2. Witness: The Spirituality of the Early Martyrs

“To live is Christ, to die is gain.”
Phil. 1:21

“The blood of Christians is seed.”
Tertullian, c. 155 - c. 220

You and I will never fully understand Christian spirituality unless we grasp what martyrdom means.


Jesus taught it:
- Matthew 5:11-12
- Matthew 10:16-18,22

Paul taught it:
- Philippians 1:21
- 2 Timothy 3:12
- Colossians 1:24
- Galatians 2:19-20

Peter taught it:
- 1 Peter 4:12-13,16

John experienced it:
- Revelation

And so, as we dive into our exploration of the church’s WITNESS, we need to remember that persecution, suffering, and death were integral to the Christian faith right from the start.

Gerald Sittser summarizes the New Testament teaching well when he writes, “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.”

Perhaps what we can learn from the early martyrs is not so much how to die, but how to live for Christ.

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1 Notes for this course are both drawn from and based on Gerald Sittser, Water from a Deep Well (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007).
A Brief History of Martyrdom in the Early Church

Persecution to 100AD

First official persecution that came from Rome was from the Emperor Nero (56-68AD), renown for being a few laurel leaves short of a wreath!

Historian Tacitus records that the persecution was a result of an accepted rumour that Nero himself had started the fire. In need of a scapegoat, Nero pointed to the Christians as the culprits, taking advantage their secrecy and enigmatic practices.

Nero ends up blaming Christians for a fire in Rome in 64AD and persecuted the Church. Now, it has to be said that although sanctioned by the state, even these were local and sporadic.

This persecution was mostly confined to Rome, but it is believed that Peter and Paul died as part of this persecution.

Set a precedent for other periods of time. As other natural disasters occurred, the population was often quick to blame the Christians for their misfortune. So much so that Tertullian, the great apologist of the 2nd-Century, once wrote:

“If the Tiber reaches the walls, if the Nile does not rise to the fields, if the sky does not move or the earth does, if there is famine, if there is plague, they cry at once, "The Christians to the lions!" (See Apology 40. 2)

Domitian (51-96 AD)

Now, this fella was a great emperor in many ways, but was obsessed with, well, Himself. He wanted to be addressed as “my Lord and my god” (which actually annoyed many within the Roman aristocracy). During his reign, Domitian carried out irrational reprisals against his enemies, including his own aristocracy that had become Christian.
Emperor Trajan (98-117 AD)

Pliny the Younger to Emperor Trajan (98-117 AD)

That they were wont, on a stated day, to meet together before it was light, and to sing a hymn to Christ, as to a god, alternately; and to oblige themselves by a sacrament [or oath], not to do anything that was ill: but that they would commit no theft, or pilfering, or adultery; that they would not break their promises, or deny what was deposed with them, when it was required back again; after which it was their custom to depart, and to meet again at a common but innocent meal, which they had left off upon that edict which I published at your command, and wherein I had forbidden any such conventicles. These examinations made me think it necessary to inquire by torments what the truth was; which I did of two servant maids, who were called Deaconesses: but still I discovered no more than that they were addicted to a bad and to an extravagant superstition. Hereupon I have put off any further examinations, and have recourse to you, for the affair seems to be well worth consultation, especially on account of the number of those that are in danger; for there are many of every age, of every rank, and of both sexes, who are now and hereafter likely to be called to account, and to be in danger; for this superstition is spread like a contagion, not only into cities and towns, but into country villages also, which yet there is reason to hope may be stopped and corrected. To be sure, the temples, which were almost forsaken, begin already to be frequented; and the holy solemnities, which were long intermitted, begin to be revived. The sacrifices begin to sell well everywhere, of which very few purchasers had of late appeared; whereby it is easy to suppose how great a multitude of men may be amended, if place for repentance be admitted.

It was during this persecution that Ignatius of Antioch (d. 108 AD) was martyred. [show image]

As he was escorted to Rome to be killed by beasts, Ignatius wrote a series of letters AND we have those letters. So interesting. Reflects his thoughts as he prepares to die. Begs them to do nothing to interfere with his execution.

Marcus Aurelius 161-180 AD

Further wave of persecution took place under the Philosopher Emperor, Marcus Aurelius (who really didn’t like Christians very much). Justin the Martyr and six of his close friends were beheaded in Rome. Bishop Polycarp, a disciple of John, was martyred here. This is significant in that it marked the end of the apostolic connection.

Justin Martyr tells the story of two men, Carpus and Papyrus where were brought before the proconsul (governor) of Pergamum. The charge? They were Christian. When told to
worship the Roman gods, Carpus replied, “I am a Christian. I honour 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.”

Though tortured, he would not change his mind. Instead, he kept repeating, “I am a Christian.” Then the governor turned to Papylius 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.”

They were both burnt alive.

**Septimus Severus 193-211 AD**

202 AD - the Emperor forbade conversion to Christianity under the penalty of severe punishment. Under this law, Christians were rounded up in groups by “police” and martyred.

**250 AD onwards - Universal Persecution**

By the time you get to the mid-200s, Christianity was firmly on the radar of the Roman Empire. More and more, the Church was seen as a threat to the state because of their rapid increase in number and their seeming attempt at secrecy and to set up a state within a state.

In 250 the emperor Decius, offered certificates called *libellus* to those who offered sacrifice on Roman altars to Roman gods and the genius of the emperor.

The edict would make it so that there could be no more hiding. You will “choose today whom you will serve”. For every Christian in the empire (Roman official, soldier, slave, man, woman, child) it would come down to a day where they would proclaim allegiance to Caesar or to Christ!

**Diocletian (284-305 AD)**

This last persecution was the worst. In many ways, this was a systematic attempt to destroy Christianity, but it was carried out too
late. This was a totalitarian regime in 285 AD. Diocletian sought to reorganize the entire Roman Empire. Formed a tetrarchy - 4 Rulers. Empire divided into what he called “dioceses”. Ruled like a police state and this Emperor really expected people to treat him as divine. Carried a sceptre, wore a diadem and citizens were commanded to worship him. If anyone refused, they were hunted down, arrested, and often killed.

During this time, Churches were razed to the ground, and Scriptures destroyed by fire. If people persisted in Christianity, they would be in deep trouble.

And yet, this is the period when the church grew at an exponential rate. In the east, by the time Valerian dies, 50% of the population are Christian!!!!

Four Reasons why the early Christians were persecuted:

1. **Christians were peculiar people:** pagans considered Christianity a strange and threatening foreign cult

   *“The Martyrs of Lyons”*

   “The Martyrs of Lyons” tells the story of horrific persecution of Christians living in Lyons, Gaul. In 177 A.D. an angry mob descended upon the Christians to beat, stone and imprison them. Their charge? Christians were said to have participated in orgies, practiced cannibalism and indulged in incest. No doubt, these charges were based on pagan misunderstandings regarding Christian love-feasts, the Eucharist and the practice of calling one another “brother and sister.”

2. **Christians lived differently from others:** Pagans resented how the Christian way of life implicitly judged Roman society

   *Discuss: Have you ever met someone whose life brought conviction to your own? Have you ever lived in a way that brought conviction to another person? What did that look like?*

   There was inherent in Christian belief and conduct something that made people uncomfortable. Christians believed that life in this world was not the only nor even the most important life there is. They considered themselves as citizens of heaven and tried to live their lives in a way that reflected this conviction.
This is expressed in the powerful account of the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas that occurred in 203 AD.

*Perpetua and Felicitas*

This is a difficult story for modern, western ears to hear (especially for parents!). However, the reality is that Perpetua cared little about what she would lose in light of what she would gain. In the end, she made a decision not between life and death, but between Christ and Rome. Her courage affected those around her and demonstrated that there was more to the Christian faith than simply met the eye. There was deep conviction - could it be that what the Christians believed was actually true?

3. **Christians lived counter-culturally:** Christianity threatened the all-pervasiveness of Roman culture

Again, the Roman Empire was surprisingly tolerant towards religion and prided itself for this. A wide variety of religious beliefs were permitted so long as they served the interests of the Empire, contributed to its well-being and ultimately recognized the supremacy of Emperor. The Emperor himself symbolized the Empire and to pay ultimate allegiance to him was to offer ultimate fealty to Rome.

Why were Christians so reviled by the Romans? Though they did not commit violent crimes against the state, Christians were martyred because they simply would not bow their knee to Rome. Christian belief (Jesus is Lord over everything) and practice (worship Jesus in all things) challenged Rome’s claim to have dominance over all spheres of life. Whenever hegemony is challenged, there will always be push-back.

*Discuss: what are the areas of the modern world that Christian witness could threaten today?*

4. **Christians lived out what they believed:** Christians viewed their faith as ultimately and exclusively true

The Romans found Christian claims to exclusive truth unsettling. Polytheists, enjoying a good debate, were often willing to be nebulous and obscure when it came to ultimate truth claims. Early Christians, on the other hand, were convinced that they held the repository of truth because Jesus Christ embodied the full revelation of God.

Such exclusivist truth claims were bound to cause offence (and still do). Most people would accept that Jesus offered a way to God, but only under the condition that there could be many ways to God. When Christians argued that Jesus was the way to God and that no other way existed, the Roman intellectual elites were outraged.
Martyrdom as a way of life

Ok, let’s bring all this home. I find that the accusations against Polycarp are telling.

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

Who Polycarp was and what he said seemed to strike right at the heart of the Roman Empire. He would not yield to the power of the State. What's more, he wouldn't bow to the gods of the Empire, and play by their rules. He simply affirmed that God did indeed exist, but the only way to know Him is through Jesus Christ the one and only true Lord. And it was this belief of Jesus as Lord to the exclusion of all other deities, including the Roman ones, that really landed him in trouble.

And it still will land us into trouble. Our world may be ok with our worship of Jesus, just so long as it doesn’t exclude the gods of secular modernity OR just so long as the Jesus we worship is merely a moral teacher offering us some thoughtful teaching, but with very little demanded in response.

The Romans were actually ok if you worshiped Jesus, but they wanted to make sure that it was Jesus AND the Roman Pantheon. Acknowledge the Roman gods first, and then feel free to worship however, and whomever you wished.

For most Christians, this was a line that they could not cross.

Ok, how does this relate to us today?

Well, martyrdom involves more than simply dying. The actual word stems from the word “witness”. To be a martyr involves dying, but in our culture, it means dying to all the things that compete for complete allegiance to Jesus Christ. For the sake of Christ, Christians are called to die to self – to ego, pleasure, power, success, the world – all the things that distract and distance us from Jesus Christ.

Martyrdom is bearing witness to grace. It is pointing people to the good news of Jesus Christ, his forgiveness and life that he offers and the difference this makes. It is proclaiming to an unbelieving world that “Jesus is Lord.”

“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.”

Jim Elliot, martyr
Head, Heart and Hands:

• Meditate on Philippians 1:21 – Can we say this?
• Meditate on Philippians 3:2-16
• Meditate on your life
  • Does how you live your life stand out to those in your sphere of influence?
  • What shapes your imagination? The world or the Word?
  • Is there a congruence between what you believe and how you live?
• The early Christians confessed that Jesus is Lord, and many suffered for it. What does it mean to confess Jesus as Lord today? What are the areas where saying this will land us in hot water? What is the price you might have to pay in your sphere of life?
• Meditate on your death.
  • How would you like to honour Jesus in your life? What would you want people to say about how you lived your Christian life?

• What choices are you facing right now? How do you make decisions?
From The Martyrdom of Perpetua. Perpetua, a new convert, was martyred March 7, 203 in the arena at Carthage, Africa. The previous year Emperor Septimius Severus had outlawed conversion to Christianity. Some believe that Tertullian was the editor of her story.

“While,” says she, “we were still with the persecutors, and my father, for the sake of his affliction for me, was persisting in seeking to turn me away, and to cast me down from the faith, — ‘Father,’ said I, ‘do you see, let us say, this vessel lying here to be a little pitcher, or something else?’ And he said, ‘I see it to be so.’ And I replied to him, ‘Can it be called by any other name than what it is?’ And he said, ‘No.’ ‘Neither can I call myself anything else than what I am, a Christian.’ Then my father, provoked at this saying, threw himself upon me, as if he would tear my eyes out. But he only distressed me, and went away overcome by the devil’s arguments. Then, in a few days after I had been without my father, I gave thanks to the Lord; and his absence became a source of consolation to me. In that same interval of a few days we were baptized, and to me the Spirit prescribed that in the water of baptism nothing else was to be sought for than bodily endurance. After a few days we are taken into the dungeon, and I was very much afraid, because I had never felt such darkness. O terrible day! O the fierce heat of the shock of the soldiery, because of the crowds! I was very unusually distressed by my anxiety for my infant. There were present there Tertius and Pomponius, the blessed deacons who ministered to us, and had arranged by means of a gratuity that we might be refreshed by being sent out for a few hours into a pleasanter part of the prison. Then going out of the dungeon, all attended to their own wants. I suckled my child, which was now enfeebled with hunger. In my anxiety for it, I addressed my mother and comforted my brother, and commended to their care my son. I was languishing because I had seen them languishing on my account. Such solicitude I suffered for many days, and I obtained leave for my infant to remain in the dungeon with me; and forthwith I grew strong and was relieved from distress and anxiety about my infant; and the dungeon became to me as it were a palace, so that I preferred being there to being elsewhere.”