

GOD'S PREVAILING WORK



Themes in Church History, AD 30-1517

By C.J. Harris

The logo for PositiveAction FOR CHRIST, featuring a stylized 'P' icon above the text.

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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

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First Printing, 2018

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-59557-323-0

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

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Introduction

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

You will spend most of your time studying the Bible, and by doing so you should better understand the conflicts faced by the church. This book 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, you probably won't be prepared to pass an exam on church history, but you should understand how God has worked through people just like you in ages past. You will know a few of these Christians—along with their contributions and shortcomings—and you will hopefully trust that God can work through even the most troubling times today.

By His Grace,



In This Book

As you work through this student manual, you'll encounter a variety of Scriptures and historical writings that you may discuss with your teacher and fellow students. The more thought you put into this study, the more your group will benefit from the discussion.

Timelines & Maps

Every chapter begins with a timeline showing a handful of important dates. You do not need to memorize these people or events—they simply help you put the chapter's themes in context. Likewise, maps serve only to show you important locations mentioned in this study.

Reading Exercises

Scattered throughout each chapter are a number of questions that encourage you to think about what you've read. References and verse numbers will show you where to look for answers. Some questions are simple, while others challenge you to carefully meditate on Scripture and form an opinion.

Quotations & Endnotes

This book 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 this book, you can find endnotes that list the original sources.

Scripture Memory

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	



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.

CHAPTER 1

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.

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)? _____
- If we believers love each other this way, what will people understand (v. 35)?

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)? _____

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

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.

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.

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? _____

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.

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*

- How did people outside the church react to this new movement (v. 43)?

- How else did the believers show love to each other (vv. 44–47)?

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.

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

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

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

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

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—

- Romans 12:15; Galatians 6:1–2—

- Ephesians 5:18–21—

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

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

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)?

- 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.

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—

- Acts 14:21–23—

- Colossians 1:9–12—

- Colossians 4:12–13—

- James 5:14–16—



- 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13—

- 1 Timothy 2:1–2—

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

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? _____

- What surprised you about Tertullian's description? _____



c. 30

The Apostle Paul is martyred.

c. 67

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, Adactus, 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?

- What promises does Christ offer to these people?

- Verse 10—_____

- Verse 12—_____

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.



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)?

- Why shouldn’t we be surprised when “the world” hates us (vv. 20–21)?

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.

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.

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

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*

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.

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.

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.

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)?

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

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.

Look back at Christ’s instructions in Matthew 10.

- Write out verse 39. _____

- 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?

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

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).

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):

- The Apostles, after being whipped and reprimanded (Acts 5:40–41):

- Barnabas and Paul, after being thrown out of a city (Acts 13:50–51):

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.

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.

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: _____
- Verse 14: _____
- Verse 15: _____

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).

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

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.

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)? _____

- What do they ask God (v. 10)? _____

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.

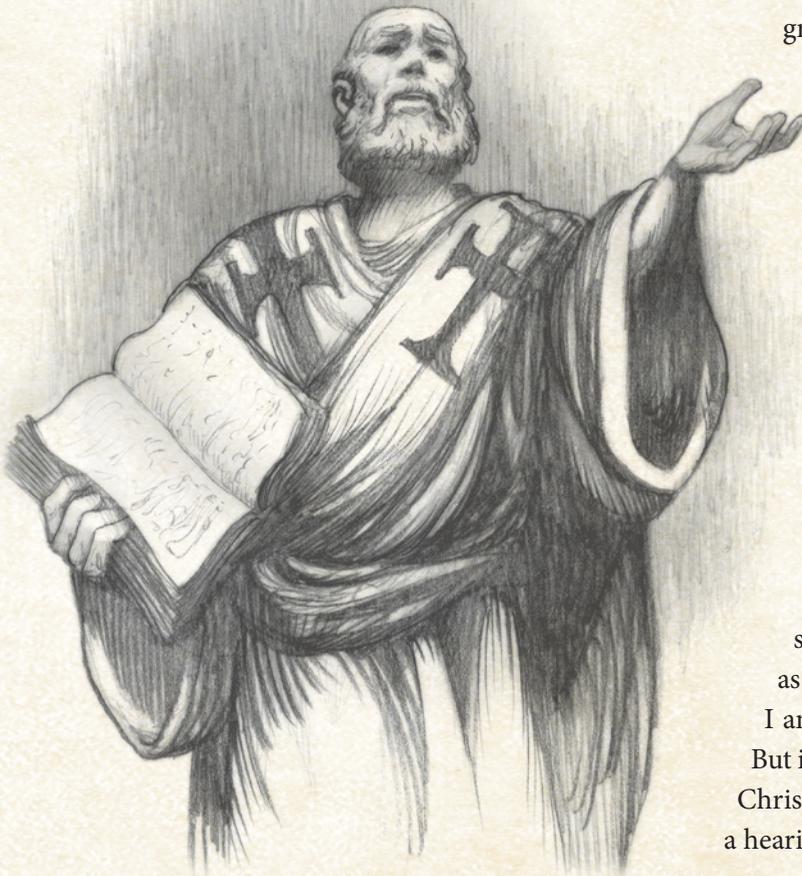
When then [Polycarp] was brought before him, the proconsul asked if he were the man [they sought]. After Polycarp confessed that he was, [the proconsul] tried to persuade him to a denial, saying, "Have respect for your age . . . Swear by the divine providence of Caesar; repent and say, 'Away with the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

- What about “swearing by Caesar” do you think seemed wrong to Polycarp?

- What reason did Polycarp offer for refusing to deny Christ?

- How do you think this scene affected believers who looked on? What about unbelievers? _____



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.

CHAPTER 3

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).

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:

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.

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?

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.

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

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)? _____

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?

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

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?

- In verse 2, what does Paul tell the Colossian believers to do?

- 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)? _____

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

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.

Be a Living Testimony

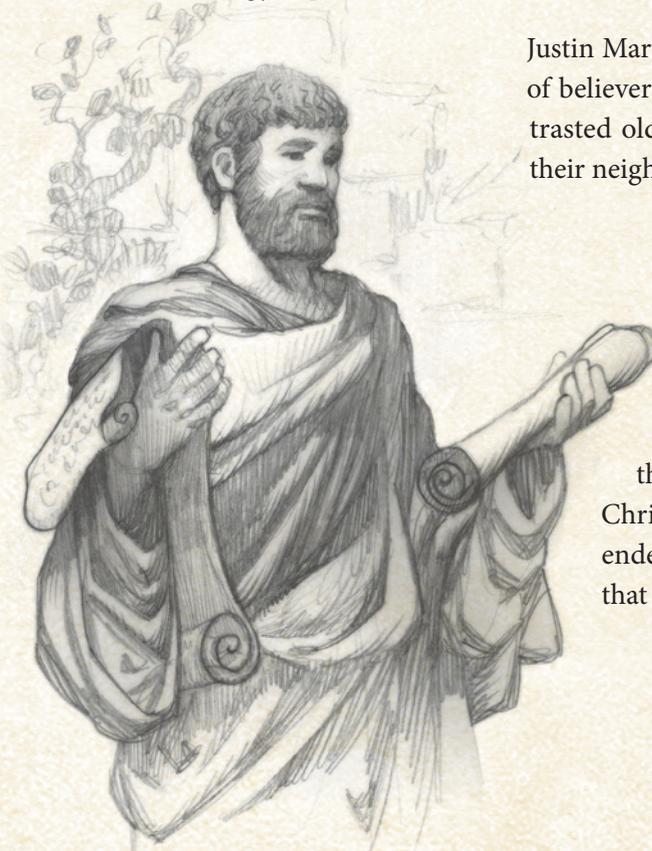
So how would Scripture describe an appropriate relationship with the world? What balance can we strike? What principles can we follow?

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*?

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.



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

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

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)?

- 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.

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

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.

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)?

- According to the end of verse 15, how should we speak to anyone questioning us about this? _____

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.

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 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: 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? _____

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?

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