow Christians and break apart the movement.[6]

The accounts are both terrifying and holy. As we reflect on these stories in armchair security, we run the risk of treating them as little more than a curiosity or a spectacle. It is easy to gawk but not learn, listen but not sympathize and thus trivialize what is sacred. These stories are not fanciful, fictional accounts that have been recorded and passed down for our entertainment. The martyrs were real people who did in fact die horribly. They had families and friends, hopes and longings, and they wanted to live a long, peaceful and prosperous life, just like us. They chose to accept death rather than renounce their faith because they believed something was more valuable than the long and happy life for which they longed, for "whatever gain" they had they "counted as loss for the sake of Christ" (Phil 3:8 NASB).

It was their witness to Christ that led to martyrdom, which in turn provided opportunities for witness. But witness was always primary because the martyrs held the conviction that the gospel is indeed true. They wanted to tell the world about Christ, and not even the threat of death could stop them. Ironically, the word for "witness" in the Greek language—*martyria*—is the root word for "martyr" in the English language. Witness and martyrdom became, over time, virtually synonymous, for Christian witness often led to death, which in turn allowed for greater witness. The great historian of early Christianity, W. H. C. Frend, observes that "the distinction between witnessing and suffering on account of that witness was becoming a fine one, and it could only be a matter of time before actual persecution would equate them."[7]

Justin Martyr, a noteworthy second-century theologian and apologist, became a Christian after he watched the brutal execution of several Christians in Rome. He was moved by their courage and serenity, and he was intrigued by a faith that could engender such uncompromising conviction. After his conversion he attempted to explain to secular critics why Christians were willing to die.

> We do not give up our confession though we be executed by the sword, though we be crucified, thrown to wild beasts, put in chains, and exposed to fire and every other kind of torture. Everyone knows this. On the contrary, the more we are persecuted and martyred, the more do others in ever increasing numbers become believers and God-fearing people through the name of Jesus.[8]

Justin knew what he was talking about; he, too, died for his faith in the middle of the second century. Like other martyrs, he bore witness to Christ through his death.

Consider just one example from the pen of Justin; it is typical of what occurred in early Christianity. In A.D. 165, two men, Carpus and Papylus, were brought before the proconsul of Pergamum, charged with the crime of being Christian. When urged to sacrifice to the gods, Carpus replied, "I am a Christian. I honor Christ, the son of God, who has come in the latter times to save us and has delivered us from the madness of the devil. I will not sacrifice to these devils." Not even torture could persuade him to change his mind. He simply kept repeating, "I am a Christian." Then the proconsul turned to Papylus, who said, "I have served God since my youth. I have never sacrificed to idols. I am a Christian. You cannot learn anything else from me. There is nothing I can say which is greater or more wonderful than this." As the two were being burned alive, Carpus said, "Praise be to thee, O Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, that thou didst deem me, a sinner, also worthy of this part in thee!"[9]

Carpus and Papylus never committed an actual crime. Why then were Christians like them singled out for such brutal punishment? It seems to make little sense, for it was common knowledge that Christians espoused a religion of love and peace, served the common good of society and prayed for the emperor. Far from posing a threat to the empire, Christians demonstrated that they were good citizens of the empire. What was so threatening about Christianity?

Comforted by the joy of martyrdom. There are four reasons why Rome persecuted Christians. First, pagans viewed Christians with suspicion because they considered Christianity a strange and threatening foreign cult. Roman officials did not like anything that was non-Roman, especially if it was religious in nature. Christianity was both. Not surprisingly, then, critics

called Christianity a "superstition," and thus "depraved, excessive, foreign, and new," as the Roman governor Pliny stated in a letter to the Emperor Trajan, written in A.D. 112.[10]

"The Martyrs of Lyons" tells the story of the gruesome deaths of a number of Christians living in Lyons, a city in Gaul (modern-day France). The account is long and rich in detail, and it tells us much about why Roman officials and pagan mobs hated, tortured and killed Christians. In addition to the story itself, it also includes spiritual commentary, biblical quotations and exhortations along the way. In A.D. 177 an angry, resentful group of pagans began to abuse Christians living in Lyons.[11] "The Adversary swooped down with full force," the account reads, inciting the mob to beat, stone and imprison them. Eventually a prefect leveled charges against them. Christians, he said, participated in orgies, practiced cannibalism and indulged in incest. That Christians kept to themselves and practiced their rituals in secret only exacerbated the problem. These accusations might sound ridiculous to us now, knowing what we do about early Christian belief and practice, but back then they demonstrated the ignorance of pagans, who confused the Christian love feast with orgies, the Eucharist with cannibalism and the use of terms of endearment—*brother* and *sister*—with incest.

Prison guards began to beat and torture the Christian prisoners, hoping to force them to deny that they were Christian; but no one would compromise. To the contrary, some who had initially denied the faith to spare their lives later stepped forward and admitted they were Christians, which only infuriated the officials even more. Day after day the abuse continued, and deaths began to mount up. One man, Pothinus, bore the indignities with unusual courage and serenity, considering his age, for he was ninety years old. "He was brought to the tribunal by the soldiers, accompanied by some of the civil magistrates and the entire mob, who raised all kinds of shouts at him as though he were Christ himself. He gave a noble witness."

There were miracles too, but of a very peculiar kind. In one instance Christians discovered that they had been confined in prison with common criminals, which gave them an opportunity to tell these fellow prisoners about Christ. The guards and mob also noticed the clear difference between the two groups. "For [the Christians] were comforted by the joy of martyrdom, their hope in the promises, their love for Christ, and the Spirit of the Father; whereas the other [pagan prisoners] were greatly tormented by

their conscience, so that as they passed by they were easily distinguished by their looks from all the others." The "miracle" was their witness, not some spectacular deliverance, which leads John D. Ziziouslas to the conclusion that "those who possess the Spirit are not so much the Christians who prophesy and perform supernatural acts as the martyrs who give their lives for Christ."[12]

Finally, those few who had survived torture and deprivation in prison were led into the arena, where they were torn apart by beasts or killed by the gladiator's sword. But not even martyrdom could silence them. Their courage in the face of death left an impression long after they were gone. Pagans wondered about the source of the inspiration and confidence of the martyrs. How could they endure such pain? What kind of religious belief could produce such conviction? What seemed most striking was their motivation. The martyrs were "intensely eager to imitate and emulate Christ." Amazingly, they even refused to accept the title of martyr, for "it was their joy to yield the title of martyr to Christ alone." He alone was worthy of honor and glory. Their deaths served only as a witness to the power of the gospel to transform human life. "They made a defense of their faith to all, but accused no one; they loosed all, but bound none. Indeed, they prayed for those who had used them so cruelly."[13]

The wild accusations leveled against Christians seem outrageous, hard to take seriously, both then and now, for the courage and love they demonstrated in the face of suffering showed them to be people of upright character, not the kind who would commit such vile acts.[14] That Christianity was viewed as foreign, strange and immoral, therefore, probably diverted attention from more important concerns. Rome was alarmed about things that were far more threatening than the peculiar rituals that Christians practiced.

The day of their victory dawned. Christians practiced a way of life that passed implicit judgment on Roman society, which is the second reason why Christians were persecuted. Christians believed that life in this world is not the only or the most important life there is. They considered themselves citizens of heaven, and they tried to live consistently with that conviction.[15] Life in the world to come mattered more to them than life in this world. This orientation toward heaven separated Christians from Roman society and

kept them from participating in popular forms of Roman entertainment. Christian leaders in particular considered Roman entertainment—the "games" and the theater, for example—corrupt, and thus off limits for the community. Early Christian documents spoke harshly against these popular activities and warned Christians to avoid them.[16] Pagan writers also observed that Christians tended to remain somewhat separate from society. For example, Tacitus, a Roman historian, commented cynically that Christians were "haters of humankind" because they refused to participate in popular Roman culture, which left the impression that they were anti-Roman.[17]

The story of Perpetua's martyrdom, perhaps the most famous of all early martyr stories, illustrates how firmly Christians resisted the encroachment of Roman culture. In the early third century the emperor Septimius Severus established a policy that disallowed conversions to Christianity. Soon a severe persecution broke out in Carthage, North Africa. Vibia Perpetua (A.D. 181-203), young, married and mother to a newborn, was arrested with several others (including her brother and a servant) and thrown into prison. She was probably singled out because she came from a prominent family, which made her conversion more public and her faith more threatening.

Shortly after her imprisonment Perpetua learned in a vision that she was soon to die. In the vision she saw a ladder reaching to heaven. She had to climb it, which she did with ease, in spite of the dragon guarding it. When she arrived at the summit she saw an immense garden; in the center sat a tall, gray-haired man dressed like a shepherd, surrounded by thousands of people dressed in white robes. He said to her, "Welcome, my child." Then he invited her to approach and gave her a morsel of cheese, which tasted sweet to her. When she awoke she described the vision to her brother. "We realized that we would have to suffer, and that from now on we would no longer have any hope in this life."

Court hearings followed; family passions flared. Her father kept pleading with her. "Do not abandon me to be the reproach of men. Think of your brothers, think of your mother and your aunt, think of your child, who will not be able to live once you are gone. Give up your pride! You will destroy all of us!" Others urged her to sacrifice to the emperor and gods. "Perform the sacrifice—have pity on your baby!" But Perpetua would not yield. "I am a Christian," she kept repeating. Finally the governor condemned her to the beasts. Far from being enraged or terrified, Perpetua "returned to prison in

high spirits." Again, people began to take notice. One prison guard was so moved that he "began to show us great honor, realizing that we possessed some great power within us."

Perpetua's Martyrdom

The day of their victory dawned, and they marched from the prison to the amphitheatre joyfully as though they were going to heaven, with calm faces, trembling, if at all, with joy rather than fear. Perpetua went along with shining countenance and calm step, as the beloved of God, as a wife of Christ, putting down everyone's stare by her own intense gaze. . . . Perpetua began to sing a psalm: she was already treading on the head of the Egyptian. . . . Then when they came within sight of Hilarianus, they suggested by their motions and gestures: "You have condemned us, but God will condemn you" was what they were saying. At this the crowds became enraged and demanded that they be scourged before a line of gladiators. And they rejoiced at this that they had obtained a share in the Lord's sufferings. . . . The others took the sword in silence and without moving, especially Saturus, who being the first to climb the stairway was the first to die. For once again he was waiting for Perpetua. Perpetua, however, had yet to taste more pain. She screamed as she was struck on the bone; then she took the trembling hand of the young gladiator and guided it to her throat. It was as though so great a woman, feared as she was by the unclean spirit, could not be dispatched unless she herself were willing. *(The Acts of the Christian Martyrs)*

Perpetua cared little about what she would lose, however severe the loss seemed to be. Instead, she fixed her eyes on heaven, which she considered a greater reality than life in this world. Just before her death she had a vision that reminded her of the victory that was sure to be hers: a man came to her prison door and escorted her to the arena. She noticed that a huge crowd was watching her. Then she saw a fierce Egyptian who was about to attack her. Suddenly she became a great warrior ready to do combat with the enemy. She started to fight the Egyptian, whom she defeated by stepping on his head. The crowds shouted their approval, while a man clad in a purple

robe said to her, "Peace be with you, my daughter!" "Then I woke up realizing that I would be contending not with wild animals but with the devil himself. I knew, however, that I would win."

The account makes clear that Perpetua was not a hero but a witness to Christ.

> Ah, most valiant and blessed martyrs! Truly you are called and chosen for the glory of Christ Jesus our Lord! . . . For these new manifestations of virtue will bear witness to one and the same Spirit who still operates, and to God the Father almighty, and to his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom is splendor and immeasurable power for all the ages. Amen.[18]

What inspired Perpetua to be so courageous and joyful? Her story is especially troubling to me because I have a twenty-two-year-old daughter. I know that I would have been tempted to respond as Perpetua's father did and beg my daughter Catherine to forsake faith in Christ, for surely in such dire circumstances life would seem preferable to death. How could I bear losing my daughter, however noble and right the cause? Yet Perpetua refused to yield, even to the pleas of her father, the cries of her baby and the scorn of the crowds. For the sake of Christ she happily submitted to death. She made a decision, not between life and death but between Christ and Rome. Her courage and determination only reminded them that perhaps there was more to these Christians than meets the eye. Could it be that what they believed was actually true? If so, then the state itself would have to face competition that it had never had to face before.

Are you a Christian? In fact, Christian allegiance to the lordship of Christ threatened Rome's hegemony, which provides a third reason why Rome persecuted Christians. Surprisingly, Rome was quite tolerant of religion, and Romans considered themselves to be a very religious and pious people. One of their greatest philosophers, Cicero, once commented that, though in many respects Rome was much like other civilizations, "yet in the sense of religion, that is in the worship of the gods, we are far superior."[19] They dutifully observed cultic activities, maintained public monuments and temples, and participated in religious ceremonies, all for the purpose of establishing good order and ensuring the prosperity of Rome. A wide variety of religious beliefs was considered acceptable, provided that they served the interests of the state, contributed to the well-being of the empire and honored the

ultimate authority of the emperor. In short, Rome tolerated religious diversity as long as the real religion of Rome was honored, which was Rome itself.[20] The rise of emperor worship, which occurred late in the first century, only reinforced this idea. The emperor became a symbol of the religion of Rome, the religion that *was* Rome.

Justin Martyr's *Second Apology* tells the story of an unnamed woman who had been converted out of a pagan background. She wanted her husband to embrace the new faith with her and so gently tried to persuade him to become a Christian. But he persisted in unbelief and immoral behavior. So she filed for a divorce. Enraged, her husband brought charges against her in a Roman court, claiming that she had left him without his consent. He also mentioned that she was a Christian, which was probably the more serious charge. He then singled out her pastor too, holding Ptolemaeus responsible for her conversion. So Ptolemaeus was also arrested. After being tortured for some time, Ptolemaeus was brought before a Roman judge, Urbicus, who asked him just one question, "Are you a Christian?" When he confessed that he was, Urbicus ordered his execution. Then another man, Lucius, also present in the courtroom, stood up and protested the judge's arbitrary and unfair judgment. "What is the charge? He has not been convicted of adultery, fornication, murder . . . or of any crime whatsoever; yet you have punished this man because he confesses the name of Christian?" Urbicus replied, "I think you, too, are one of them." Lucius responded, "Indeed, I am." So he ordered Lucius's execution too. The account ends with one final—and very telling—observation. "Lucius then acknowledged his gratitude," it reads, "realizing that he would now be set free of such evil masters, and would depart for the Father and the king of heaven."[21]

What was it about the name *Christian* that caused such offense? Early Christian writers observed the irony and absurdity of the accusation. Philosopher and apologist Athenagoras, writing a defense of Christianity to the emperor Marcus Aurelius, asked incredulously, "Why is a mere name odious to you? Names are not deserving of hatred; it is the unjust act that calls for penalty and punishment."[22] Tertullian, another late-second-century apologist, protested the legal travesty of the charge. "No name of a crime stands against us, but only the crime of a name. What crime, what offence, what fault is there in a name? . . . All that is cared about is having what the public hatred demands—the confession of a name, not examination of the charge."[23]

It is true that Christians did not commit crimes against the state, like murder. But that did not absolve Christians of guilt, for simply being Christian posed a peculiar kind of threat to Rome. Christians were martyred because they would not bow the knee to Rome, sacrifice to the emperor as a god and treat the empire as if it had ultimate authority. Forced to choose between Jesus and Caesar, Christians for the most part chose Jesus, confessing him as Lord. In nearly every one of the early accounts of martyrdom, this conflict between Christianity and the state surfaces as a major issue. Christian belief had public consequences; Christian practice challenged Rome's quest for dominance. Christianity made claims that threatened the empire.[24] Such conviction was bound to upset the state.

The destroyer of our gods! There is one final reason why Rome persecuted Christianity, and it is the most important. The early Christians viewed their faith as ultimately and exclusively true, which threatened the popular pluralism of the day. "The Romans tolerated a remarkable degree of religious liberty," notes historian Stephen Benko, "and they therefore found the Christians' exclusive claims to truth disconcerting." Pagans assumed that religious truth was by nature ambiguous and obscure, and thus best left open to debate. Christians thought otherwise, for they were certain that God chose to come to earth as Jesus Christ to bring salvation to the world because all other attempts to reach God had failed. "The Christian, however, was convinced that he was in possession of the truth, because Jesus Christ embodied the ultimate revelation about God," concludes Benko.[25]

In the end, therefore, the Christian belief in Jesus as Savior and Lord caused the greatest offense. Critics indicated that they were willing to accept Jesus as *a* way to God, just as they accepted most other ways to God, but only under the condition that Christians would abandon the belief that Jesus was *the* way to God. The Christian confession that Jesus is Lord simply flew in the face of Rome's pluralism and tolerance. It also infuriated the intellectual elite, who understood Christianity well enough to recognize that it would not fit comfortably, if at all, into Roman culture.

The martyrdom of the venerable bishop Polycarp, who served the church in Smyrna (located in modern-day Turkey) for many decades, illustrates how offensive Christian belief proved to be. As the story goes, a mob, which had already put several Christians to death, started to call for Polycarp's

death too, for he was a well-known leader in the region. His friends persuaded him to withdraw from the city, and he complied, finding a place to hide in the country. Writing an account of the story in the fourth century, Eusebius notes, "There he remained with a few companions, devoting himself night and day to constant prayer to the Lord, pleading and imploring as he had always done that God would grant peace to the churches throughout the world." Officials eventually hunted him down, transported him to the city, and ushered him into the arena, where a huge crowd began to call for his death. As the account reads, a voice from heaven cried, "Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man."

The proconsul pressured him to deny Christ and swear to Caesar, but Polycarp refused. "For eighty-six years I have been His servant, and He has never done me wrong: how can I blaspheme my King who saved me."

> "Swear by Caesar's fortune," the proconsul shouted.
>
> "If you imagine that I will swear by Caesar's fortune, as you put it, pretending not to know who I am, I will tell you plainly, I am a Christian."
>
> The proconsul threatened. "I have wild beasts. I shall throw you to them, if you don't change your attitude."
>
> "Call them."
>
> "If you make light of the beasts, I'll have you destroyed by fire."
>
> "The fire you threaten burns for a time and is soon extinguished: there is a fire you know nothing about—the fire of the judgment to come and of eternal punishment, the fire reserved for the ungodly. But why do you hesitate? Do what you want."
>
> "Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian," the proconsul announced to the crowd. "This fellow is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches numbers of people not to sacrifice or even worship."

Enraged, the crowd called for his death. They bound Polycarp to a stake, stacked wood around him and set it on fire. Meanwhile, Polycarp prayed, "I bless Thee for counting me worthy of this day and hour, that in the number of the martyrs I may partake of Christ's cup, to the resurrection of both soul and body." After his death a public official requested that Polycarp's body be withheld from the church, lest Christians make him an object of veneration, "not realizing," as the account reads, "that we can never forsake Christ, who suffered for the salvation of those who are being saved in the entire world,

or worship anyone else." The story ends by offering praise to Christ, the one for whom Polycarp was willing to die. "For to Him, as the Son of God, we offer adoration; but to the martyrs, as disciples and imitators of the Lord, we give the love that they deserved for their unsurpassable devotion to their own King and Teacher."[26]

Jesus, the Only Savior?

The accusations against Polycarp—"the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches numbers of people not to sacrifice or even worship"—are noteworthy. Polycarp's influence, it would seem, undermined the heart and soul of Rome's religious philosophy. Not only did he refuse to yield to the power of the state, dangerous enough in itself, but he also challenged Rome's religious pluralism. He would not acknowledge the legitimacy of Rome's gods and participate in Rome's religious ceremonies. Polycarp believed that there was only one way to know God, and that was through Jesus Christ. By preaching that faith in all of Asia, he was joining battle with Rome's entire worldview. Polycarp's belief in Jesus as Lord was the real problem.

The ancient record at this point sounds curiously modern. Modern pluralism resembles Rome's; modern rejection of Jesus' lordship repeats Rome's rejection of Jesus. In the academic world, for example, Christian exclusivity—the idea that Jesus is the only way to God—offends the pluralistic assumptions of the day, just as it did two thousand years ago. Now, as then, the idea that there is one religious truth runs contrary to the spirit of the age. It is assumed that religious belief could be and often is valuable for any number of reasons, but there is no way of knowing which religion is actually true. Christians challenge this cultural assumption when they claim that Jesus is Savior and Lord.[27] Christians have been causing such offense for two thousand years.

The incarnation—God becoming human in Jesus Christ—violated the religious sensibilities of the day, for it was widely believed that the transcendent God of the universe could not become a human being. Celsus, a second-century philosopher and opponent of Christianity, recoiled at the very idea. He argued that God could not undergo such change, God could not become a man. "It is the nature only of a mortal being to undergo change and remolding, whereas it is the nature of an immortal being to remain the

same without alteration. Accordingly, God was not capable of undergoing this change."[28] How could the eternal God of the universe be a mortal man too? If Christians "worshiped no other God but one, perhaps they would have had a valid argument against others. But in fact they worship to an extravagant degree this man who appeared recently, and yet think it does not offend God if they also worship his servant."[29]

But Christians did not stop there. Christians erred even more grievously by worshiping a human being whose entire life proved to be unworthy of such attribution. Far from being an impressive, imposing figure, which the ancients would have expected of a God who had chosen for whatever reason to come to earth, this man whom Christians called Lord was an abject failure. Born under suspicious circumstances, raised in total obscurity, deprived of education and proper training, executed for claiming that he was divine—this was hardly a person whose claims to deity could be taken seriously. Celsus could hardly hold back the laughter. He ridiculed Christians for glorying in something as crude and ignominious as a cross.[30] That Christians called Jesus God was unthinkable, an affront to sane religion and sound reason.

Porphyry, a well-known third-century pagan philosopher, suggested that Jesus did not *have* to be a problem. He found Jesus an attractive figure, worthy of admiration, but only if he were viewed as one among many gods. Porphyry was even willing to welcome Jesus into the pantheon of Rome. "What I am about to say seems surprising to some, namely, that the gods have proclaimed Christ to be most pious and immortal, and that they remember him in a laudatory way."[31] But Porphyry could not comprehend—and would not accept—the Christian claim that Jesus was God incarnate. "We cannot attain to so great a mystery by one way."[32] Desperate to undermine Christian belief, he tried to provide an alternative explanation, one that sounds curiously modern. The disciples, he suggested, had fabricated the idea that Jesus was God incarnate, claiming "more for their master than he really was, so much more indeed that they even called him the Son of God, and the Word of God, by whom all things were made, and affirmed that he and God are one."[33]

In one sense, pagan critics were right. Even the disciples themselves were not predisposed to believe in the unique person Jesus eventually proved himself to be. They inherited from their Judaic background an expectation

that the Messiah would emerge as a great leader to drive out the hated Romans, reestablish Israel's independence and usher in a golden age. Jesus' death on the cross put an end to their hopes. If Jesus had remained in the grave, then the movement would have quickly faded, as earlier messianic movements had. But the disciples claimed that Jesus was raised from the dead, not as a resuscitated corpse that would surely die again but as a resurrected being who would live and reign forever. The resurrection convinced them that Jesus was the Son of God. They called him Lord and worshiped him as God, and rightly so.[34] Their belief in the bodily resurrection of Christ, which emerged out of the many postresurrection encounters they had with Jesus, had a profound impact on how they viewed life in this world. Far from disparaging it, they saw life in this world as a prelude and preparation for life in the next world, which they viewed as a completion and perfection of this world. It made them value life as it is, but it also gave them courage to sacrifice their lives in anticipation of another, greater one.[35]

This belief in God's "condescension," as Athanasius, the courageous fourth-century bishop of Alexandria, described it, implied that other religions, which emphasized the necessity of an "ascent" to God or the gods, were wrong. If humans could get to God through law, ritual or special knowledge, as every ancient religion prescribed, then God would not have had to come to earth. But the disciples proclaimed that God did come to earth, thus exposing these other religions as vain and false. Christianity had succeeded where other religions had failed because God had accomplished what fallen people, left to their own schemes and efforts, could not do—win their salvation. This was good news to the early Christians, and they could not keep it to themselves. Polycarp was called "the teacher of Asia" and "the father of Christians" because he preached this message to the masses, as did so many others. This eagerness to spread the news won converts, but it also attracted enemies. "The Christians were seen as religious fanatics," Robert Wilken concludes, "self-righteous outsiders, arrogant innovators, who thought that only their beliefs were true."[36] As witnesses, they would not be intimidated into silence or forced to compromise their convictions.

Their witness led to martyrdom, as Polycarp's story shows. They thought it a small price to pay. What was persecution to them, considering the privilege they had of telling others about the one who promised eternal life? For

that matter, what was death to them, considering that they belonged to the one who conquered death? "Twelve men, illiterate and unskilled in speaking," Justin Martyr observed, "went out from Jerusalem into the world. Through the power of God they revealed to the whole of humankind that they were sent by Christ to proclaim the word of God to everyone. . . . We meet death cheerfully for confessing to Christ."[37] Ironically, other religions in ancient Rome—the "mystery religions," as they were called, the emperor cults and various Gnostic sects—did not produce many martyrs (Judaism being the one exception). It was Christians who died for their faith. That fact alone caught people's attention.

We can only speculate about the pressure they faced to compromise faith under threat of torture and death. We know that many did capitulate to the Romans, hand Scripture over to the officials, betray fellow Christians, sacrifice to the gods and swear allegiance to the emperor as a divine being. Roman officials tried to make it easy, assuring them that they could continue to believe in Jesus, just a lesser Jesus, not the martyrs' Jesus but Porphyry's Jesus, one god among many gods. But at least some refused, for they believed that Jesus truly was the Son of God and the only way to God. As Pliny complained to the Emperor Trajan, Christians were obstinate, which in his mind was reason enough to punish them. But that obstinacy was rooted in a conviction; Christians believed that Jesus was Savior and Lord.[38]

Martyrdom as a Way of Life

Christians still die for their faith, now more than ever.[39] Martyrdom is as terrifying today as it was then, if not more so. In some parts of the world Christians disappear from their homes during the night; they are warned that if they persist in faith their relatives will die; they are beaten and dismembered by hostile mobs. Missiologist David B. Barrett estimates that 160,000 Christians were martyred in the year 2000 alone.[40] They died in that year for the same basic reason they died in the year 155, when Polycarp was martyred, or in 202, when Perpetua was martyred. The early martyrs believed that if Jesus is Lord and the only Savior, then he accepts no rivals—no person or religion or ideology or empire. They affirmed that the Christian faith requires nothing less than a firm and joyful commitment to this conviction. Jesus came as God in human flesh to show the way to God and to be the way to God for us. This is the only Jesus there is. A lesser Jesus is not

the real Jesus at all, at least not according to the testimony of the martyrs, from Stephen to the present.

It turns out, then, that the Roman arena is not such a strange place to begin this book after all. Martyrdom is foundational to our understanding of Christian spirituality, for it highlights what was—and still is—distinctive and essential in Christianity. Not that all true Christians have to be or will be martyrs. Martyrdom is not a choice but a calling and a gift that God gives to some but not to all. In fact, it could be that martyrdom involves something more fundamental than willingness or longing to die. It could be that martyrdom as *literal* death misses the main point. Most of us will not have to die for our faith, though it might come to that, even for those living in the West. But we will all face moments when we will have to choose between Christ and something else that vies for our ultimate allegiance. The early martyrs—Perpetua, Polycarp and many others—did not in fact choose martyrdom, at least not directly. If anything, the early Christian community criticized those who rushed into martyrdom as if it were some kind of badge of honor. They chose to be faithful to Christ; martyrdom just happened to be the result.

G. K. Chesterton said of Francis of Assisi that he turned martyrdom into a way of life. For the sake of Christ he learned to die daily to the gods—ego, pleasure, power, success—that threatened to dominate his life, which was why he lived with such vitality and passion. It was his commitment to *live* for Christ that made him a martyr, though he never suffered literal martyrdom, for commitment to Christ required him to die to self. Death to self gives life. It is life in Christ that might, under some circumstances, actually lead to literal death.

The martyrs did not die to prove something to God or earn something from God but to witness to the life they had received as a gift from God. This gift was so precious and priceless to them that they could not keep it a secret. In the end, martyrdom was—and still is—a witness to grace, which is why, in my mind, it properly serves as the starting point of a book on spirituality. Christian spirituality has little to do with what we do for God. We will never be able to love, pray, think, feel, work, meditate, fast or even die our way into a deeper spiritual life if we rely on human effort or clever schemes alone. There is nothing we can do—nothing we have to do—to find a way to God, because in Jesus Christ God has already made his way to us. The martyrs'

fate might not be ours. But their faith and conviction must be. Salvation is a pure gift. God loves us so much that he came to us in Jesus Christ. That is the good news of the gospel; and it is the foundation of Christian spirituality. At Christmas we celebrate who God is as he came to us in human flesh; at Easter we celebrate what God did to win our salvation. In both cases we bear witness to the glorious work God has done, to the glorious God that he is. We declare that we are recipients of grace, beloved of God, prodigals welcomed home. That is good news worth living for, and dying for. Thus we confess, as the early martyrs confessed: "Jesus is Lord!"

PRACTICES

- Read Philippians 3:2-16.
- Meditate on your own death. Ponder the legacy you would like to leave.
- Now write your own obituary in light of how you would like to honor Jesus as Lord of your life. What would you want said about the way you lived your life for Christ?
- What does this say about the choices you make today?

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