

Church History and Evidences
Notes: Paul's Companions and Roman Persecution

I. Timothy, Titus, Barnabas, John Mark, and Luke

A. **Timothy** - That Timothy was jailed at least once during the period of the writing of the New Testament is implied by the writer of Hebrews mentioning Timothy's release at the end of the epistle. The apocryphal Acts of Timothy states that in the year 97 AD, the 80-year-old tried to halt a procession in honor of the goddess Diana by preaching the gospel. The angry pagans beat him, dragged him through the streets, and stoned him to death.

B. **Titus** - Early church tradition holds that Paul, after his release from his first imprisonment in Rome, stopped at the island of Crete to preach. Due to the needs of other churches, requiring his presence elsewhere, he left Titus to finish the work he had started. Paul summoned Titus from Crete to join him at Nicopolis in Epirus [Titus 3:12]. Later, Titus supposedly traveled to Dalmatia. He returned to Crete and remained there into his old age, dying at age 94 in Gortyna, near the city of Candia (modern Heraklion).

C. **Barnabas** - Although the date, place, and circumstances of his death are historically unverifiable, Christian tradition holds that Barnabas was martyred at Salamis, Cyprus, in 61 AD. After he returned to Cyprus, his native country, he suffered martyrdom in the following manner: certain Jews coming from Syria and Salamis, where Barnabas was then preaching the gospel, being highly exasperated at his extraordinary success, fell upon him as he was disputing in the synagogue, dragged him out, and after the most inhuman tortures, stoned him to death. His kinsman, John Mark, who was a spectator of this barbarous action, privately interred his body in a cave.

D. **John Mark** - Was sent by Paul to Colossae (Colossians 4:10; Philemon 24) and serving with him in Rome (2 Tim 4:11); from Pentapolis he made his way to Alexandria. When Mark returned to Alexandria, the pagans of the city resented his efforts to turn the Alexandrians away from the worship of their traditional gods. In AD 68, they placed a rope around his neck and dragged him through the streets until he was dead.

E. **Luke** - He was the only Gentile (non-Jew) to write books of the Bible. See Col. 4:10-11, 14, "*My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my co-workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me. ... 14 Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings.*" As a physician, Luke must have been curious about the medical conditions behind Christ's miracles. As a matter of fact, Luke uses more medical terms than any other New Testament writer. For example, he doesn't just say Publius' father was sick: he tells us he suffered from fever and dysentery. He is believed to have been a martyr, reportedly having been hanged from an olive tree. Luke died at age 84 in Boeotia, according to a "fairly early and widespread tradition".

II. Major Persecutions from Rome

- A. Prior to Nero's accusation of arson and subsequent anti-Christian actions in 64, all animosity was apparently limited to Jewish hostility.
- B. From the time of Nero (64 A.D.) until the conversion of Emperor Constantine and the Edict of Milan (313 A.D.), whereby Christianity was made legal, the Christian faith was officially regarded as a *religio prava*, an evil or depraved religion.
- C. The early Christians were the targets of repeated persecutions - some of unspeakable cruelty. For example, the emperor Nero blamed the Christians for the great fire that destroyed 10 of the 14 city wards at Rome in 64 A.D., a fire that Nero apparently had ordered himself. The historian Tacitus, not a Christian, said that Nero had the believers "torn by dogs, nailed to crosses, . . . even used as human torches to illumine his gardens at night."
- D. According to some historians, Jews and Christians were heavily persecuted toward the end of Domitian's reign (89-96). The Book of Revelation, which mentions at least one instance of martyrdom (Rev 2:13; cf. 6:9), is thought by many scholars to have been written during Domitian's reign. Early church historian Eusebius wrote that the social conflict described by Revelation reflects Domitian's organization of excessive and cruel banishments and executions of Christians, but these claims may be exaggerated or false.
- E. But Christians were not under persecution everywhere and all the time. The persecutions were sporadic, with peaceful intervals in between. They varied in their intensity and were mostly localized.
- F. Between 109 and 111, Pliny the Younger was sent by the emperor Trajan (r. 98-117) to the province of Bithynia (in Anatolia) as governor, and their correspondence is considered a valuable historical source. In one of his letters (Letter 10.96), Pliny reports on his actions with regard to some people who had been denounced as Christians, some of them anonymously: those that persisted in confessing that they were Christians he had executed or, if Roman citizens, sent to Rome; those who denied that they were Christians he subjected to the test of invoking the gods, offering them incense and a libation in the presence of an image of the emperor, and cursing Christ. Some who admitted that they had formerly been Christians but proved, by passing the test, that they were no longer Christian, declared that Christians did not commit the crimes attributed to them, a declaration confirmed under torture by two slave women who were called deaconesses. Pliny therefore asked the emperor whether ceasing to be a Christian was enough to secure pardon for having been one, and whether punishment was merited just for being a Christian ("the name itself") or only for the crimes associated with the name. Trajan responded that the problem could only be dealt with case by case. The authorities were not to seek Christians out, but people who were denounced and found guilty were to be punished unless, by worshiping the Roman gods, they proved they were not Christians (having denied Christ) and so obtained pardon. Anonymous denunciations were to be ignored.
- G. Christians who refused to recant by performing ceremonies to honor the gods would meet with severe penalties; Roman citizens were exiled or

condemned to a swift death by beheading. Slaves, foreign-born residents, and lower classes were liable to be put to death by wild beasts as a public spectacle. A variety of animals were used for those condemned to die in this way. There is no evidence for Christians being executed at the Colosseum in Rome.

H. There were two all-out empire-wide persecutions intended to utterly destroy the church. The first, under the emperor Decius, began in December 249AD. Everyone in the empire had to get a certificate from a government officer verifying that he or she had offered a sacrifice to the gods - an act that most Christians in good conscience could not do.

I. The second, called "The Great Persecution," began on February 23, 303, under Emperor Diocletian. Galerius, the empire's second-in-command, was behind this persecution policy and continued it after Diocletian's death. For eight long years, official decrees ordered Christians out of public office, scriptures confiscated, church buildings destroyed, leaders arrested, and pagan sacrifices required. All the reliable methods of torture were mercilessly employed - wild beasts, burning, stabbing, crucifixion, the rack. But they were all to no avail. The penetration of the faith across the empire was so pervasive that the church could not be intimidated nor destroyed. In 311, the same Galerius, shortly before his death, weak and diseased, issued an "edict of toleration." This included the statement that it was the duty of Christians "to pray to their god for our good estate."