



TRIED BY FIRE

The STORY of CHRISTIANITY'S
FIRST THOUSAND YEARS



WILLIAM J.
BENNETT

New York Times Bestselling Author

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Nelson Books



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*To those Christians around the world who are still tried by
fire and who have given everything for their faith.*

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INTRODUCTION

Christians in North America and Europe have always looked forward to celebrating Christmas. The sense of anticipation surrounding the holiday is an indication of what it offers: rejoicing in the Savior's birth, chances to celebrate traditions with family, the exchange of gifts, time off work, and so much more. But Christians around the world don't always have that same sense of anticipation. For some, the approach of the day can be clouded with dread. Let's examine some events of the season that took place around the globe to see why:

- In Somalia, fourteen peacekeepers were killed by Islamist militants as they celebrated Christmas.
- In Iran, seven Christians were hung at dawn on Christmas Day.
- In Kenya, thirty-six Christians in a work camp near the Somali border were either shot or beheaded by Islamist gunmen.
- In Pakistan, a twenty-eight-year-old woman, already the mother of four children and pregnant with another, was forced to walk naked through town and beaten with pipes by her employers. She miscarried. The charge against her? Being a Christian.¹

And the story of persecution and martyrdom continues; there is more Christian persecution now around the world than at any time in history. Pope Francis made headlines when he suggested as much in 2014.² In the same year, the Pew Research Center confirmed: Christians are the world's most persecuted religious group.³ One needs only to follow the reports coming out of Islamic State-occupied territories to get a sense of how bad the violence against Christians can get. In February 2015, twenty-one Egyptians were beheaded by the Islamic State as they cried out to Christ.⁴

The persecution of Christians is a dismal reality. And yet to Christians it is nothing new. The reignition of persecution of Christians around the world—in Iraq and Syria, Nigeria and Somalia, Pakistan and India—recalls the first few centuries after Christ, when devastation of the church was normal in places that are relatively tolerant today, like Italy, France, and Spain.

This book is the story of that early church, and predominantly its endurance through persecution. The burnings, beheadings, and other tortures of the first few centuries AD did not quash the ability of Christians everywhere to persist in belief. On the contrary, it is clear from the sources from the era that the ravages visited upon the church actually *strengthened* it. As the third-century writer Tertullian declared, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."⁵ Such a phenomenon is so counterintuitive and so supernatural that it deserves new attention here. Most aspects of the growth and theology of the early Christian church are explored here, but special

focus is given to how it endured centuries as a target of violence. Stories of Maximus the Confessor, whose tongue was cut out, or Perpetua, who was gored by a bull before being stabbed to death, still cry out to us and remind us of our spiritual roots.

Biography is one of the most excellent ways of teaching history. Consequently, *Tried by Fire* also has a heavily biographical focus. Great weight is given to the accomplishments, inner conflicts, and vital details of scholars (Augustine, Jerome), preachers (John Chrysostom, Gregory Nazianzus), missionaries (Pope Gregory, Saint Boniface), kings (Constantine, Justinian), and eccentrics (Simeon the Stylite, who lived atop a pillar in the desert; and Origen, who castrated himself). Their stories help illustrate the remarkable nature of their lives and times, and show how the extraordinary depth of their convictions shaped the world. Many of them are very graphic, and I warn the reader ahead of time of some disturbing material.

One of the difficulties in writing a book on the church is that there are so many definitions of what a Christian is. In the centuries since Christ founded his church, divisions over matters great and small have split the church into different sects, with the main divisions being Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox. The theological framework I employ in this book tries to encompass the most basic points of belief shared among all three. I acknowledge that each group will have, according to its own theological rubric, very different interpretations of the same historical events. The intent of *Tried by Fire* is not so much to declare what turns of history were right or wrong (except in the most obvious cases, such as the Arian denial of the divinity of Christ or the perversions of the tenth-century papacy), but to describe the causes and effects of various events in the first thousand years of the church.

There are already many excellent books on the Christian church. Men have, in fact, been writing histories of the church since the book of Acts. In recent decades, books like Robert Wilken's *The First Thousand Years* and Justo González's *The Story of Christianity* have told the story more than adequately. For clarification, you will notice many factual claims common to church historians that are not accompanied by footnotes. This decision not to cite every fact was made purely out of a consideration of added time to completion of the book and the length of the manuscript, and not a desire to obfuscate my sources. I am indebted to those books and others for much of the research for this book, but it is time to tell more fully this bloody part of the church's story.

In the mid-first century, the apostle Peter wrote to a church suffering persecution. He wanted them to understand that it was not for nothing. He urged that "the trial of your faith (much more precious than gold which is tried by the fire) may be found unto praise and glory and honour at the appearing of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:7 DRB). I hope that your faith will be strengthened by reading the accounts of those who have come, thought, written, and suffered before us.

WILLIAM J. BENNETT
SPRING 2016

ONE

SCATTERED SHEEP

Paul in Rome, the Appeal of Christianity, Missionary Journeys, and Deaths of the Apostles

On the night of July 18, AD 64, a great fire erupted in the south-eastern end of the Circus Maximus, a popular area in the city of Rome for commerce and entertainment. It quickly swept through the city, incinerating three districts and severely damaging seven others. Our idea today of ancient Rome is very often a city of concrete lustered with marble. In reality, most structures were made of wood or brick, which offered virtually no protection against fire. This particular blaze raged for six days before it was extinguished. The Roman historian Tacitus vividly described the damage the fire inflicted on the city and the panic experienced by its inhabitants as they tried to save one another:

Added to this were the wailings of terror-stricken women, the feebleness of age, the helpless inexperience of childhood, the crowds who sought to save themselves or others, dragging out the infirm or waiting for them, and by their hurry in the one case, by their delay in the other, aggravating the confusion. Often, while they looked behind them, they were intercepted by flames on their side or in their face.¹

The emperor at the time was a twenty-seven-year-old descended from a wealthy and powerful line of emperors: Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, or, as he is more commonly known to us, Nero. According to the Roman historian Suetonius, Nero was known for his insatiable lust, avarice, and brutality. His rise to power began with matricide. For fun, he would have innocent men and women bound to a stake. Nero himself, clad in the skin of some wild animal, then would spring forth from a cage and attack their private areas. On this night, claimed Suetonius, Nero dressed in stage costume and sang a popular song about the burning of the mythical city of Troy. In the aftermath, Nero decided to build a palace, the Domus Aurea (Golden House), on the site where the fire began. Rumors began to spread around Rome: Had Nero himself engineered such carnage, all to build a palace for himself?²

We don't know how exactly the inferno began, or what Nero's role was in engineering it. But we do know that Nero, to deflect attention from the rumors that labeled him an arsonist, quickly looked for a scapegoat. His sinister gaze would soon fall on a group that had nothing to do with it, a group that Suetonius described as "a

class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition.”³



A bust of the Emperor Nero in the Pushkin State Museum,
Moscow.

Nero had targeted the nascent Christian community in Rome. His vindictive purge was the first state-sponsored persecution of Christians in history. In the words of Eusebius of Caesaria, a historian from the fourth century AD who is often called “the Father of Church History,” Nero “began to plunge into unholy pursuits, and armed himself even against the religion of the God of the universe.”⁴ Tacitus paints a sickening portrait of the Neronian persecutions. Christians were arrested and forced to confess under threat of death. Many were then sentenced to death, not so much for setting the fire, but for hatred against mankind. Their deaths were humiliating and excruciating:

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.⁵

But even such violence did not—could not—stamp out the Christians. Tertullian, writing in the third century, managed to praise the Neronian persecution as evidence that the Christian life was something worth living: “We glory in having such a man as the leader in our punishment. For whoever knows him can understand that nothing was condemned by Nero unless it was something of great excellence.”⁶

Few Roman citizens loudly objected to the persecutions. But Nero’s outrageous and unjust administration eventually incited a rebellion and earned him the title of public enemy. As his enemies closed in on his hideout in 68, he ordered one of his attendants to stab him to death. Nero’s famous dying words were “*Qualis artifex pereo*,” which translates into English as “What an artist dies in me!” To his last breath, Nero was a man who gloried in his own violence, lust, and narcissism. His self-conception was the very opposite of his most famous victim’s, to whom we now turn our attention.

PAUL IN ROME

From the mid-30s AD onward, the man born Saul of Tarsus had devoted himself to telling the Mediterranean world about Jesus, a Jewish carpenter from the small town of Nazareth in the Roman province of Judea. Initially, Saul himself was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish religious teaching class; he had been a zealous persecutor of those who adhered to Jesus' teachings. "Saul began to destroy the church," says the book of Acts. "Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison" (8:3). One day in probably the year 33 or 34, Saul set out for Damascus, in Syria, to find any Jews there who were members of "the Way" (Acts 9:2) so that they might be imprisoned in Jerusalem for violating Jewish religious law. But while on the road there, he was blinded with a bright light and fell on his face. A voice accompanied the light: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," the voice replied (vv. 4–5). Saul eventually reached Damascus and lay blinded for three days, until a Damascene Christian named Ananias came and healed him. Ananias was afraid to approach Saul, knowing how intensely he hated Christians. And he must have been puzzled by God's own words describing how he planned to use Saul: "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (vv. 15–16). Ananias laid hands on Saul, and the next day Saul went to the Jewish synagogue in Damascus, where he preached "fearlessly" that Jesus was the Son of God (v. 27).



Caravaggio, *The Conversion of St. Paul*, ca. 1600.

Saul then traveled to meet the other disciples in Jerusalem. Initially, they were fearful of him, not believing he was really a disciple because of his reputation as a destroyer of Christians. But he was soon accepted on the basis of his preaching. He took the name Paul, choosing to adapt the Gentile (meaning non-Jewish) way of pronouncing his name in order to ingratiate himself to them. Paul began visiting synagogues, teaching to the Jewish congregations that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of messianic prophecies found in the Hebrew Old Testament. (In English, the word *Christ* comes from the Greek word *Christos*, which means “anointed one.” This was a transliteration of the Hebrew word *Messiah*, which means the same.) Paul’s reputation as a persecutor preceded him, and his conversion confounded his audiences. As the book of Acts says, “All those who heard him were astonished and asked, ‘Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?’ ” (9:21). But Paul kept declaring to them that Jesus was the Christ.

In time, Paul became an itinerant evangelist, crisscrossing the Mediterranean world, telling the gospel of Jesus Christ to Jews and Gentiles. At Athens, Paul confronted Stoic and Epicurean philosophers with the gospel. On the island of Cyprus, he temporarily blinded a false prophet (Acts 13:4–12). At Ephesus, a city in the ancient world famous for its shrine to the Greek goddess Artemis, Paul fled a mob of craftsmen that had been angered by his insistence that their gods of silver and gold were not real gods (19:23–41). It wasn’t out of piety that these craftsmen chased him down; the Ephesian economy was dependent on visitors to the shrine. At times, as God had told Ananias would happen, Paul suffered an incredible amount of physical persecution for following Christ. As Paul recounted in 2 Corinthians,

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and

naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. (11:24–28)

But none of it deterred Paul. He planted multiple churches across the Mediterranean world and won many converts. Now, in AD 67, Paul was in Rome, and his faith would again be tested. Nero’s persecution was raging. Although we have no contemporaneous written record of Paul’s last days or martyrdom, and there is still a healthy amount of scholarly debate on the topic, early church tradition claims that Paul was beheaded at Rome during the Neronian persecution.

A letter by Clement of Rome, written in about AD 90, comments on Paul’s attitude in facing death: “After that he had been seven times in bonds, had been driven into exile, had been stoned, had preached in the East and in the West, he won the noble renown which was the reward of his faith . . . he departed from the world and went unto the holy place, having been found a notable pattern of patient endurance.”⁷

In 2002, the Vatican commissioned an excavation of a tomb in the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside-the-Walls in Rome, a church near the Vatican that for two millennia has been thought to contain the remains of the apostle. In 2009, the pope released the results of the excavation. He noted that a white marble sarcophagus had been found containing bone fragments that were carbon-dated to the first or second century AD. In addition to the bone fragments, the archaeologists also found “some grains of incense, a ‘precious’ piece of purple linen with gold sequins, and a blue fabric with linen filaments.” A slab of cracked marble with the Latin words for “*Paul apostle martyr*” was also found set in the floor above the tomb. “This seems to confirm the unanimous and uncontested tradition that they are the mortal remains of the Apostle Paul,” declared Pope Benedict.⁸ What motivated Paul to embrace suffering and death? Certainly being a Christian brought him no earthly rewards, like money, social acceptance, or a life of comfort. To answer the question, we look now at how the earliest iterations of Christianity contrasted with the paganism of the ancient world.

THE APPEAL OF CHRISTIANITY TO THE CLASSICAL WORLD

To its first-century (and modern) practitioners, the Christian hope of eternal deliverance from eternal punishment and earthly misery was so attractive that Paul could write to the Philippians that, for him, “to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). Under the rubric of Jesus’ and Paul’s teachings, the first Christians understood Christ’s righteousness to be their own. The virtue was not obtained through one’s nature, habits, power of reason, or intelligence, but through the grace of God. This was a huge change from the classical notion that virtue was mostly a cultivated trait. The Christian faith also put no intellectual, ethnic, racial, gender, or class restriction on who could be a member. This ministry on earth presaged the unity that Jesus intended for the future church in his absence. As Paul had written in his epistle to the Galatians, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). Jesus as he appears in the Gospels is also

radical for his associations with the sinful, poor, infirm, and ignorant. This concern for the lowest stratum of society revealed a valuation of human life that was vastly more empathetic than Greco-Roman notions. To the Christian, every human being, having been made in the image of God, is precious in the sight of the Almighty. In time, this attitude would permeate Western thinking on all kinds of issues; in the early Middle Ages, for example, it was the Christian ethic that ended slavery in the Roman world. Christianity, and in particular its approach to sexual morality and gender norms, also improved enormously the condition of women, a topic to be explored in a later chapter.

Values derived from Christianity have largely been responsible for the relative economic, personal, and political freedoms enjoyed in the West. Although Western civilization has, especially in the past century, drifted from its Christian roots on issues like the sanctity of life, the importance of work, the formation of the family, and the centrality of faith in public life, our culture is still more derivative of Christianity than of any other world religion. Even amid the rise of secularism, the average Western man or woman has a concern for the inherent dignity of the individual, the condition of the poor, and the right to religious expression. And countries around the world have taken note of what has allowed Western civilization to distinguish itself. Harvard professor Niall Ferguson's 2011 book, *Civilization*, carried a remarkable quote from a member of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, which had recently conducted a study that attempted to identify the dominant factor that made Western civilization so successful compared to other civilizations:

We were asked to look into what accounted for the . . . pre-eminence of the West all over the world . . .

We studied everything we could from the historical, political, economic, and cultural perspective. At first, we thought it was because you had more powerful guns than we had.

Then we thought it was because you had the best political system. Next we focused on your economic system. But in the past twenty years, we have realized that the heart of your culture is your religion: Christianity. That is why the West has been so powerful. The Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life was what made possible the emergence of capitalism and then the successful transition to democratic politics. We don't have any doubt about this.⁹

The societal benefits of Christianity may seem obvious to some of us now. But it took centuries before ideas that had their origin in the gospel would become permanently knit into the cultural fabric. This is evident as we examine some of the struggles of the apostolic age of the church.

MISSIONARY ACTIVITY AND PERSECUTION OF THE DISCIPLES

The traditional view of the origin of the Christian church is that it began at Pentecost. Pentecost fell on a feast day in ancient Israel that celebrated Moses' receipt of the Law on Mount Sinai. On this day in AD 33, it happened to occur within a few days of Jesus' ascension into heaven, when 120 or so believers were gathered together to pray and ponder their next steps. On that day, the Holy Spirit, "like the blowing of a violent wind," swooped down from heaven and enabled all of the assembled to understand one another in a common language, despite the fact that they all were speaking their native tongues: Cappadocians, Cretans, Elamites, Egyptians, Galileans, Jews, Judeans, Medes, Mesopotamians, Pamphyliaans, Parthians, Pontians, Phrygians, and Romans (Acts 2:2–10). Some observers who heard the commotion were bemused by the sight and suggested that they were all drunk. But the apostle Peter stood up in response and delivered the first sermon of the Christian church: "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah" (v. 36). The preaching must have been powerful; the book of Acts reports that "about three thousand were added to their number that day" (2:41).

The significance of Peter rising to preach should not be overlooked. In Matthew 16, Jesus told his disciple Simon, "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (vv. 18–19). Catholics have interpreted these words to establish that Christ appointed Peter to be the head of the Christian church, and one to whom the other disciples would defer in matters of doctrine and ecclesiastical dispute. Among other sects of Christianity, there is a great diversity of opinion as to what exactly Jesus meant by this. Whatever one thinks about the question, the Gospels' depiction of Peter as one of the disciples to whom Jesus was closest, along with Peter's preeminence in Acts, establishes him as one of the leaders of the New Testament church.

The book of Acts captures in detail Peter's ministry in the time of the New Testament church. He was uncompromisingly brave in the face of legal and physical retribution. Peter and John, "unschooled, ordinary men," were thrown in jail before being tried by the Jewish ruling council (Acts 4:13). As punishment, the council declared they would have to stop preaching in public. But Peter and John could not be deterred. "We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard," they declared (v. 20). When Peter arrived at a house in which a young woman had died, the woman's friends were there, crying and holding out the pieces of clothing that she once made. With the words "Tabitha, get up," Peter raised her from the dead (9:40). When Peter was put in prison, an angel freed him, an event that went unnoticed by sixteen Roman guards. After "no small commotion," the sixteen were executed for their dereliction (12:18–19).

The apostles' work would not be impeded by the martyrdom of one of their own. The first martyr of the Christian church was Stephen, as documented in the book of Acts. Stephen was stoned to death by a mob of angry Jewish leaders, who were incensed by Stephen's accusation: "You always resist the Holy Spirit . . . you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it" (7:51, 53). Acts tells us that in Stephen's final moments he saw the heavens open, with Jesus

standing at the right hand of God. His final words were, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (v. 60).