

Chapter 16: The Church That Was Persecuted

“Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”¹

“Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.”²

The whole Scripture, especially the New Testament, emphasizes the horrifying truth about the existence of very active spiritual beings who strive to prevent the penetration of the life-saving message of Christ among sinners. The devil and his angels, whom the Lord Jesus called evil spirits, possess a high level of intelligence and in human history have designed and executed (and still execute) his criminal plan of spiritual deception over most people on the planet. The apostles affirmed the biblical truth that Satan, not God Almighty, is the ruler of this world.³ Most of humanity does not follow the New Testament evangelistic doctrine of salvation, but instead men are seduced by demonic ideologies and religions and are on the road to ruin.

The Lord also said that only a small number of people would travel the narrow path of salvation (which consists of true biblical faith), while the majority of mankind is moving towards eternal peril (for reasons of general betrayal of the biblical texts, be it through addition or subtraction to the Lord's revelation in the Holy Scriptures).⁴ According to the testimonies of the apostles whom God inspired, the entire history of the Christian Church (and even before the church) is a period of great struggle. It is the struggle between good and evil, or rather - the unnoticeable power of divine illumination and the totalitarian system of satanic darkness.

New Testament believers are sent from their Lord into the world filled with spiritual darkness to be light, just as He Himself was sent:

*“Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, **I am the light of the world.** He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.”⁵*

*“**You are the light of the world.** A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. **Let your light so shine before men,** that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”⁶*

The Lord said that people who are working in selfish interests of their own agendas are trapped with the iron chains of satanic delusion in the guise of earthly power. Such

¹ Matthew 5:11-12.

² Timothy 3:12.

³ See 2 Corinthians 4:4 and Revelation 12:9.

⁴ See Deuteronomy 4:2; Proverbs 30:6; and Revelation 22:18-9.

⁵ John 8:12. Author's emphasis.

⁶ Matthew 5:14-6. Author's emphasis.

people refuse to accept the saving truth that the minority will preach. These people want to stay on the side of the majority, who will feel comfortable and have no adversity. The devil, who deceives the whole world, will try to stifle the Gospel before it leads the masses, present in extremely bondage, into the light. As a liar and the father of lies, so named by the Lord, he has carried out these tactics to near perfection among unregenerate people.

The Lord taught His disciples that the way of living and preaching the Gospel would have much adversity filled with hatred both from irreligious and religious people clinging to unbiblical traditions of their fathers. The Lord explained that the devil's primary tactic in the fight against the victorious Gospel consists of **deception** spread against true biblical Christians. The tactic used by the god of this world against the Son of God, before the end of His earthly mission, was the same one used later to fight against the apostles. Even today, the tactic of deception is always used against the children of God in the contemporary world. This tactic is called perjury (or false accusations), which in many cases is accepted totally and blindly without any proof by the broad masses.

False Testimony Received about the Lord Jesus Christ

The earthly ministry of Jesus Christ not only consisted of bringing joy to simple, enthusiastic people who welcomed the coming forward to the great prophet, but the Messiah also condemned the hypocrisy and false doctrine of the Jewish leaders (Matthew 23). Of course, their motives for following Jesus and listening to His preaching differed from other people. Realizing that Jesus of Nazareth condemned many of their actions, the Jewish religious leaders became His dangerous enemies and decided to try at all costs to remove Jesus from the public scene. Because they feared the reaction of the people who believed Jesus was the Messiah, they could not publicly oppose him. Thus, they plotted a way to accuse him before the Roman Empire - which would arrest and then execute Him:

*“So the scribes and Pharisees **watched Him closely**, whether He would heal on the Sabbath, that they might find an accusation against Him... But they were filled with rage, and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.”⁷*

*“Now it happened, as He went into the house of one of the rulers of the Pharisees to eat bread on the Sabbath, that **they watched Him closely**.”⁸*

*“And the chief priests and the scribes that very hour sought to lay hands on Him, but they feared the people... So they watched Him, and sent spies who pretended to be righteous, that they might seize on His words, **in order to deliver Him to the power and the authority of the governor**.”⁹*

⁷ Luke 6:7,11. Author's emphasis.

⁸ Luke 14:1. Author's emphasis.

⁹ Luke 20:19-20. Author's emphasis.

*“Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, “What shall we do? For this Man works many signs... **Then, from that day on, they plotted to put Him to death...** Now both the chief priests and the Pharisees had given a command, that if anyone knew where He was, he should report it, that they might seize Him.”*¹⁰

However, despite having strong organization with many informants on the ground, the religious leaders could not “*seize and put Him to death*” until the time of His final and violent arrest in the garden at Gethsemane.

After a grand welcome from the gathered people who, when they saw Jesus riding on a colt, recognized the fulfillment of Zechariah’s ancient prophecy about the coming Messianic kingdom,¹¹ the Pharisees realized that all their previous efforts to discredit Jesus were in vain:

*“The Pharisees therefore said among themselves, ‘You see that you are accomplishing nothing. Look, the world has gone after Him!’”*¹²

Distraught over the fact that the people no longer listened to their “soul stirring” advice, they enlisted the help of a disciple – the traitor, Judas Iscariot. Jesus was arrested and taken to the middle of the night to a trial before the Sanhedrin – the supreme religious court. Their firm intention was to settle matters with Jesus once and for all. This intention is primarily reflected in the fact that they prepared in advance of the trial a slate of false (lying) witnesses who were supposed to confirm the Pharisees’ accusation that Jesus was a blasphemer against the public interest:

*“Now the chief priests, the elders, and all the council sought false testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, but found none. Even though many false witnesses came forward, they found none. But at last two false witnesses came forward and said, ‘This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.’ And the high priest arose and said to Him, ‘Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?’ But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest answered and said to Him, ‘I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!’ Jesus said to him, ‘It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.’ Then the high priest tore his clothes, saying, ‘He has spoken blasphemy! What further need do we have of witnesses? Look, now you have heard His blasphemy! What do you think?’ They answered and said, ‘**He is deserving of death.**’ Then they spat in His face and beat Him; and others struck Him with the palms of their hands, saying, ‘Prophecy to us, Christ! Who is the one who struck You?’”*¹³

¹⁰ John 11:47, 53, 57. Author’s emphasis.

¹¹ John 12:12-8.

¹² John 12:19.

¹³ Matthew 26:59-68. Author’s emphasis.

After hearing Jesus affirming Himself to be the Son of God,¹⁴ the religious leaders hauled Jesus before Pontius Pilate the Roman governor. Knowing that the charge of blasphemy would not convince Pilate to punish Jesus, they decided to accuse Jesus before the Roman official as a political enemy of Rome – an insurrectionist threat to the stability of the empire:

*“Then the whole multitude of them arose and led Him to Pilate. And they began to accuse Him, saying, ‘We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, saying that He Himself is Christ, a King.’ Then Pilate asked Him, saying, ‘Are You the King of the Jews?’ He answered him and said, ‘It is as you say.’ So Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowd, ‘I find no fault in this Man.’ But they were the more fierce, saying, ‘**He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee to this place.**’”¹⁵*

The accusation that Jesus was stirring up the people and forbidding them to pay taxes, of course, was false.¹⁶ The accusation that Jesus was a political rebel and evildoer was also false.¹⁷ The King of the Jews denied that His kingdom would be established by a political overthrow of Roman rule over the land of Judah:

*“Pilate then went out to them and said, ‘What accusation do you bring against this Man?’ They answered and said to him, ‘**If He were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him up to you**’... Then Pilate entered the Praetorium again, called Jesus, and said to Him, ‘Are You the King of the Jews?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Are you speaking for yourself about this, or did others tell you this concerning Me?’ Pilate answered, ‘Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered You to me. What have You done?’ Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.’”¹⁸*

As if there were not enough false accusations, the Jewish religious leaders told yet another lie after the Lord's crucifixion and resurrection. When they learned from the Roman guard that an angel had rolled away the stone at the tomb of Christ and Christ's body was no longer there,¹⁹ the Jewish religious leaders had another opportunity to believe in Christ and obey Him as Lord. Instead, they decided to spread yet more deception:

*“Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, **they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying, ‘Tell them, ‘His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.’** And if this*

¹⁴ See Luke 22:70-1.

¹⁵ Luke 23:1-5. Author's emphasis.

¹⁶ See Luke 20:19-26.

¹⁷ See John 18:30.

¹⁸ John 19:29-30, 33-6. Author's emphasis.

¹⁹ See Matthew 28:1-15.

*comes to the governor's ears, we will appease him and make you secure.' So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day."*²⁰

The deception consisted in the fact that Jesus's body was removed from the grave while the guards were sleeping.²¹ The frightened disciples of Jesus never could have mustered the courage to attempt to steal His body.²² Matthew notes that this deception was believed in the Jewish nation "until this day", i.e., many Jews refused to accept the Gospel several decades after the Lord's Ascension into Heaven.

The Persecution of the First Century Church

*"If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me."*²³

The Lord Jesus Christ warned that His disciples in generations to follow would surely face evil and persecution from unregenerate unbelievers. Only a small minority in each generation will obey the Word of God, while the majority, including those who lived during Christ's earthly ministry, would side with those who oppose God.

The apostles in the first century immediately after the descent of the Holy Spirit and the establishment of the Church met with problems just as the Savior predicted. Such problems consisted of prohibitions to preach, beatings, and murder attempts against those preaching the Gospel. The persecution and abuse as described in the first thirty years of the existence and expansion of the Church for the most part originated not with atheists but with deeply religious people. Jews, Greeks, and Romans viewed Christianity as a dangerous religious cult that threatened the destruction of their religious identity and would lead to alienation of people from their ancient spiritual roots of many centuries.

Acts chapters 4 and 5 describe how the Jewish elders wanted to put an end to the movement of Jesus of Nazareth. After healing a man paralyzed from birth, the apostles were arrested and thrown into prison. They were given a threat before being released:

²⁰ Matthew 28:11-15. Author's emphasis.

²¹ The Romans would punish sleeping on duty very harshly – execution. Thus, this story invented by the Jewish leaders is impossible.

²² See Matthew 26:56; 69-75.

²³ John 15:18-21. Author's emphasis.

*“Now as they spoke to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came upon them, being greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. **And they laid hands on them, and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening... So they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus...** So when they had further **threatened them**, they let them go, finding no way of punishing them, because of the people, since they all glorified God for what had been done.”*²⁴

However, after the apostles continued to preach, once again they were arrested. This time the threats became more serious – with the use of violence:

*“And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest asked them, saying, **‘Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man’s blood on us!’** But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: **‘We ought to obey God rather than men’**... When they heard this, **they were furious and plotted to kill them ... And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.**”*²⁵

After some time passed, the number of the Lord’s disciples grew. Traditional Jews led by Saul, the fanatic Pharisee, started a true wave of bloody persecution. The first Christian martyr was one of the seven deacons of the first church named Stephen. After they arrested Stephen, he began to speak to the testimony of the truth of Christ’s prophecy foretold in the Old Testament. His persecutors reacted in this manner:

*“Then they cried out with a loud voice, **stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him.** And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, **‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit’**... Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time **a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles...** **As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.**”*²⁶

Despite the troubles that befell these innocent people, the persecuted Christians continued to carry the gospel to the lost. On the other side, Saul the Pharisee was filled with anger because of what he considered the propagation of dangerous heresies. Since Saul was zealous for the faith of his fathers, which he considered holy and infallible, he conceived a plan to travel outside the country of Judah to other parts of the Roman Empire among Jews living abroad. Paul’s goal was to hunt down and bring back to Jerusalem the supporters of this sect founded by the crucified Nazarene:

²⁴ Acts 4:1-3, 17-18, 21. Author’s emphasis.

²⁵ Acts 5:27-9, 33, 40-1. Author’s emphasis.

²⁶ Acts 7:57-59; 8:1, 3. Author’s emphasis.

*“Then Saul, **still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord**, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”*²⁷

However, on the road to Damascus, something happened to this young Pharisee which he could have never imagined. Instead of carrying out his "expedition" to attain success in defending zealously the stubborn faith of his fathers - for which he never had any shred of doubt that may be what is wrong - this young man was confronted with the fact that his understanding of the Scriptures (the Old Testament) was completely wrong. After his risen Savior appeared in blinding sunlight, Saul, the sworn enemy of the Church of Christ, became the most ardent apostle of persecuted Christianity. Upon his conversion to Christianity, Saul changed his Jewish name, which in translation means "sought by God", to Paul, which in Latin means "small". After Paul recognized his error in misunderstanding the Scriptures and accepting that Jesus of Nazareth really is the Christ (Messiah), he immediately began to preach this truth wherever he went, both in Damascus and in Jerusalem:

*“So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus. Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God. Then all who heard were amazed, and said, ‘Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?’ But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ. Now after many days were past, **the Jews plotted to kill him**... So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out. And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, **but they attempted to kill him.**”*²⁸

It is obvious that Paul too met with the same threat with which earlier he had threatened others. His former comrades now regarded Paul as an apostate from the tradition of his fathers and a sectarian. They wanted to arrest Paul and close his mouth. The former persecutor now became a fugitive.

Acts 12 describes the murder of the apostle James, son of Zebedee, by King Herod, as well as the arrest of Peter and his incarceration. Acts 13 reveals the first opposition to the gospel by the false prophet Elymas, followed by resistance to Paul and Barnabas from both Jews and Gentiles, including representatives of the government. Acts 14 relates further persecution in Iconium, where they planned to stone the apostles to death. Since the evangelists fled to the neighboring city of Lystra and preached the gospel there, the Jews of Antioch and Iconium came to Lystra and incited the local population against Paul. This time, Paul could not escape stoning. The persecutors thought that Paul had died from the blows of the stones thrown at him and abandoned his body to the wild beasts. However, Paul was still alive. He went to the city of Derbe. After

²⁷ Acts 9:1-2. Author's emphasis.

²⁸ Acts 9:19-23, 28-9. Author's emphasis.

preaching there, Paul passed through all those places where they sought to kill him and exhorted believers to remain faithful. He returned to Antioch. Later, Paul received a vision to travel to Europe to proclaim the gospel there. The apostle found himself in Philippi. Presenting the gospel of salvation in Christ to all people, to the Jews first and then to the pagans, this was the reaction of the traditionally religious Romans:

*“...They seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities. And they brought them to the magistrates, and said, ‘These men, being Jews, exceedingly trouble our city; and they teach customs which are not lawful for us, being Romans, to receive or observe.’ Then the multitude rose up together against them; and the magistrates tore off their clothes and commanded them to be beaten with rods. And when they had laid many stripes on them, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to keep them securely. Having received such a charge, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.”*²⁹

For our study, this statement that the apostles were teaching customs not lawful to be adopted by Romans, as well as for people indoctrinated in religious tradition centuries old, is significant.³⁰

After these false accusations, the Lord’s followers once again were thrown into prison. After their miraculous liberation, they continued with their missionary journey. Their persecution by fanatical Jews continued in the Greek cities of Thessalonica and Berea. The familiar scenario replayed itself as once again the Lord’s followers were accused of being enemies of the state and rebels:

*“But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, ‘These who have turned the world upside down have come here too. Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus.’ And they troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things... But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was preached by Paul at Berea, they came there also and stirred up the crowds.”*³¹

²⁹ Acts 16:19-24. Author’s emphasis.

³⁰ The revolt of the Romans and- the traditional Jews against the proclamation of the Gospel actually occurred after Paul drove out an evil spirit from a slave whose masters made lots of money from her display of fortune telling. This ability was enabled by the evil spirit. After the demon departed the woman, her talent for fortune telling ceased, and her masters lost their ability to make money off her. Thus, her masters lashed out against the apostle. Up to that point, they were completely uninterested in Paul. This example clearly demonstrates the real reasons (such as loss of financial profit) that ungodly people very often conceal their hatred for God’s truth and mask them with an alleged concern for the spiritual good of the people.

³¹ Acts 17:5-8, 13. Author’s emphasis.

Several years later, the apostles came to Ephesus. Their preaching resulted in the conversion of many people and their rejection of worshiping the idolatrous statues of pagan gods, whom they used to worship in the past. After these events unfolded, the artisans and merchants who produced these idols for profit realized that they would lose a lot of money if Paul continued to succeed in turning people from idolatry. They decided to try to stop Paul:

*“And about that time there arose a great commotion about the Way. For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Diana, brought no small profit to the craftsmen. He called them together with the workers of similar occupation, and said: ‘**Men, you know that we have our prosperity by this trade.** Moreover you see and hear that not only at Ephesus, but throughout almost all Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away many people, saying that they are not gods which are made with hands. So not only is this trade of ours in danger of falling into disrepute, but also **the temple of the great goddess Diana may be despised and her magnificence destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worship.** Now when they heard this, **they were full of wrath and cried out, saying, ‘Great is Diana of the Ephesians!’**”³²*

This example reveals how influential people can defend their personal, selfish, material interests through manipulating the religious sentiments of the uninformed masses. Although Demetrius’s personal motive for opposing Paul and others stemmed from his fear of losing his income, he achieved maximum effect by appealing to the masses’ "religious heritage" and concern for national interests.

On the other side, the Jews did not stand idle. Acts 21 describes another attack on Paul and his helpers. Once again, we see the errant understanding of the essence of their work:

*“Now when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, **stirred up the whole crowd** and laid hands on him, crying out, ‘Men of Israel, help! **This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place;** and furthermore he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.’ (For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.) And all the city was disturbed; and the people ran together, seized Paul, and dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut. **Now as they were seeking to kill him,** news came to the commander of the garrison that all Jerusalem was in an uproar... When he reached the stairs, he had to be carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob. For the multitude of the people followed after, crying out, ‘**Away with him!**’”³³*

When Paul was protected and continued to preach the true message of God and against the traditions of their fathers, angry mobs again demanded his death:

³² Acts 19:23-8. Author’s emphasis.

³³ Acts 21:27-31, 35-6. Author’s emphasis.

*“And they listened to him until this word, and then they raised their voices and said, ‘Away with such a fellow from the earth, **for he is not fit to live!**’”*³⁴

Paul was brought before the Jewish supreme council because of his missionary work. His activity lessened the division and strife between the Pharisees and the Sadducees (the two religious movements that made up this group). They became one militant group made up of dozens of religious fanatics who resolved at all costs to eliminate Paul. In collaboration with the religious leaders, they forged a bloody plan:

*“And when it was day, some of the Jews banded together and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. Now there were more than forty who had formed this conspiracy. They came to the chief priests and elders, and said, ‘**We have bound ourselves under a great oath that we will eat nothing until we have killed Paul.** Now you, therefore, together with the council, suggest to the commander that he be brought down to you tomorrow, as though you were going to make further inquiries concerning him; but we are ready to kill him before he comes near.’”*³⁵

However, Paul’s nephew discovered this conspiracy and told him about it. Then Paul went to the Roman commander, whom he knew. The Roman commander ordered Paul to be escorted with a strong military detachment from Jerusalem to Caesarea. On this occasion, the commander named Claudius Lisius wrote a letter to the king Felix. He informed Felix of the “offenses” with which Paul was accused:

*“And when I wanted to know the reason they accused him, I brought him before their council. I found out that he was accused concerning questions of their law, **but had nothing charged against him deserving of death or chains.** And when it was told me that the Jews lay in wait for the man, I sent him immediately to you, and also commanded his accusers to state before you the charges against him. Farewell.”*³⁶

This official of the Roman Empire, a pagan who showed no partiality in Jewish religious disputes, clearly made a more objective assessment of the “peril” of Paul’s actions than the “orthodox” Jewish leaders, who were ready to put Paul to death because of his religious convictions. The professional soldier concluded that Paul had not done anything worthy of punishment by the state authorities in this religious dispute.

Failing to find peace because Paul once again escaped from their clutches, the enemies of the Gospel – the high priest Ananias, the elders, and a lawyer named Tertullus – came before Felix and made false allegations more strongly than ever before:

*“Nevertheless, not to be tedious to you any further, I beg you to hear, by your courtesy, a few words from us. **For we have found this man a plague, a creator of dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the***

³⁴ Acts 22:22. Author’s emphasis.

³⁵ Acts 23:12-5. Author’s emphasis.

³⁶ Acts 23:28-30. Author’s emphasis.

*Nazarenes. He even tried to profane the temple... And the Jews also assented, maintaining that these things were so.”*³⁷

It is interesting to note that these religious people, who called themselves orthodox, were not troubled by the fact that they falsely swore and gave false testimony simply in order to destroy others who preached differently from them, even though Scripture clearly commands in the ninth commandment: *"Thou shall not bear false witness against thy neighbor."* What is worse, this false testimony is directed against the few followers of the Lord by a huge mass of people who followed and supported the traditionalists. The word of defense for the persecuted and falsely slandered apostles never enjoyed such worldly support as the word of prosecution by their accusers - who insinuated their blatant fabrications before the government by calling for a ban on the accused's activity and the arrest of those whom they opposed.

Fortunately, a representative of the Roman Empire, who, according to Luke, "knew" the Jewish religion and its contemporary controversies (Acts 24:22), not only rejected the testimony of the Jewish religious leaders, but he also recognized Paul to be a harmless and noble man in listening to his preaching. Unfortunately, Felix was not strong enough to free Paul. Instead, Felix detained Paul in prison out of a desire to please the official Jewish religious authorities.³⁸ Despite his innocence, Paul remained in prison for two years, until Porcius Festus succeeded Felix.

The previous script of events repeated itself during the reign of Festus. The Jews once again tried to persuade the Roman governor to return Paul to Jerusalem – so that their fanatics could attack and assassinate him on the way. (Acts 25:1-3) When this plan failed, the Jewish officials yet again brought up some dramatic and false accusations that they could not prove. Luke describes the apostle's testimony:

*“...While he answered for himself, ‘Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended in anything at all.’ But Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favor, answered Paul and said, ‘Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and there be judged before me concerning these things?’ So Paul said, ‘I stand at Caesar’s judgment seat, where I ought to be judged. **To the Jews I have done no wrong**, as you very well know. For if I am an offender, or have committed anything deserving of death, I do not object to dying; but if there is nothing in these things of which these men accuse me, no one can deliver me to them. I appeal to Caesar.”*³⁹

And Festus himself realized that Paul was not a criminal, but rather the issue was his disagreement with the official Jewish religious leaders on certain issues. The pagan Roman correctly assessed the situation without being deceived by those who claimed to serve the one true God. Festus said to King Agrippa:

³⁷ Acts 24:4-6, 9. Author's emphasis.

³⁸ This situation is similar to the relationship in contemporary Serbia between the government on the one side and religious people who make false accusations against Christians. We will examine this subject in the next chapter.

³⁹ Acts 25:8-11. Author's emphasis.

*“And Festus said: ‘King Agrippa and all the men who are here present with us, you see **this man about whom the whole assembly of the Jews petitioned me, both at Jerusalem and here, crying out that he was not fit to live any longer.** But when I found that he had committed nothing deserving of death, and that he himself had appealed to Augustus, I decided to send him.’”*⁴⁰

Agrippa himself also became convinced that Paul was innocent and his accusers were lying. In fact, Agrippa stated that Paul almost persuaded him to become a Christian (Acts 26:28). This incident demonstrates an exceptional situation when two pagan leaders were confronted with conflict between religious minorities and the Satanic advocates of traditional religion who falsely accused them:

*“When he had said these things, the king stood up, as well as the governor and Bernice and those who sat with them; and when they had gone aside, they talked among themselves, saying, ‘**This man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains.**’ Then Agrippa said to Festus, ‘**This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.**’”*⁴¹

This review of Acts leads us to conclude that the ongoing efforts of leaders of the major religions (Jewish, Latin, Greek) fabricated false accusations to create conflict between ordinary people ignorant of the Gospel against Christian believers. We can also recognize that these same clever religious leaders rationalized their behavior on centuries-old tradition from their ancestors. Through deception and false testimony, these religious leaders attempted to persuade the government to pressure Christians through legal prohibition of their physical (or at least spiritual) presence. Such tactics by opponents of the gospel, as we shall see in the next chapter, have not changed for centuries and remain unchanged to this day.

Persecution of Christians under Pagan Rome

Although the book of Acts cites the restraint of the Roman authorities with regard to prosecuting Jesus’s disciples based on false accusations, things changed later in the second half of the first century. Mass persecution of Christians began.

Namely, in 64 A.D., a major fire broke out in Rome. This disaster ensued for over a week and resulted in the destruction of one entire city quarter. Many casualties resulted, and thousands of people were left homeless. News spread that the emperor himself, Nero, started the fire in order to extend his imperial palace to the areas of the destroyed city.

When he learned that the people blamed him for the disaster that befell the inhabitants of the capital, Nero got the idea to shift the blame to someone else. His scapegoat was a religious Jewish sect, the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. They comprised a small Christian church about which the Romans, at the time, knew very little. Because the

⁴⁰ Acts 25:24-5. Author’s emphasis.

⁴¹ Acts 26:30-2. Author’s emphasis.

Christians preached that the sinful world in the future be destroyed by fire (according to 2 Peter 3:7), it seemed quite logical to blame them for burning the “sinful city” of Rome. Christians in Rome were also accused of preaching hatred toward civilization and observing some mysterious nocturnal rites:

“The lack of temples, the night meetings and secret ceremonies, all inevitably aroused suspicion, and naturally the most monstrous rumors developed about orgies, magic, and ritual murders at Christian meetings.”⁴²

The ancient historian Cornelius Tacitus in his *Annals* describes the beastly torture of Christians that followed the spreading of unproven charges of arson:

“Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt **and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class 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 Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, **not so much of the crime of firing the city, as 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.”⁴³

After this cruel massacre of Christians, which was limited to the capital of the empire, persecution on a grander scale occurred under the emperor Domitian, who ruled from 81-96 AD. This ruler attempted to enforce Romanization of the whole empire, which included the institution of the cult of the emperor – who demanded veneration as a deity. At the end of the first century, most Christian churches were located in Asia Minor, and the persecution of Jesus' followers, who refused to venerate Caesar as a god, was most prevalent in this province. After the death of Domitian, Trajan became emperor from 98-117. His reign continued the oppression and murder of believers.

Although no official law prohibited anyone from calling himself a Christian, nonetheless believers particularly in the East suffered frequent arrest and interrogation by the Roman authorities. Anyone who renounced Christ was immediately set free. Otherwise, if a true believer survived and admitted his membership in the "pernicious superstition", he would receive a death sentence. We find such treatment of Christians in correspondence between the Roman authorities Emperor Trajan and Pliny the proconsul who led during the second decade of the second century A.D. Such a situation lasted for several

⁴² Alexander Schmemmann, *The Historical Road to Orthodoxy*, 57.

⁴³ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44 from <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/tacitus.html> .Author's emphasis.

decades during the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161-180). In fact, the situation became even more difficult for the oppressed followers of the Son of God:

“The reign of Marcus Aurelius, philosopher and enlightened man, for 20 year was, somewhat paradoxically, the period of the most intense persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire. Although there were no significant changes to legislation (denial of Christ would lead to the release of the prisoner), **anonymous informers who hated Christians** by making complaints and charges against these unfortunate believers **received the general approval of the Roman masses that were hostile to this new ‘superstition’, the new ‘heresy.’**”⁴⁴

It was not until the early third century that the law officially allowed the persecution of the followers of Christ. The emperor who enabled a new wave of killing was named Septimius Severus. In the year 202, he issued an edict that outlawed Christianity and Judaism. Anyone who confessed to either of these two religions was subject to the death penalty. As a consequence of the adoption of this law, Christians were killed particularly in northern Africa.

Half a century after the enactment of the first legislative act to prohibit Christianity, a man ascended to the Roman throne and started the first official state persecution of the Church. Although he only ruled for three years (249-251), Emperor Decius managed to behead many of the local churches by condemning to death their elders-bishops. The emperor introduced the practice of universal sacrifice to the gods, which was conducted under the watchful supervision of special state commissions. Many Christians who were unable to run away from being present at such sacrifices were executed because of their refusal to submit to the law.

When Valerian (253-260) succeeded Decius as emperor, his first few years were more benign for Christians. However, in 258, for unknown reasons he ordered many church officials to be executed and the expropriation of assets held by nobles who had become Christians. Those who remained faithful often were threatened with the death penalty.

Gallienus ascended the throne in 261 and began a period of 40 years when the persecution of Christians ceased. During this period, the church was strengthened and grew in numbers.

It is interesting that Diocletian, the last Christian persecutor, left the Christians alone during the first nineteen years of his reign. However, he later issued a whole series of laws that sanctioned open official government hostility against the New Testament believers. On February 23, 303, the emperor issued an edict that called for the burning of Christian holy books and an official ban on church gatherings. On the next day, he issued a second edict that took away Christians’ right to own property (which had been given in the previous period of peace), and disallowed them to be plaintiffs in any litigation. He again came to power and renewed their persecution and torture. Several

⁴⁴ Milan Vukmanovic, *Early Christianity from Jesus to the Christ*, 38. Author’s emphasis.

months later, Diocletian passed a third edict that forced officials of the Christian churches to perform public offerings to the altars of pagan idols as a condition for release from prison.

In the years 304 and 306, Emperor Galerius made two additional general edicts that mandated Christians to attend and participate in sacrifices to pagan deities. Any resistance to the imperial orders would face severe retaliation. However, only a few years later in 311, Galerius fell seriously ill and suddenly changed his decision. Christians were once again allowed to gather in their homes for worship, on condition that they would not disturb public order and peace, and that they would pray for the emperor and the peace of the Roman state.

The next year in 312 brought about the famous Edict of Milan. The Emperor Constantine declared the Christian religion equal with others in the empire. Apparently Constantine's conversion to Christianity, which happened on the basis of a strange dream after which he defeated Maxentius, his rival for the Roman throne, represented the first step towards what transpired later.

What actually transpired was a monstrous transformation of formal Christian religion, in which the persecuted church quickly ascended to the position of itself becoming a persecutor of others and utilizing the apparatus of the state to carry out persecution.

The next chapter will examine in detail the ways that the Church took this tragic turn of affairs.