

GOD'S PREVAILING WORK

Themes in Church History, AD 30-1517

By C.J. Harris

About the Cover

The picture shows part of the Via Sancta, the ceremonial road that ran through the Forum at the center of ancient Rome. In the foreground are two temples—the Temple of Antoninus Pius and Faustina on the left, and the Temple of Romulus on the right. Both structures were converted into Christian churches, which explains their blend of architectural styles.

God's Prevailing Work: Themes in Church History, AD 30–1517
by C.J. Harris, PhD

Copyright © 2018 by Positive Action for Christ, Inc., 502 W. Pippen Street,
Whitakers, NC 27891.

positiveaction.org

All rights reserved. No part may be reproduced in any manner without
permission from the publisher.

First Printing, 2018

Printed in the United States of America

Print ISBN: 978-1-59557-324-7

PDF ISBN: 978-1-59557-325-4

Contributions from Michelle Harris, MA

Cover and layout design by Shannon Brown

Illustrations by Justin Gerard

Editing and development by Jim Lord, Christa Lord, and Duncan Johnson

Published by

 **PositiveAction**
FOR CHRIST

Contents

Introduction	5
In This Study	7
Chapter 1—Life in the Early Church	11
Chapter 2—The Persecuted Church.	26
Chapter 3—Living in the World	45
Chapter 4—From Persecution to Privilege	59
Chapter 5—Heresies	72
Chapter 6—No Earthly City	86
Chapter 7—To the Regions Beyond.	101
Chapter 8—Light for the Dark Ages	115
Chapter 9—Christendom Divided.	129
Chapter 10—The Crusades	141
Chapter 11—Out of the Cloister.	158
Chapter 12—A Turbulent Darkness	171
Chapter 13—The Light of the Word.	188
Suggested Reading.	205
Endnotes	207

Introduction

I wrote this study to introduce students to the history of God's work through His people, the church. This first volume begins with the first century after the resurrection of Christ, then winds its way up to the dawn of the sixteenth century. Students will not stop and study every significant event or every notable person, but I hope they'll catch a broad glimpse of the struggles, failures, and triumphs of God's people.

Students will spend most of their time working through Scripture, and by doing so they should better understand the conflicts faced by the church. This curriculum is a study of themes—principles, ideologies, and ideas that grew alongside the church for centuries. Some ideas grew from Scripture, others from elsewhere.

But through all these conflicts, we can see some of God's prevailing work—the grace He shows His people in every era.

Why study the history of the church?

1. **Church history gives us a sweeping view of God's sovereignty.** People, movements, and nations fall away, but the church of God endures forever.
2. **Church history teaches us to show grace to others, even Christians that differ from us.** God uses people with all manner of strengths and weaknesses. No denomination or assembly is perfect, but God moves through a diversity of groups to accomplish His plan.
3. **Church history reminds us that Scripture establishes God's work in every age.** No Christian work has truly succeeded beyond its adherence to the Word of God. Scripture guides us to its Author, discouraging us from our tendency toward corruption.

At the end of this study, students will not have a comprehensive knowledge of the figures, movements, and topics discussed, but they should understand how God has worked through His children in ages past. They will know a few historic figures—along with their contributions and shortcomings—and hopefully trust that God can work through even the most troubling times today.

By His Grace,



In This Study

This curriculum features two primary components: a Student Manual and a Teacher’s Manual. The Student Manual includes the bulk of the course material, including reading exercises and study questions. The Teacher’s Manual includes suggested answers to the student work, as well as historical notes and discussion questions that a teacher can present to a group.

The Student Manual features thirteen chapters for thirteen weeks of study. Each week, students should read through the chapter and answer the questions, after which you, the teacher, can review the material with the group, present additional observations, solicit feedback, and guide the group’s discussion.

A week before you begin teaching this study, distribute the Student Manuals and ask your students to work through the first chapter before the next class. Consider taking a few minutes to read through the introduction in the Student Manual (pp. 5–6) and then answering any initial questions.

In the Student Manual

Timelines & Maps

Every chapter begins with a timeline showing a handful of important dates. These are not essential to understanding the chapter’s themes, but they can help contextualize the events, movements, and figures within a student’s overall understanding of history. Significant events introduced in the chapter are in **bold**. Likewise, maps can provide some geographic context.

Reading Exercises

Each chapter includes a variety of suggested Scripture passages that students can look up in their own Bible before answering questions that encourage retention and critical thinking. The Student Manual also features a number of primary source readings adapted for the modern reader. These can bolster individual study and group discussion.

Quotations & Endnotes

The Student Manual includes many quotations taken from a variety of authors. In most cases, the text is adapted from a translation, with modernized vocabulary and grammar. Brackets mark significant words that have been changed for the sake of clarity. At the back of the Student Manual and Teacher’s Manual are endnotes that list the original sources.

In the Teacher's Manual

Exercises & Discussion

This Teacher's Manual includes every exercise from the Student Manual along with suggested answers. As a group, you can re-read the passages of Scripture, review any straightforward questions, and then spend time discussing the deeper or more personal questions. Included throughout are additional discussion ideas that build upon the student exercises.

Historical Notes

This manual also features background information that can help you contextualize some of the material for your students. This curriculum must necessarily skip a wealth of historical detail, but you may wish to spend time exploring a particular figure or event that captures your students' interest.

Excluding the table of contents, all page numbers refer to locations in the Student Manual.

Important Note: You can download free presentation slides for this curriculum at the *God's Prevailing Work* product page on positiveaction.org.

Page Format

This Teacher's Manual includes a complete copy of the Student Manual material—except broken into sections and interspersed with the notes exclusive to this manual. A sample section is on the following page.

Future Materials

This curriculum is planned as the first of two volumes on the themes of church history. The second, in development as of 2018, will pick up at the dawn of the Reformation. For announcements or more information, visit positiveaction.org.

As a non-profit publishing ministry, we consider teachers our co-laborers in the faith. Each curriculum remains a work in progress, and the people who teach these studies have a great impact on the scope and format of every new edition. If you have any comments, questions, or concerns, please don't hesitate to contact us—we'd love to hear from you.

info@positiveaction.org
(800) 688-3008
positiveaction.org

Positive Action for Christ
P.O. Box 700
Whitakers, NC 27891-0700

Exercises: Page 109

Christians and Warfare

As Christians living in the New Testament age, we are free from the law of sin and judgment. We live instead by grace, showing mercy to others just as God shows mercy to us. Even when we suffer harm, we can forgive and respond with love—not for the sake of suffering, but for the sake of the gospel.

Discussion: Can you think of passages in the New Testament that encourage peace? Note Matthew 5:9; Romans 12:18; 14:19; Galatians 5:22; Colossians 3:15; and James 3:18.

Context: Even in the Old Testament, when Israel engaged in outright warfare, God gave His people no open-ended mandate to make war. The commands to conquer Canaan were limited and specific, and even when Israel's people responded to foreign attacks, they were required to first offer conditions of peace (cf. Deut. 20:10–12, 20).

Exercises: Page 109 (cont.)

But despite an overwhelming emphasis on peace, the New Testament does not condemn governments for using acts of force to protect their citizens. Note 1 Peter 2:13–14.

- According to verse 14, what does God allow government officials to do?

Punish those who do evil and praise those who do good.

Again, the actions of a government are not always moral or right. But God can work through civil structures for the good of His people.

Thankfully, we can find advice for individual Christians caught up in conflicts. Read Matthew 5:38–42, where Jesus corrects those who twist the Old Testament Law into a justification for revenge.

- Explain in your own words how believers should generally respond when someone does them wrong. Answers will vary. We should respond with mercy and kindness.

Excerpt from the Student Manual

Notes only in the Teacher's Manual

Continued excerpt from the Student Manual, with suggested answers

Scripture Memory Sheet

Name: _____

Chapter	Scripture	Signature
1	Acts 2:46-47	
2	Matthew 5:11-12	
3	John 17:14-15	
4	1 John 2:15-17	
5	2 Peter 2:1	
6	Hebrews 11:16	
7	Matthew 28:19-20	
8	Psalms 119:151-152	
9	James 3:17-18	
10	Matthew 26:52-53	
11	Matthew 25:40	
12	James 4:8-10	
13	Luke 11:33	

Life in the Early Church

Objectives

- Demonstrate continuity between the early and modern church
- Emphasize the love and unity central to biblical descriptions of the church
- Discuss the priorities of the early church, comparing them with Christian activity today

Introduction

This history of the church is the history of God’s work—through His people, by His power. It’s a story, a narrative, an arc—winding its way from the resurrection of Jesus to His eventual return to Earth. We see only part of the path, but we have the stories of others to encourage us.

This study will trace the broad strokes of church history, emphasizing God’s work in His people. There’s no need to worry about memorizing a host of names, dates, and events. You’ll instead study the broad themes and principles that carried the church from one age to the next. This framework will serve you well if you tackle deeper or more specialized studies in the future.

This chapter begins by introducing the second century Christian writer, Papias. Papias likely studied under the Apostle John, one of Jesus’ closest followers. Papias also developed a close friendship with Polycarp, a Greek disciple of John who would become a respected bishop in the city of Smyrna. We’ll discuss him more in Chapter 2.

This kind of discipleship marked the early years of the church. Assemblies circulated the books and letters of the apostles, relying on the wisdom of teachers who traced their learning back to Jesus Himself. These are the first links in the chain of church history.

Primary Text: Acts 2:42–47



c. 30

c. 43

Emperor Claudius begins the Roman conquest of Britain.

c. 48–58

The **Apostle Paul** makes at least four separate missionary journeys.

c. 60–130

Papias, likely a student of the Apostle John; an early Christian writer and bishop

64

Emperor Nero orders the first coordinated Roman persecution of the Christian church.

68

Nero commits suicide.

70

Titus, a Roman general that would later become emperor, besieges Jerusalem, destroying Herod's temple and looting the city.

c. 70–155

Polycarp, likely a student of John; notable Christian bishop, writer, and martyr

c. 95

The **Apostle John**, the last of the Twelve, dies of natural causes while in exile on the island of Patmos.

c. 200s

Christians throughout the Roman empire recite the **Apostles Creed**, a set of twelve statements summarizing the essential teaching of Christ's original followers.

Life in the Early Church

In A.D. 95, John passed away. The last of the original twelve apostles, John had spent his final years in exile on the island of Patmos. Unlike many of the other apostles, John survived Roman persecution, dying instead of natural causes after a long life of writing and teaching.

But one church leader refused to let the apostles' teaching die with them. Papias, a Greek man born some 30 years after Christ's ascension, faithfully studied the ministries and messages of Christ's followers. He may even have learned the gospel from the Apostle John himself.

So Papias chose to compile a collection of the apostles' teachings, as related by believers who served alongside them. Papias introduces the work with this thought:

But I will not be unwilling to put down, along with my interpretations, those instructions I received with care at any time from the elders, stored up with care in my memory, assuring you at the same time of their truth. For I did not, like the multitude, take pleasure in those who spoke much, but in those who taught the truth—nor in those who related strange commandments, but in those who rehearsed the commandments given by the Lord to faith—[the commands] proceeding from truth itself.

If, then, any one who had visited the elders came, I asked minutely after their sayings—what Andrew or Peter said, or what was said by Philip, or by Thomas, or by James, or by John, or by Matthew, or by any other of the Lord's disciples . . . For I imagined that what was to be got from books was not so profitable to me as what came from the living and abiding voice.

—Papias, *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord*¹

Apostle—Literally, “sent one”—including the twelve original apostles trained by Jesus; but more broadly, any messenger of the gospel

Though only fragments remain today, the *Exposition* extended to five volumes. Papias ensured that his knowledge of the apostles' teaching would carry forward to the next generation.

Discussion: What do you think Papias meant by the last sentence of this passage?

Historians still debate the question, but it could be that Papias wanted to cut through all the legends surrounding the apostles and get his information direct from individuals who took their word seriously. Not everything Papias wrote was reliable—the same is true for any historian—but he nonetheless made an incredible effort.

The Hope of Christ

My work will begin, as I have said, with the dispensation [or, revealed history] of the Savior Christ—which is loftier and greater than human conception—and with a discussion of his divinity; for it is necessary, inasmuch as we derive even our name from Christ, for one who proposes to write a history of the Church to begin with the very origin of Christ’s dispensation, a dispensation more divine than many think.

—Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History*²

When Jesus ascended to heaven, He did not leave His church without guidance or direction. He promised His disciples the Holy Spirit, who would teach them and help them remember what Christ had said (John 14:26). Then, as believers carried Christ’s gospel to the rest of the world (cf. Matt. 28:16–20), they could embody the principles of Christ’s kingdom.

What would mark the character, the testimony, the culture of the church? We could summarize Christ’s hope for the church in two big ideas—love and unity.

Divine Love

Read John 13:33–35. Here Jesus prepares the disciples for His departure.

- Whose love should we imitate (v. 34)? **Jesus** _____
- If we believers love each other this way, what will people understand (v. 35)?
That we are disciples of Christ _____

Divine Unity

In John 17, we find Christ’s prayer for His followers. He prays not only for the disciples with Him, but also for everyone who would believe on Him through the apostles’ ministry (v. 20). That includes us.

- In verses 20–23, Jesus prays that His followers would be one—unified and inseparable. Whose unity should we imitate (v. 21)? **The Father and the Son** _____

- And if we pursue such godly unity, what will we help people see (vv. 21, 23)?

That the Father sent Jesus to the world; that God loves us

When we walk hand in hand with other believers, serving each other and supporting each other, people will notice. This love and unity testifies to the truth of Christ—it proves that God’s hand still moves through His people today. Only God could draw people from different nations, languages, and social classes to form a loving, unified body—His church.

Separate a ray of the sun from its body of light—its unity does not allow a division of light; break a branch from a tree—when broken, it will not be able to bud; cut off the stream from its fountain, and that which is cut off dries up.

Discussion: The early church faced division over a variety of cultural differences, big and small. Some examples are below:

- Sensitivity about eating food that had been offered to idols (cf. 1 Cor. 8)
- Debates over circumcision (cf. Acts 15)
- The way men and women presented themselves in the assembly (cf. 1 Cor. 11:2–16)
- Favoritism for rich people over the poor (cf. James 2:1–13)

The church included people from every conceivable background—Jews and Greeks, slaves and free people, men and women (cf. Gal. 3:28)—and many of these believers had to serve corrupt human authorities in hostile cultures (cf. 1 Pet. 2:11–17).

- What cultural differences do we have within our assembly? What kind of gaps do we have to build bridges across?
- What challenges do we face in our society? How do politics, economics, and culture make it difficult to be loving, unified Christians?

We still need God to unify us and grow His love within us. We depend entirely on Him.

The Central Practices of the Early Church

Assemblies in the first century looked very different from the well-dressed people in some auditoriums today. Unlike modern believers in the West, the early Christians had no dedicated buildings, no government protections, and often little money. Historically speaking, it's surprising that Christianity survived a generation. But empowered by the Spirit and led by Scripture, the church not only grew—it thrived.

Thus also the Church, shone over with the light of the Lord, sheds forth her rays over the whole world, yet it is one light which is everywhere diffused, nor is the unity of the body separated.

—Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Church*

Context: In Acts 2, we see the spark that ignited the church in Jerusalem. During the Jewish feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit arrived to mark the believers present (vv. 1–4), and the Apostle Peter declared Jesus to be the risen Lord and Messiah (v. 36). Among the people gathered for the feast, three thousand accepted Christ (v. 41). The following activities are a natural result of Christians enjoying their bond in the gospel.

How did God sustain love and unity within the church? Read Acts 2:42–47, where the Apostle Luke explains what the early believers did together.

- Verse 42 lists several activities that characterized the early church in Jerusalem. What did the believers do? **Text will vary by translation. The verse lists the apostles' teaching, the fellowship of believers, the breaking of bread, and prayers.**

Exercises: Page 12

- How did people outside the church react to this new movement (v. 43)?
With awe/fear
- How else did the believers show love to each other (vv. 44–47)?
Answers will vary. They treated their possessions communally (v. 44). They sold their possessions to give to those in need (v. 45). They spent time together worshiping in the temple and eating in their homes, with gladness, generosity, praise, and the favor of the community (vv. 46–47). God added daily to the church (v. 47).

Let's take a closer look at the key activities in this passage.

The Apostles' Teaching

The early believers lacked something we take for granted today—a complete New Testament. Christians could teach from Old Testament Scripture and the letters of the apostles, but the final New Testament books weren't written until about A.D. 95, half a century after Christ's resurrection. Many more years passed before Christians could gather, copy, and distribute these books widely. But by the third century church leaders generally recognized the Scriptures that make up our 27-book New Testament canon.

History: The church did not *decide* which books belonged in the canon. Most church leaders respected the authority of the Spirit, so they carefully *discerned* or *recognized* the works inspired by God. God worked through this process to preserve for us the 27 books we have today.

The history of the New Testament canon is complicated, but the 27 books were widely accepted and referenced throughout the early church. Believers embraced the four Gospels immediately as they were written, along with most of the epistles. Some leaders expressed doubt over the authorship of Hebrews, James, and the letters of Peter and John, but Christian writers like Origen recognized the full 27-book canon by the middle of the third century.

Exercises: Page 12 (cont.)

Canon—In the Christian tradition, an authoritative body of texts inspired by God; includes a comprehensive collection of Scripture

and the other apostles performed miracles, spoke prophecies, and carefully defended the doctrine of Christ—all until their teaching crystallized into the Scripture we hold today.

Church history began as the apostles taught their followers—and as those followers, in turn, taught others. This is how God expects His truth to spread—face to face, teacher to student, generation to generation (cf. 2 Tim. 2:1–2). Even with Scripture as our anchor, God chooses to work through us, His people, as a channel for His grace.

Creed—A set of beliefs that marks all members of a group

In His wisdom, God provided for these early believers. Christ Himself trained His apostles to spread and preserve His teaching. Even Paul, who did not accept Christ until after the resurrection, likely received special teaching directly from Jesus (cf. Gal. 1:11–18). Paul

At the end of Chapter 3 (p. 43), you'll find a translation of the Apostles' Creed, a set of

Discussion: God used the ministry of the apostles—with their personalities, miracles, and teaching—only temporarily. Why do you think God didn't just allow the church to continue under this sort of human, verbal inspiration? Possible answers:

- Verbal teaching has many limitations. A written record is more efficient and communicable across geography, culture, language, and time.
- Christ pointed to Himself as the one true path to God (cf. John 14:6), and we should elevate no one else to that preeminence (cf. Col. 1:15–20). A written Scripture keeps human teachers accountable to God's Word alone.

Note 2 Peter 1:16–21. Here Peter mentions several ways that God revealed truth to the apostles, but he presents Scripture as the highest of these forms of revelation.

Discussion: Read 2 Timothy 2:2. Here Paul instructs Timothy to pass on his doctrine to the next generation.

- Who has taught you about God and His Word? Who are you teaching—or preparing to teach?
- How can Christians pass on doctrine even if they don't preach or teach in an assembly?

twelve beliefs that early believers viewed as a summary of the apostles’ teaching, though not written by the apostles directly. The original Greek text dates back to the third or fourth century.

Fellowship

Modern Christians often use the word *fellowship* to refer to times of food and fun with other believers, but in Scripture we find a much broader meaning. Fellowship was a spirit of sharing—a communal drive that cared for the needs of each member.

Look through each of the passages below and list the kinds of things that early believers shared with their brothers and sisters in Christ. What kind of situations do we experience together?

- Acts 2:44–45; 1 John 3:17—
Material needs / sharing

- Romans 12:15; Galatians 6:1–2—
Times of happiness and sorrow; rejoicing and weeping; emotional or spiritual burdens

- Ephesians 5:18–21—Worship, song, praise, gratitude, mutual service

- Believers have different gifts and strengths. Write two ways that you can share with other believers in your assembly.
Answers will vary.

Labor together with one another; strive in company together; run together; suffer together; sleep together; and awake together, as the stewards, and associates, and servants of God.

—Ignatius of Antioch,
in a letter to Polycarp, c. 110

Discussion: What are some practical ways we can share our gifts with believers around us? How has God equipped us to serve each other?

The Breaking of Bread

Ordinance—Depending on the Christian tradition, a practice that symbolizes, commemorates, or confers a work of God; includes the biblical practices of communion and baptism

When we read that believers “broke bread” in the New Testament, we understand that they memorialized Christ’s death, as Jesus taught His disciples to do at the Last Supper (cf. 1 Cor. 11:23–26). This *ordinance* helps us remember not only the sacrifice of Christ, but also the shared foundations of our faith.

The gospel—the good news of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection—is a belief held in common by all true Christians. Many Christians therefore refer to the Lord’s Supper as *communion*. We believers all share equal footing at the cross, and if we meditate on Christ’s sacrifice together, we’ll reject the kind of pride and ambition that can destroy assemblies.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17–22. Here Paul rebukes the church in Corinth for ignoring the purpose of the Lord’s Supper.

- How did these believers fail to nurture communion (vv. 18–21)?
They promoted divisions (vv. 18–19); some began eating before everyone arrived (v. 21); some went hungry while others even got drunk (v. 21).

- Briefly list the steps your assembly takes to observe the Lord’s Supper. Explain how one or more of these steps can promote a sense of unity.
Answers will vary.

Prayer

By praying, we show our dependence on God. We rejoice in the grace He’s shown us, and we offer up our burdens to Him. As we pray with other believers, we address needs far beyond the physical troubles mentioned earlier. We reach the limits of our service, and we trust God to help where we cannot.

Prayer is happy company with God.
—Clement of Alexandria, c. 150–215

Like all communication, prayer flows from our heart. Ideally, we pray not only to share our needs, but also to express our gratitude, our wonder, our hopes, our love. This activity helps believers bond together—but more importantly, prayer helps us abide with God.

How did the early believers view prayer? Look through the following passages and note briefly the reasons people prayed.

- Acts 1:23–25—**To ask for guidance**

- Acts 14:21–23—**To encourage others and commit them to God**

- Colossians 1:9–12—**To request that believers know God’s will with wisdom and understanding; that they please God by the way they act; that they do good; that they learn more about God; that they have strength, endurance, and patience; to offer thanks to God, who has made us all heirs**

- Colossians 4:12–13—**To struggle/labor on behalf of other believers**

- James 5:14–16—**To request healing for the sick**



Exercises: Page 17

- 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13—To request that God make us increase and abound in love

- 1 Timothy 2:1-2—To request that authorities allow us to live peacefully

Discussion: After reviewing these kinds of requests and reasons for prayer, what specific things do you think we should ask God to give our assembly? How can we pray in a manner that reflects God's own desires?

Consider Christ's prayers in John 17 and Matthew 26:36-46. Why did Jesus need to pray?

Further Reading: A Glimpse of the Early Church

Around A.D. 200, the North African theologian Tertullian wrote a book defending the Christian faith against the accusations of a hostile culture. In the following passage, Tertullian describes the culture within his church assembly.

I will immediately go on, then, to present the peculiarities of the Christian society, that, as I have refuted the evil charged against it, I may point out its positive good.

We are a body knit together as such by a common religious belief, by unity of discipline, and by the bond of a common hope. We meet together as an assembly and congregation, that, offering up prayer to God as with united force, we may wrestle with Him in our supplications. This strong exertion God delights in.

We pray, too, for the emperors, for their ministers, and for all in authority, for the welfare of the world, for the prevalence of peace, for the delay of the [end of the world and the Roman Empire].

We assemble to read our sacred writings, if we [have occasion to need] forewarning or remembrance. [Regardless], with the sacred words we nourish our faith, we animate our hope, we make our confidence more steadfast—and [just as importantly], by the indoctrination of God's commands, we reinforce good habits.

In the same place also warnings are made, rebukes and sacred corrections are administered. For with a great gravity is the work of judgment continued among us, as befits those who feel assured that they are in the sight of God; and you have the most notable example of judgment when anyone has sinned so grievously as to require his severance from us in prayer, in the congregation, and in all sacred communication.

The tried men of our elders preside over us, obtaining that honor not by purchase, but by established character. There is no buying and selling of any sort in the things of God. Though we have our money-chest, it is not made up of purchase-money, as of

Further Reading: Page 18

a religion that has its price. On the monthly day, if he likes, each [Christian] puts in a small donation; but only if it be his pleasure, and only if he be able: for there is no obligation; all is voluntary.

These gifts are [a fund for good works]. For they are not . . . spent on feasts, and [drinking], and [eating greedily], but to support [the poor] and bury [the dead], to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined now to the house; such, too, as have suffered shipwreck; and if there happen to be anyone in the mines, or banished to the islands, or shut up in the prisons, for nothing but their faithfulness to the cause of God’s Church, they become the nurslings of their confession [or, chosen faith].

But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. “See,” they say, “how [Christians] love one another”—for [unbelievers] are animated by mutual hatred; “how [Christians] are ready even to die for one another”—for they themselves [would] sooner [kill].

—Tertullian, *The Apology*³

- What do you find similar between your assembly and the assembly described in this passage? **Answers will vary. May include the emphasis on prayer and reading Scripture; the treatment of offerings; charitable efforts; a culture of service and sacrifice.**

- What surprised you about Tertullian’s description? **Answers will vary.**

Discussion: What did you find surprising about this description?

- Why do you think Tertullian describes prayer as a struggle? Note how Paul describes the ministry of Epaphras in Colossians 4:12–13.
- What parts of this description reflect the principles of love and unity?
- Why do you think Tertullian presented this as a defense of the church?

The Persecuted Church

Objectives

- Explore the basis for Christian persecution, along with examples in the early church
- Discuss common responses to persecution, as well as the view encouraged by Scripture
- Note ways that God can turn the evils of persecution toward good

Introduction

Christianity was born amid persecution. As Christ predicted, His death foreshadowed the suffering and persecution of His followers (cf. John 15:18–21). In the Book of Acts, we see the deaths of James and Stephen, along with the innumerable trials faced by Paul and his companions.

Yet these earliest assemblies refused to take up arms against the government or religious leaders. At the encouragement of the apostles, they viewed opposition as an opportunity to reflect the sacrifice of Christ.

But Christianity did not end when the church scattered from Jerusalem. Nor was the faith watered down when it spread out to Rome, Asia Minor, and North Africa. In the face of incredible challenges, the church grew. Against all odds, the kingdom triumphed because of its great King.

Primary Text: Matthew 5:10–12



c. 30

c. 67

The Apostle Paul is martyred.

64

The First Persecution – Emperor Nero orders the first coordinated Roman persecution of the Christian church.

c. 95

The Apostle John dies of natural causes.

c. 155

Polycarp, friend of Papias and leader of the church in Smyrna, is martyred.

c. 165

Justin, a Christian philosopher, is martyred along with his students. Followers would later call him Justin Martyr.

203

The Christian noble Perpetua is martyred along with a group of other Christians. Her prison diary would be widely read in the early church.

258

The North African bishop Cyprian is martyred after refusing to recant his faith.

c. 255

The Valerian Persecution – Emperor Valerian I restricts Christian worship, eventually banning assemblies, executing leaders, and confiscating property.

303

The Great Persecution – Diocletian orders all Scripture and places of worship burnt, later requiring that Christians worship state-approved gods or be executed.

c. 303

After refusing to sacrifice to Roman gods, many Christians are executed—including legendary martyrs Felix, Adautus, Marcellinus, Peter, and Euphemia.

CHAPTER 2

The Persecuted Church

Polycarp was a Christian bishop in Smyrna, a city in what is now Turkey. Neither a prolific writer nor theologian, Polycarp nonetheless became an important figure in the early church. Like his friend Papias, he carried forward the teaching of the apostles, and he remained faithful even in the face of persecution and death. According to *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, a manuscript widely revered by the church after his death, Polycarp was killed on the orders of the Roman proconsul in Smyrna, likely in the mid-150s.

The soldiers found Polycarp in the home of a friend. He heard them approach and had the chance to flee, but after at least two near-captures, he chose to run no further. The authorities had discovered Polycarp's current location by torturing two of his young students, so he refused to remain free at the expense of other believers. "The will of God be done," he said.

Whatever the band of soldiers had expected, it was not a warm welcome from an aging pastor. Polycarp greeted them as guests, requesting that food and drink be prepared for all present. When the soldiers had eaten, he asked permission to pray for a short while. Stunned, they agreed, wondering aloud why the proconsul had sent them armed to capture such a man.

During this arrest, Polycarp reportedly prayed for two hours, pleading on behalf of every believer he had ever known, as well as the officials responsible for his capture. This compassion stayed with him—on the journey to the arena, through the trial, despite the pleas to renounce Christ, in the face of jeering crowds, and to his death by fire and sword.

O Lord God Almighty . . . I bless you because you have granted me this day and hour, that I might have a place among the number of martyrs in the cup of your Christ unto the resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and of body, in the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit.

—*The Martyrdom of Polycarp*⁴

The Blessing of Christ

Persecution—Threats, opposition, and violence targeted at a specific group because of their shared identity

Matthew 5–7 includes Christ’s best-known message, the Sermon on the Mount. Here Christ describes what it means to be a part of His kingdom—to live within His dominion. He begins by describing the kind of person who will be blessed—happy, contented, joyful—in His kingdom. These statements, known as

the Beatitudes, startled the hearers. Jesus calls “blessed” those people who do seemingly unhappy things—like mourn, hunger, and show humility.

In case you’re not already familiar with the passage, read Matthew 5:1–12 and answer the following:

- What is the final beatitude repeated in verses 10 and 11?

Text will vary by translation. Blessed are those persecuted for righteousness’ sake.

- What promises does Christ offer to these people?

- Verse 10—The kingdom of heaven is for them.

- Verse 12—Their reward is great in heaven.

Jesus makes clear in this sermon that the citizens of His kingdom would stand out from the rest of the world. Their principles and values would look very different.

Discussion: In what ways should Christians try to be different? On the flip side, what do you think are some *bad* ways to stick out?



The Roman Empire in the 100s–200s ▲

The Origins of Persecution

A Natural Conflict

The world will naturally oppose the followers of Christ. Read John 15:18–21.

- How does Jesus describe our relationship with “the world” (v. 19)?
We are not of the world. We don’t belong to it. Rather, Christ chose us out of the world.

- Why shouldn’t we be surprised when “the world” hates us (vv. 20–21)?
If they persecuted Christ, and we serve Him, they’ll persecute us, as well.

Exercises: Page 24

As used by Jesus and the apostles, “the world” (Gr. *kosmos*) refers to the mix of culture and governance formed by people who reject God. It’s the system of rebellion you’d expect from people who oppose Christ’s love and power, and it pervades every society around the globe.

Christ’s followers, then, offend these systems. We Christians undermine the rebellion, and we should not be surprised to earn society’s hatred and disgust.

This conflict stems from the beginning of history itself. Cain murdered his brother Abel. The leaders of Israel killed prophets sent to correct them. Religious and political leaders crucified Christ.

Context: Later in the New Testament, the apostles repeated these warnings about persecution. Note 1 John 3:11–18.

Exercises: Page 24 (cont.)

Early Persecutions of the Church

And without surprise, persecution continued into the age of the church. Jewish and Roman leaders tried to stamp out followers of “the Way” in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 9:1–2), but this only encouraged Christians to spread out into the Middle East, Asia Minor, North Africa, and even Europe. Believers served and taught despite harsh local opposition. Before long, however, greater powers would set themselves against God’s kingdom.

Tacitus, a Roman historian, describes how the Emperor Nero, in an attempt to blame the Great Fire of Rome on someone other than himself, launched the first coordinated persecution of Christians:

Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most meticulous tortures on a group hated for their abominations—called “Christians” by the populace.

Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus—and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea (the first source of the evil) but even in Rome . . .

. . . an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, but of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished; or were nailed to crosses; or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.

Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the Circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer, or stood aloft in a chariot.

Exercises: Page 25

Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good—but rather to feed one man’s cruelty—that they were being consumed.

—Tacitus, *The Annals*⁵

Discussion: Tacitus makes clear that he thinks little of Nero, but he also offers little sympathy to Christians. Why doesn’t he like them?

Exercises: Page 25 (cont.)

Emperor Marcus Aurelius launched another harsh persecution in the mid-second century. Many stories of this time—with varying accuracy—made their way into John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* (c. 1552–1570). The following excerpt describes the martyrdom of the believer Felicitatis and her seven children:

Felicitatis, an illustrious Roman lady, of a considerable family and the most shining virtues, was a devout Christian. She had seven sons, whom she had educated with the most exemplary piety.

Januarius, the eldest, was scourged, and pressed to death with weights; Felix and Philip, the two next had their brains dashed out with clubs; Silvanus, the fourth, was murdered by being thrown from a precipice; and the three younger sons, Alexander, Vitalis, and Martial, were beheaded. The mother was beheaded with the same sword as the three latter.

—John Foxe, *Book of Martyrs*

History: Unlike the men and women cited in this chapter’s opening timeline, Felicitatis was no famous Christian leader or theologian. Yet Christians preserved her story for centuries out of a deep respect for martyrs. Historians continue to find martyr narratives today in manuscripts and even paintings in Roman catacombs.

History: Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*, originally *The Acts and Monuments*, was published in the mid-1500s—first in Latin, then English. For many years, the book remained the second most popular religious text in English, after the Bible itself. The compilation features many historiographical flaws common to that day, but it remains a valuable reference and a challenging devotional work. Some modern editions include abridged sections, updated translations, and historical footnotes.

Exercises: Page 25 (cont.)

Responses to Persecution

If God's enemies continue to persecute God's people, how should we respond? Before noting what Scripture commends, let's look at two wrong responses.

Avoiding Conflict by Denying Christ

The understandable response to persecution is to avoid it. And persecutors of the early church often gave Christians a way to escape death—believers could deny Christ and make a sacrifice to the emperor.

History: In A.D. 112, a Roman magistrate, Pliny the Younger, wrote to Emperor Trajan that when a person was arrested as a Christian, he or she could be released if the person publicly cursed the name of Christ. Such opportunities were common in the early Roman persecutions, especially if the Christian were a prominent military or government official.

Exercises: Page 25 (cont.)

In 250, Emperor Decius ordered everyone in the Roman Empire to make a sacrifice to the gods—for the wellbeing of the empire and the emperor. Citizens had to make their sacrifice in the presence of a government official, who would issue them a certificate—a *libellus*—to confirm their loyalty to Rome. Those who refused to sacrifice were labeled traitors and severely punished.

History: As you've probably realized, the Roman government was never a secular one, and it did not offer freedom of religion or conscience in the modern sense. During both the Roman Republic (c. 509–27 B.C.) and the early Roman Empire (27 B.C.–313 A.D.), government officials tied the worship of Roman gods with a person's loyalty to the state. People could worship additional gods, so long as they acknowledged the core civic cult. But Christians—by claiming a single, exclusive Deity—risked accusations of treason.

Exercises: Page 26

This kind of stark religious test seems alien to believers in the West today, but our culture can still put our faith to the test. We can understand the desire to avoid ridicule or conflict.

- List a few ways you've seen people today avoid being identified as a Christian. Answers will vary. Some believers keep their faith and beliefs secret. Others refuse to challenge or question prevailing philosophies, simply going along with the crowd. Others deny Christ outright and never look back.

Discussion: What are some of the examples you listed here? It's commendable to avoid unnecessary conflict and persecution, but how do some Christians today avoid conflict in inappropriate ways?

Exercises: Page 26 (cont.)

Blessed therefore, and noble, are all the martyrdoms which have taken place according to the will of God (for it behooves us to be very careful and attribute to God the power over all things). For who could fail to admire their nobleness and patient endurance and loyalty to the Master?

—*The Martyrdom of Polycarp*⁴

In Matthew 10, as Jesus prepares the twelve apostles to go ahead of Him and preach in towns and villages, He warns them about opposition. He tells them not to fear people who can destroy the body, but rather the One who can destroy both body and soul (v. 28). As an encouragement, Jesus explains that the Father sees even the death of sparrows, and we're certainly worth more than a few birds (vv. 29–31).

- What does Jesus promise those who openly identify with Him (v. 32)?

Christ will acknowledge/confess them before God the Father.

- But what will happen to those who deny Christ (v. 33)?

Christ will deny them before the Father.

Discussion: Note Peter's denial of Jesus in Luke 22:54–62. Is forgiveness possible after an offense that great? For early believers facing threats and violence, this was a difficult and sensitive issue—one we'll discuss further when we cover the Donatist Controversy in Chapter 6.

Viewing Suffering as Virtue

We might wonder why anyone would pursue suffering or pain, but this has been a temptation for many believers throughout history. In the early church, as Christians began to revere martyrs, some people, perhaps out of pride or misplaced zeal, threw themselves toward opposition, imprisonment, and even death.

But God does not call every Christian to suffer persecution equally, nor should we take pride in persecution for its own sake. Suffering is no virtue—rather, we show virtue when we suffer for the sake of the kingdom. When we encounter opposition, we should embrace it as an opportunity to reflect Christ—not as a chance to enshrine ourselves on the pedestal of martyrdom.

After this the Church was seized by the persecution which then took place under Maximinus, and when the holy martyrs were led to Alexandria, Anthony also followed, leaving his [monastic] cell, and saying, “Let us go too, that if called, we may contend or behold them that are contending.” And he longed to suffer martyrdom . . .

—*The Life of Saint Anthony*⁶

History: We find one example of self-martyrdom in the same manuscript that records Polycarp’s death. A man named Quintus organized a group of Christians to voluntarily turn themselves in to the Roman authorities. However, when Quintus saw the wild beasts ready to kill him, he swore an oath to Caesar and offered a sacrifice. He escaped death—but we’re not sure his friends did. The manuscript continues, “For this cause therefore, brethren, we praise not those who deliver themselves up, since the Gospel does not so teach us.” There’s no sense inviting that kind of temptation.

Another example, shown by the quote on page 27, is Anthony the Great (c. 251–356). During the persecution under Emperor Maximinus II, Anthony left his hermitage in the desert and traveled to Alexandria. He openly encouraged Christian prisoners, preaching even at the judgment hall where others were being sentenced to death.

The governor responded by banning all monks from the city, but Anthony ignored the command and made sure the governor could see him preaching in the streets. Ironically, Anthony was not martyred, but died of natural causes, years after the persecution ended.

We discuss Anthony’s life a bit more at the beginning of Chapter 3.

Exercises: Page 27 (cont.)

Look back at Christ's instructions in Matthew 10.

- Write out verse 39. Text will vary by translation.

- But note what Jesus recommends back in verse 23. How would you resolve the teaching of verses 23 and 39? How can they both be true?
Answers will vary. Christians can and should avoid some persecution, but we must be willing to give our lives for the gospel.

Discussion: How did you resolve the teaching of verses 23 and 39?

Christ's teaching doesn't contradict itself. In verses 22–23, Jesus explains how His disciples can respond pragmatically to danger. But in verses 34–39, He warns that the gospel will necessarily create conflict, and all believers should be ready to sacrifice their wealth, their relationships, and even their lives for the sake of Christ.

We should not avoid persecution *at all costs*—but it's foolish not to accept God's help when He offers us a way out.

Discussion: Describe a scenario in which you think it would be wrong for a Christian to escape persecution.

Exercises: Page 28

Accepting Persecution with Joy

God helps us accept difficulties with *joy*—that deep, abiding, hopeful outlook that trusts God to turn all things toward the ultimate good. Yes, we bear our cross after Christ, but we can rejoice to see God work even through dark times. And as Jesus explains in Matthew 5, we can take heart from the promise of a heavenly reward, the same enjoyed by the prophets persecuted in ages past (v. 12).

Context: In Matthew 5:12, Jesus points our gaze forward, assuring us that today's suffering is worth it. At the same time, for the benefit of Jewish listeners who knew the

Old Testament, He challenges us with the legacy of the prophets, who often suffered for the sake of God’s message—but received their reward for that suffering.

Discussion: Note also Hebrews 11:36–38, where the writer invokes this same legacy. The world treated these saints as less than human, but what phrase in this passage reveals God’s opinion of His people (v. 38a)?

Exercises: Page 28 (cont.)

Look through the following passages and record how each person or group responded to suffering.

- Jesus, on the night before His crucifixion (Matt. 26:36–39):
Answers will vary. Jesus prayed in Gethsemane with His disciples accompanying Him (v. 36–37). He was extremely upset (v. 38), but He submitted to the Father (v. 39).

- The Apostles, after being whipped and reprimanded (Acts 5:40–41):
They rejoiced at being counted worthy to suffer shame/disgrace for their association with Christ.

- Barnabas and Paul, after being thrown out of a city (Acts 13:50–51):
They shook the dust off their feet and left, moving on to the next opportunity for ministry.

On the face of it, those three responses seem very different. Faced with suffering, these people likely felt different things. But they all responded to make way for further service.

Discussion: Can you think of other figures in the Bible who responded well to suffering—specifically suffering for their faith? Examples could include Ruth, David, Isaiah—and perhaps Job.

What about negative examples? Consider the responses from Elijah (1 Kings 19:4, 14) and Jonah (Jonah 4:5–11).

The Prevailing Work

Ultimately, we will respond to persecution well when we view it the way God does—as opportunities for His glory to shine even brighter. In 2 Corinthians, when Paul details the persecution and suffering he faced, he boasts not of his strength, but of his weakness—the weakness that helps other people see God’s power (cf. 12:7–10).

From our human perspective, persecution is all bad—bad causes, bad experiences, bad results. And this suffering does indeed stem from humanity’s sin and rebellion. But when we trust God’s *sovereignty*—His absolute rule over everything—we can see His work prevail even through the horrors of persecution.

Why does God allow and use human evil? Theologians and philosophers have grappled with that question for millennia, but here we’ll briefly note a few ways God worked through persecution—for His glory and for the good of His church.

Discussion: We can argue that God has a purpose even when Christians suffer. But when we relate to others who struggle with pain, we can’t presume to know God’s exact purpose behind every trial.

How does God command us to respond to the suffering of others? How can we comfort others well? How can we comfort badly? Note Romans 12:15, Galatians 6:2, and Colossians 3:12–17.

To lift others up, sometimes we must be willing to step down into the muck with them, to sit with them where they are. When offering comfort to people, solutions are great; but our presence is better.

A Testimony to the World

Look again at Christ's teaching in Matthew 5—specifically verses 13–16. Here He describes how citizens of His kingdom stand in contrast with the world.

What kind of imagery does Christ use? What does He call His followers?

- Verse 13: **Salt** _____
- Verse 14: **A light / a city on a hill** _____
- Verse 15: **A light / lamp / candle** _____

Persecution cannot kill our testimony. Indeed, during the darkest times of persecution, the gospel has shone all the brighter. The church has grown and expanded despite the worst opposition. Few things attract more attention than a person dying selflessly for their beliefs. As Tertullian wrote, “We multiply whenever we are mown down by you. The blood of Christians is seed” (*The Apology*, c. 197).

Discussion: What do you think Tertullian meant when he called the blood of martyrs “seed”?

We test our values through sacrifice. What are we willing to give up in order to pursue what we love? Throughout history, when Christians sacrificed their lives simply to cling to Jesus, they showed how deeply they cherished God's love for them. For unbelievers, the only other explanation for this behavior was insanity—and teachers like Papias and Polycarp did not seem deranged.

How do we reflect this principle in human relationships? Can you think of examples of stuff we give up to serve the people we love? What do we sacrifice for the sake of ministry? Note Hebrews 12:1–3.

A Refinement of the Church

Persecution has a way of focusing the people and doctrine of the assembly. When laws condemn Christians to death, assemblies often have fewer petty arguments or false believers

Page 30

multiplying among them. People need the Spirit to remain faithful under mockery and threat of death (cf. Matt. 10:19–20; 1 Cor. 12:3).

Yes, the early church still included false teachers—we’ll cover a few later—but the crucible of Roman persecution left Christianity a much more focused and doctrinally-sound faith. Unlike many other world religions, our beliefs do not need the slightest bit of civil or cultural support. The Spirit can work anywhere He chooses.

Context: Note 1 John 2:18–23. Here John condemns people he calls “anti-christs”—that is, people who deny that Jesus is the Christ. In verse 19, John argues that at least some people who leave the church during persecution were never believers to begin with. Their departure reveals a false faith.

Discussion: Note also the Parable of the Sower in Luke 8:5–15. How does Christ communicate the same principle we find in 1 John 2? What soil represents so-called believers who deny Christ (v. 13)?

Exercises: Page 30 (cont.)

A Portent of Judgment

Persecution is yet another way the world rebels against God. Unable to attack God directly, the wicked commit atrocities upon His people.

These offenses demand a response. A just king cannot ignore an act of war. Our Savior, the King of kings, will not stand idly by, either. Justice requires judgment.

Read Revelation 6:9–10. Here, through John’s vision, we catch a glimpse of heaven in the future, before the final judgment. Under the altar, the apostle sees a crowd of people.

- Who are these believers (v. 9)? People killed for the Word of God and for bearing witness for Him

- What do they ask God (v. 10)? How long before You judge and avenge our blood?

Discussion: What answer do these saints receive in Revelation 6:11? Note the implication here: God already knows each man and woman who will sacrifice their life for Him. From His perspective as the transcendent One above time itself, judgment is as certain as the offense that merited it.

Is it just for God to judge those who persecute His people? Consider how you would feel about a human judge who excused murders, thieves, and abusers.

Exercises: Page 30 (cont.)

For modern Christians living in comfort, freedom, and the gift of God’s mercy, the idea of judgment can seem uncomfortable. But a God of love must necessarily despise evil. To believers who have lost their families and friends to persecution, or to believers that have endured imprisonment and torture, it is a comfort to know that God will not allow these offenses to stand. In mercy and in justice, He will make every wrong right.

As we see more of God’s work, we can learn to accept conflict, opposition, and suffering as part of our journey. We may not understand His thoughts or purposes, but we trust Him to work all things toward good. If we believe His Word, we can proclaim Him no matter the challenge. And somehow, impossibly, beyond all human reason, we can rejoice along the way.

Further Reading: Polycarp's Stand

The beginning of this chapter includes a summary of Polycarp's ministry and arrest. The following is an excerpt from *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* (c. 160) which describes the trial before his death.

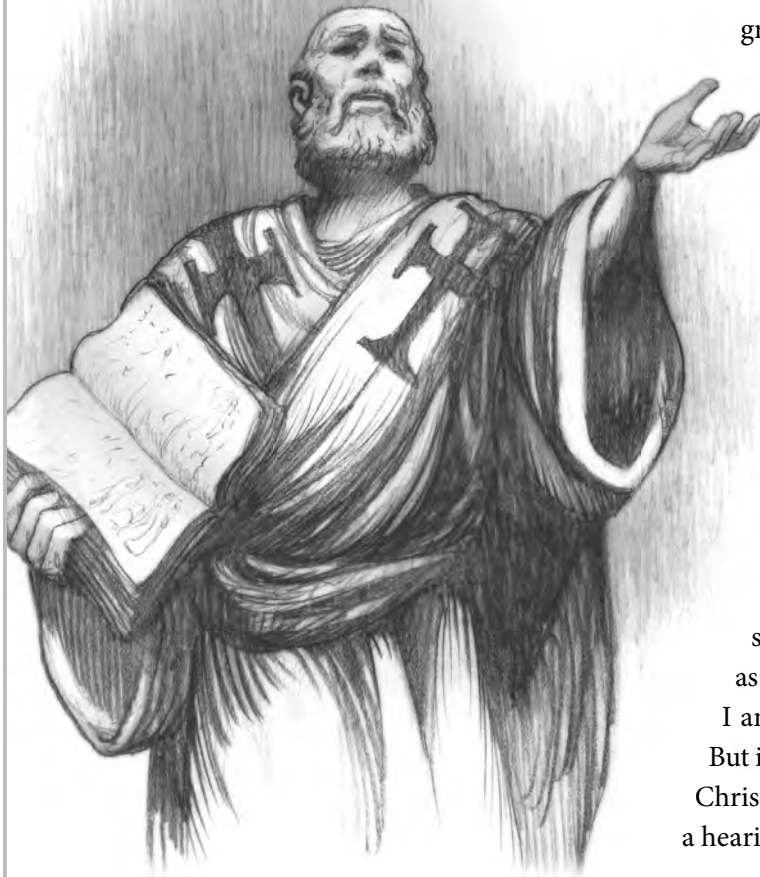
When then [Polycarp] was brought before him, the proconsul asked if he were the man [they sought]. After Polycarp confessed that he was, [the proconsul] tried to persuade him to a denial, saying, "Have respect for your age . . . Swear by the divine providence of Caesar; repent and say, 'Away with the Atheists.'"

Then Polycarp, with a solemn expression, looked over the whole multitude of lawless heathen in the stadium, and waved his hand to them; and groaning and looking up to heaven, he said, "Away with the Atheists."

But when the magistrate pressed him hard and said, "Swear the oath, and I will release you; revile the Christ"—Polycarp said, "Eighty-six years have I been His servant, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King, who saved me?"

But after [the proconsul] persisted . . . [Polycarp] answered, "If you suppose, wrongly, that I will swear by the providence of Caesar, as you say, feigning ignorance of who I am, hear plainly: I am a Christian. But if you wish to learn the doctrine of Christianity, choose a day and give me a hearing."

The proconsul said, "Convince the people [instead]."



But Polycarp said, “As for you, I would have held you worthy of conversation; for we have been taught to render, as appropriate to princes and authorities appointed by God, such honor as does us no harm. But as for these, I do not hold them worthy to defend myself before them.”

At which point the proconsul said, “I have wild beasts here, and I will throw you to them, unless you repent.”

But [Polycarp] said, “Call for them: for the repentance from better to worse is a change not permitted to us; but it is a noble thing to change from unrighteousness to righteousness.”

Then [the proconsul] said to him again, “I will cause you to be consumed by fire, if you look down on the beasts—unless you repent.”

But Polycarp said, “You threaten with the fire that burns for a time and after a little while is quenched—because you are ignorant of the fire of future judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. But why do you delay? Come, do what you will.”

Saying these things—and more besides—[Polycarp] was inspired with courage and joy, and his expression was filled with grace, so that not only did it not drop in dismay at the things which were said to him, but rather the proconsul was astonished and sent his herald to proclaim three times in the middle of the stadium, “Polycarp has confessed himself to be a Christian.” . . . then [the crowds] thought fit to shout out with one voice that Polycarp should be burned alive. . . .

. . . When he had offered up the *Amen* and finished his prayer, the firemen lit the fire.

—*The Martyrdom of Polycarp*⁴

Further Reading: Page 33

- What about “swearing by Caesar” do you think seemed wrong to Polycarp?
Answers may vary. This kind of oath affirmed divine authority to Caesar, who essentially demanded worship.

- What reason did Polycarp offer for refusing to deny Christ?
The faithfulness of God; the value of the eternal over the temporal

- How do you think this scene affected believers who looked on? What about unbelievers? Answers will vary.

Discussion: Why do you think Polycarp wouldn’t let himself swear by the “divine providence” of Caesar?

Why do you think the Romans called Christians “atheists”? One possible answer—to the average Roman, any person who rejected the state-approved pantheon did not believe in a legitimate god. The Romans also despised the Christians’ lack of visible idols, and they found it repugnant to worship someone condemned and crucified by their government. To them, an invisible, stateless God was no god at all.

After reading the accounts of martyrdom in this chapter, do you agree with Tertullian when he called the blood of martyrs the “seed” of the church?

Living in the World

Objectives

- Discuss ways Christians have related with the world
- Discern appropriate ways to respond to opposition from unbelievers
- Challenge students to develop an answer for their hope in Christ

Introduction

God put us in this world, yet called us out of it. How then do we relate to the people and culture and governments and systems around us? How do we walk that line between avoiding sin and reaching out to sinners? When we spend time with unbelievers, it's difficult to know what to say and do.

This chapter presents several ways believers have chosen to relate with the world system. Some Christians embrace the world; some avoid it; and some try to engage it. We must separate from wickedness, but we must also reach out in love to wicked people. Hopefully this chapter will help you approach the world with care and wisdom.

The introductory reading includes a few more excerpts from *The Life of St. Anthony*. Though Anthony became something of a legend for his admirers, his attempts to hide from the world reflected a shallow philosophy of holiness and Christian service.

Primary Texts: John 17:14–15; 1 Peter 3:8–16



c. 30

c. 35–110

Ignatius of Antioch, a bishop of Antioch in Palestine, and possibly a student of the Apostle John

64

The First Persecution under Emperor Nero

c. 100–165

Justin Martyr, a Christian philosopher and teacher

122

Emperor Hadrian begins building a wall to keep barbarians out of Roman territory in Britannia.

c. 150–215

Clement of Alexandria, a leader and teacher of the church in Alexandria, Egypt

c. 200s

Christians throughout the Roman empire recite the **Apostles Creed**.

c. 255

The Valerian Persecution under Emperor Valerian I

c. 251–356

Anthony the Great, a hermit-teacher who lived in the desert west of Alexandria; an early Christian monk

303

The Great Persecution under the western emperors Diocletian and Galerius

311

Suffering from what is likely a form of cancer, Galerius issues an edict of religious tolerance one month before his death.

312

After the Battle of Milvian Bridge, Constantine marches into Rome and establishes himself as ruler of the western part of the Roman empire.

313

Constantine issues the Edict of Milan, which legalizes Christian worship.

Living in the World

The following excerpts come from *The Life of Saint Anthony* (c. 350), which describes a famous hermit who lived in an empty desert-fortress west of Alexandria. The book's writer, Athanasius, admires the discipline and spirituality of this monk:

Anthony, however, according to his custom, returned alone to his own cell, increased his discipline, and sighed daily as he thought of the mansions in heaven, having his desire fixed on them, and pondering over the shortness of man's life.

And he used to eat, sleep, and go about all other physical necessities with shame, [thinking] of the spiritual faculties of the soul. So often, when about to eat with any other hermits, remembering the spiritual food, he begged to be excused, and departed far off from them, deeming it a matter for shame if he should be seen eating by others. . . .

And he used to say that it behooved a man to give all his time to his soul rather than his body, yet to grant a short space to the body for its necessities; but all the more earnestly to give up the whole remainder to the soul and seek its profit, that it might not be dragged down by the pleasures of the body, but, on the contrary, the body might be in subjection to the soul.

For this is that which was spoken by the Savior, "Be not anxious for your life, what you will eat . . ." (Matt. 6:25).

Discussion: Do you think Anthony interpreted Christ's teaching in Matthew 6:25 correctly? If not, how should we read this passage (vv. 25–34)?

Introduction: Page 35 (cont.)

In 311, hearing news of Diocletian Persecution, Anthony traveled to Alexandria to encourage those facing imprisonment and death. He told them to remain faithful, and—as noted in the Chapter 2 class discussion—he sought out persecution himself. He preached in the judgment halls, in the prisons filled with believers, and in the street as government officials rode by. But despite every attempt at public agitation, Anthony never became a martyr, and he grieved as if he had failed his duty.

Athanasius writes that God must have kept the hermit alive so that he could continue teaching about discipline. The writer continues:

Introduction: Page 36

And when at last the persecution ceased . . . Anthony departed, and again withdrew to his cell [in the fortress], and was there daily a martyr to his conscience, contending in the conflicts of faith.

And his discipline was much more severe, for he was always fasting, and he had a garment with hair on the inside, while the outside was skin—which he kept until his death. And he neither bathed his body with water to free himself from filth, nor did he ever wash his feet, nor even allow so much as to put them into water, unless compelled by necessity.

—*The Life of Saint Anthony*⁷

Athanasius writes that around the age of 105, Anthony became deathly ill. To avoid a lavish funeral—the kind still common in Egypt—he traveled with two friends to a remote location, where he reportedly died in peace. Following Anthony’s instructions, his friends buried him in a secret grave, one even more isolated than his desert home.

Discussion: Why do you think some people pursue ascetic lifestyles? What’s attractive about hardship or self-abuse? Note Colossians 2:16–23.

Exercises: Page 36

The relationship between Christians and the world has challenged believers since the beginning of the church. In 2 Timothy 4, we read that one of Paul’s followers, Demas, deserted the apostle out of love for the world around him (v. 10).

To be clear, when Scripture refers to the “world” in this sense, the writers do not mean the world’s people. God calls us to love everyone, just as He loved them enough to send His Son (cf. John 3:16). Rather, as noted in Chapter 2, the world involves a mix of commerce, culture, and politics—both concrete and ideological—that remains opposed to God.

So how do Christians relate to this system and the people trapped inside?

Discussion: What are some visible elements of the world system? What are some of its ideological elements—its philosophical assumptions?

Exercises: Page 36 (cont.)

Avoiding the World

Many people in church history responded to the world system by trying to avoid it altogether. Afraid of sin and its consequences, these hermits rejected wealth, pleasure, and broader society, retreating instead to caves, mountains, or walled-off hideaways.

But that choice did not live up to Jesus' expectations. Note John 17:14–15, where Jesus prays for the followers He'd leave behind in this world.

Exercises: Page 37

- What did Jesus ask the Father to do for us (v. 15)?

Not to remove us from the world, but to protect us from evil / the evil one

Jesus asks God for preservation in this world, not an escape from all temptation. Later in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul explains that such an escape isn't even possible. Read Romans 7:18–25, where Paul admits an ongoing struggle:

- In verses 18–19, he writes that sometimes he cannot do the good things he wants to. Instead, what lives inside him, opposing him (vv. 20–21)? Sin/evil

Paul writes that while his inner being delights in God's law, another part of him desires sin. The conflict leaves him feeling like a prisoner (v.23). His mind wants to serve God, but his flesh serves the law of sin (v. 25). This is why he argues in Romans 8 that we must trust Christ's sacrifice (v. 3) and follow the Spirit (vv. 5–17).

- We need God to free us from our bondage to sin. With that truth in mind, is it possible to escape evil by isolating ourselves? Why or why not?

Answers will vary. We can never escape sin through avoiding the world because we carry the law of sin in our own flesh.

Context: Jeremiah expresses a desire to escape from sin—in his case, by fleeing into the wilderness (Jer. 9:2–3). In a way, this longing is good—it reflects the anticipation of heaven. But we cannot forget that sin will follow us anywhere in this world. Even as redeemed children of God, we still have a fallen, sinful nature.

But 2 Peter 1:3–4 tells us that we believers have escaped something, after all. When we receive grace at salvation, God grants us escape from the corruption that the rest of the world faces. We still live in the world, but it no longer drags us down with it into judgment.

Exercises: Page 37 (cont.)

The world system grows from the unchecked sin of humanity. Our “flesh,” as Scripture calls it, resonates with the world’s values. So to use Paul’s image of warfare, our flesh is the world’s foothold in us. As long as we have these earthly bodies, we will battle the world’s ideology on this beachhead.

Retreat will not free us from the battle. When we hide from the world, we hide from our responsibility to reach people with the gospel.

—Martin Luther (1483–1546), on his time in a monastery with the Order of Saint Augustine:

When I was a monk, if I felt some temptation assail me, I said to myself, “I am lost!”—and immediately resorted to a thousand methods, in order to suppress the cries of my heart. I went to confession every day, but that did me no good.

Thus oppressed with sadness, I was tormented by a multiplicity of thoughts. “Look!” I exclaimed, “you are still envious, impatient, passionate! It is of no use for you, O wretched man, to have entered this sacred order.”⁸

Discussion: Remember the way that Anthony despised his “flesh”—his physical form. This reflected a sort of Platonic philosophy that treated the physical as necessarily base, low, or evil, with the spiritual being higher, better, and more true.

But is the physical necessarily bad? What in Scripture indicates that the physical is good? Note the following:

- God created us with physical bodies.
- God designed ways for us to enjoy the physical world.
- Jesus resurrected with a glorified physical body that is a precursor to our own. Even in eternity, in God’s perfect new creation, we will apparently have tangible, corporeal form.

Engaging the World

God expects us to reach out to others (Matt. 28:19–20), not hide from them. The world is doomed, but we can show its people the way to safety. Yes, many will resist us or attack us, but Christ left us here to be ambassadors of hope and peace—even to God’s enemies. Everyone needs the gospel.

Engagement of the system is not an embrace. We do not mindlessly accept what the world says is true, beautiful, or valuable. We do not depend on the world for our sense of security, self-worth, or purpose. Rather, we focus our hopes and desires upward. Only then will we have anything valuable to offer the world’s people.

Read Colossians 3:1–4, where Paul describes our new life in Christ.

- What phrase in verse 1 indicates that Paul is writing to fellow Christians?
Text will vary. He addresses those who have been raised with Christ.
- In verse 2, what does Paul tell the Colossian believers to do?
Set their minds/affections on things above, not on earthly things
- We can do this because Christ holds our life in His hands. Anything worth treasuring lies with Him. And when Christ finally reveals Himself at the end of time, what also will happen (v. 4)? We will also appear/be revealed in glory.

Then we’ll finally understand what God created us to be.

Context: When we meditate on the hope we have in Christ—and all His promises for our future—we’ll find the world system less and less attractive. God created us to be amazing reflections of His grace. Why would we invest in a decaying, abusive, hopeless system that God will one day vaporize?

Exercises: Page 38 (cont.)

During the second and third centuries, as the church faced persecution and attacks from broader culture, some believers stood up for the ideas and doctrine of Christianity. Christian writers would craft a defense (Gr. *apologia*) and thereby become *apologists*. They addressed their works to government officials or the public at large, arguing that the church didn't follow dark teachings, but rather uplifting, moral principles.

Examples of early apologists include Tertullian—from whom you've already read—as well as Justin Martyr, Quadratus, Theophilus, and Clement. They often defended their faith and fellow believers in the face of violent persecution—some at the cost of their lives. As a group, they challenged and corrected the philosophies of the world at a time when other Christians found it easier to hide.

Context: Today we use the word *apology* to refer to a statement of regret—that is, we're sorry for doing something wrong. But in Greek culture, an *apologia* was a defense, a reasoned argument for something you believe. A good comparison in modern culture is perhaps the closing statements a lawyer makes in a jury trial.

Exercises: Page 39

Be a Living Testimony

So how would Scripture describe an appropriate relationship with the world? What balance can we strike? What principles can we follow?

We can find a good summary in the First Epistle of Peter, where the apostle encourages the Jewish Christians who found themselves scattered away from home. As they tried to pick their way through Gentile culture and still hold to their beliefs, they needed a great deal of wisdom.

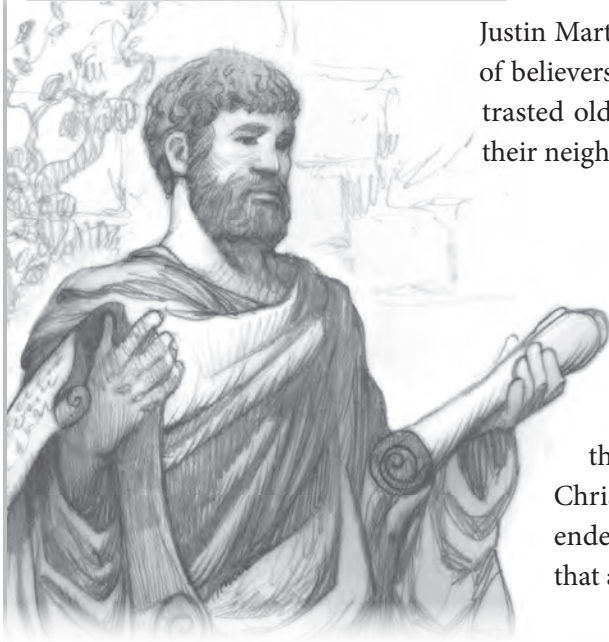
For the next few sections, we'll look at 1 Peter 3:8–17. Consider the first principle of this passage:

- In verse 8, what does Peter challenge the believers to *be*?

Terms will vary by translation. Christians should be unified, compassionate, loving, kind, and humble.

To defend our faith, we must first reflect its Author. We must, as an assembly, embody the love and unity of Christ. This automatically sets us apart—because the world, in its ideology of pride and rebellion, cannot muster lasting virtue.

Exercises: Page 39 (cont.)



Justin Martyr (c. 100–165) pointed to the communal love of believers as proof of the power of the gospel. He contrasted old, selfish pursuits with believers' new love for their neighbors:

... We, who loved the path to riches and possessions above any other, now produce what we have in common, and give to every one who needs; we, who hated and destroyed one another, and would not use even the same fire of those belonging to another tribe, because of their different customs; now, since the coming of Christ, [we] live together, pray for our enemies, and endeavor to persuade those who hate us unjustly, that all who have lived in accordance with the good

Page 40

commands of Christ may come to a good hope of obtaining from God, the Ruler of all things, the same reward as ourselves.

But, in case you should suspect me of [deceptive arguments], I think it best, before proceeding to my proofs, to bring forward a few extracts from the teaching of Christ; and be it yours, as mighty Emperors, to judge whether we have taught and do teach truly.

Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*⁹

History: As noted in this chapter's timeline, Justin Martyr was one of the earliest Christian apologists. His *First* and *Second Apology* tried to defend Christian beliefs to a Roman audience. He wrote the *Dialogue with Trypho* to convince Trypho, a Jewish man, that Christ was the Messiah promised by the prophets—and that the New Covenant therefore superseded the Old.

Justin was martyred around 165 after refusing to make sacrifices to Roman gods. A handful of his students were executed at the same time.

Respond with Blessing

Second, Peter urges his audience to respond well to mistreatment and mockery—whether from believers or unbelievers. Read 1 Peter 3:9–12.

- Peter writes that we shouldn't repay evil for evil—because believers are called to something higher. What are we called to both give and receive (v. 9)?

A blessing

- In verses 10–12, Peter quotes a section of Psalm 34. List every instruction from verses 10–11 that can help us avoid unnecessary trouble.

Answers will vary. We should avoid evil and deceptive speech (v. 10). We should turn from evil and do good (v. 11). We must pursue peace (v. 11).

- In verse 12, what blessing does God promise the righteous?

That He watches over them and hears their prayers

People strike out at believers to convince us that our God is too far away to see or hear us. When we respond with blessing, we show them that God's grace remains with us—and we have more than enough to share. Selfless love is a potent defense for our faith.

Context: Peter contrasts the good and bad ways we can respond to mistreatment. Naturally, we tend to respond with anger, frustration, or retaliation (cf. v. 9). But the Spirit enables us to bless the other person (cf. v. 9), doing good and seeking peace (cf. v. 11). God rewards our blessing with His own (v. 9).

Discussion: How can Christians be expected to respond to mistreatment with love? Where do we find that strength? What examples can we look to?

Be Prepared to Answer

In verse 15–17, Peter describes a way to engage that requires some preparation.

- What question should we be ready to answer (v. 15)?

What is the reason for the hope in us?

- According to the end of verse 15, how should we speak to anyone questioning us about this? With meekness/gentleness and fear/respect

This attitude—along with good, Christlike behavior—should put to shame anyone who accuses us of evil (v. 16).

- State the principle of verse 17 in your own words.

Answers will vary. It's better to suffer for doing good than for doing evil, if suffering is indeed God's will for us.

The command to be ready requires some work—on the part of the Spirit, yes, but also on us, as well. We should study the Word and become familiar with what Scripture teaches about God, His creation, and how He designed life to work. We show our love for the Father by pursuing Him in knowledge and understanding.

Still, it can be terrifying to answer questions about our beliefs. Thankfully, we need not have all the answers right away. We can lean on mature believers and other resources. We can take our time to respond to questions in a careful way. And we can acknowledge that God hasn't yet given us every answer to every problem.

But ultimately, we must be able to present the reason for our hope—the gospel of Christ. Why do we have joy in Christ? He died to take the punishment for our sins, then rose again to prove that death had no power. Why do we care so little about the things of this world? Certainly we enjoy God's gifts, but we enjoy the Giver more.

God has given us something we cannot sell, but He has not taken away our ability to work for it.

Discussion: What kind of questions do we not yet have a complete answer for? What sort of ambiguity must we accept, at least on this side of eternity?

How can the gospel give us hope anyway? Can you think of people in the Bible who maintained hope even when they didn't have all the answers? Examples might include Abraham, Job, David, Esther, Mary the mother of Jesus, and others.

Exercises: Page 41 (cont.)

God has saved us from this present world, but He has not taken us out of it. We remain here to testify—by suffering, if necessary—to His power in the gospel. We need not fear the world; God has conquered it. Rather, we can present the world's people with the hope of Christ.

Further Reading: Page 42

Further Reading: Beliefs of Second Century Christians

This chapter features a few short texts circulated by Christians in the second century. The first three statements come from notable apologists who asserted their hope in Christ:

It is neither in a definite place or special shrine, nor yet on certain feasts and days set apart, that the [one with understanding] honors God . . .

All our life is a [holy] festival. Being persuaded that God is everywhere present on all sides, we praise Him as we till the ground; we sing hymns as we sail the sea; we feel His inspiration in all that we do.

—Clement of Alexandria¹⁰

I will endeavor to show proofs from the rest of the Lord's doctrine and the apostolic letters . . . laboring by every means in my power to furnish you with much help against the contradictions of heretics; to reclaim the wanderers and convert them to the church of God; and at the same time to confirm the minds of [new believers] so that they preserve the faith they have received . . .

. . . but following the only true and steadfast teacher, the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who—through His transcendent love—became what we are so that He could make us be what He is.

—Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*¹¹

But if so great a power is shown to have followed and to be still following the dispensation of His suffering, how great will that be which follows His glorious appearing! For He will come on the clouds as the Son of man, as Daniel foretold, and His angels shall come with Him.

—Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*¹²

- Imagine someone has you asked to explain, in simple terms, why you trust Jesus. How would you respond? **Answers will vary.** _____

Discussion: How did you respond to the challenge at the bottom of page 42? What reason could you offer that an unbeliever might understand?

Further Reading: Page 43

The early apologists struggled to explain Christian beliefs to broader culture, but they found some help in the use of creeds. The following set of statements is known as the Apostles Creed. As you may remember from Chapter 1, Christians in the second century considered these beliefs to be the core of their teaching, passed down from the Apostles themselves. While the Apostles did not actually write these statements, the creed reflects the stand of the early church.

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth;

And in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord;

Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried;

He descended into hell [or, the depths]; the third day he rose again from the dead;

He ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;

From there He will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting.

Amen.

—The Apostles Creed¹³

- What doctrines here have you heard recently in your church?

Answers will vary.

- Are there any teachings you were surprised not to find in this creed?

Answers will vary.

Teacher's Note: Students may have questions after reading a couple statements in the creed. First, they may not understand the term “catholic” outside of its association with the Roman Catholic Church. To believers throughout history, however, this term refers to the *universal* church—the body of Christ—not a specific denomination.

Students may also be confused at the statement that Christ “descended into hell” (Latin, *descendit ad inferos*). Some confusion is appropriate—there’s a long and complicated history to this phrase.

If the writers of the creed meant “hell,” the literal place of judgment, they likely drew this doctrine from one interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19 and Ephesians 4:9–10. Christians differ on whether these passages refer to Christ’s preaching on Earth, which is lower relative to heaven—or they mean that Christ spent part of the three days after His crucifixion in Hades. The author of this study holds to the first of these views.

The writers of the creed may also have simply meant “the depths”—or, the grave. The phrasing is sometimes associated with Greek and Roman conceptions of the spiritual underworld.