**THE TRAIL OF BLOOD AND TEARS.**

**In the fourth chapter of Genesis, we have the story of Cain murdering his own brother, Abel. The reason for this unspeakable crime was that Abel’s deeds were righteous and acceptable to God, while Cain’s offering was evil. With this first violent, cruel, heartless act of murder begins a long and continual “TRAIL OF BLOOD AND TEARS” of God’s people at the hands of unbelieving, unholy, and cruel perpetrators of suffering.**

**1. It is the purpose of this lesson to focus on this “trail of blood and tears” primarily of the New Testament church and its history of suffering for their faith in Christ. However, a few mile posts along this trail during Old Testament times will serve to link both testaments in the same journey. A good place to begin this focus in the O.T. trail of suffering is in the book of Hebrews, chapter 11:36-38, as the writer reflects back on the horrible things the saints of God of O.T. times endured for their faith. These verses tell us: “And others had trial of cruel mocking and scourging, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented: (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth”. This characterizes the long and bitter, hurtful trail followed by many of the O.T. saints.**

**Consider the children of Israel in Egyptian bondage as a story of cruel and barbaric treatment of God’s people. Elijah suffered at the hands and wishes of wicked Jezebel, who vowed to kill him, and hunted him down in all the country for 3 ½ years. Tradition tells us that Isaiah, the great Messianic prophet of the Lord, was sawn asunder, probably by wicked king Manasseh. The children of Judah, pulled from their homes and made captive hundreds of miles away, deprived of their homes, families, livelihoods, their temple and much more. And who doesn’t know the stories of the firey furnace, the lions den, and wicked Hamaan’s plot to extinguish every member of the Hebrew family. Jeremiah wept his heart out over Judah, and yet he was subjected to cruel and inhumane treatment. These and many more are instances of God’s people of O.T. travels on the trail of blood and tears. Sometimes their suffering was at the hands of the ungodly heathen nations, and other times it was at the hands of their own people. As Jacob was mistreated badly by his own father-in-law, and Joseph suffered despicable treatment at the hands of his own brothers, so God’s people have known very few moments of acceptance and peace in their walk with God.**

**2. The sufferings of Christ.**

**Turning now to the N.T. and the subsequent history of God’s people, and beginning as it were on day one of the N.T. story, at the birth of Christ and his subsequent sufferings, followed by each generation of his faithful servants along this “trail of blood and tears”. This trail is not some hidden by-way, but a thoroughfare packed with suffering saints for the cause of Christ all along the journey.**

**Immediately upon the birth of Christ, and as soon as the wise men’s visit was over, the Lord told Joseph to take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt. (Mt. 2:13). The reason was that Herod would seek the child to destroy it. Thus began the earthly life of Jesus, so filled with suffering at the hands of his own people who should have accepted and believed in him.**

**Isaiah the prophet, some 700 years before the birth of Christ, foretold in powerful language, the extreme sufferings the savior would endure. (Ch. 53.) Other prophets as well, spoke of the rejection and suffering of Christ. Soon after he began his earthly ministry, the constant, daily attempts by the religious hierarchy in Jerusalem, including the scribes, Pharisees, priests, etc., to vilify, condemn, blaspheme, falsely accuse, reject, scorn and attempts to trap him in some mistake or grounds for killing him. He who did nothing but good, miraculous good, to people everywhere, was the constant brunt of evil designs, hate, ridicule, unbelief and every conceivable kind of opposition and harm. And it was this same “mob” that ultimately arrested him by the help of one of his own disciples who bargained to betray him and finally crucify him. After a night of blasphemy, mockery, beatings, humiliation and a brutally false trial, he was nailed to a cross to die for those same murderers as well as the rest of the world. If it be argued that all of these things must needs be, very likely that is true. But that does not clear the guilty of their hateful persecution of the savior of the world.**

**After briefly considering the sufferings of Christ, which was a part of God’s foreordained plan in providing redemption for mankind, an additional reason for his sufferings should also be set forth. Jesus represented to the world total and complete righteousness and goodness. Just like Cain who slew his brother because his brother’s deeds were righteous while Cain’s were evil, so also it was with Jesus and the religious zealots of his day. Though they had abundance of religion, yet they despised the truth of God. This is the pattern and cause for the suffering of all of God’s people before Christ, and we will find it to be the same following after him.**

**3. The sufferings of the early church.**

**Fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus on the day of Pentecost, the church was born by an amazing outpouring of the Holy Ghost, evidenced by the phenomenon of “speaking in other tongues”. On that very occasion the carnal ridicule began as some of the crowd doubted, mocked and accused the disciples of being drunk. From there it only got worse. The church, thus established, was charged with the great task of carrying the gospel to all the world. That gospel was “Jesus and the resurrection” and a new life of righteousness and purity in him. During his earthly ministry Jesus forewarned his followers that: “ye shall be hated of all men for my sake”, and, “if the world hate you, you know that it hated me before you”.**

**The pattern seems to be set therefore, that wherever righteousness through obedience to the word of God is found, hate, mockery, rejection and persecution will follow. Let us take a look at the ensuing record of God’s people in the early church, to see if this is really true.**

 **a. In Acts, chapters 3 & 4, John and Peter go to the temple to pray. On their way they heal the lame man that everyone, including the priests knew. This gave them the opportunity to explain that Jesus, who was raised from the dead, had healed the man. The priests, captain of the temple and the Sadducees were grieved that they were preaching through Jesus the resurrection from the dead. Then they put them in jail.**

 **b. In Acts chapter 5, they again apprehended the apostles, beat them and threatened them, commanding them not to teach about Jesus. They rejoiced that they were accounted worthy to “suffer” for his name.**

 **c. In the 7th chapter of Acts, the deacon Stephen gave a marvelous message of Christ, after being brought before the council with false accusations of blasphemy and insurrection. For his righteous message he was stoned to death, thus becoming the first martyr of the church.**

 **d. Acts 8. At that time there was a great persecution of the church at Jerusalem, so that they were scattered abroad everywhere.**

 **e. And Saul, yet breathing out threatening and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, headed to Damascus with authority from the priests to arrest men or women and bring them bound to Jerusalem for punishment for “that way.**

 **f. Acts 8:23. Paul was converted on the way to Damascus and straightway preached Christ in the synagogues. And the Jews took counsel to kill him. In verse 16 of this chapter, the Lord tells Ananias that, “ I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake”.**

 **g. Acts 12. Herod vexed the church and killed James, the brother of John with the sword.**

 **h. Next he apprehended Peter and put him in jail, intending to bring him to the people for their mob treatment.**

 **i. Acts 13. In Antioch of Pasidia, the Jews stir up sedition against Paul and Barnabas and expelled them from their city.**

 **j. Acts 14. At Iconium, the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and made their minds evil affected against Paul. There was a plot hatched up to stone them.**

 **k. Acts 14. At Lystra, Jews from Antioch and Iconium persuaded the people and stoned Paul and drug him out of the city and left him for dead.**

 **l. Acts 16. At Phillipi, the idolatrous heathen apprehended Paul and Silas; beat them with many stripes and put them in prison, with their hands and feet in stocks.**

 **m. Acts 17. They called Paul a babbler and mocked him scornfully.**

 **n. Acts 18. At Corinth, Jews made insurrection against Paul. They beat Sosthenes, the chief ruler of that synagogue before Gallio’s judgment seat.**

 **o. Acts 19. A mighty uproar and insurrection is made by the idolatrous people of Ephesus because their goddess Diana was being preached against.**

 **p. Acts 22-28. Paul goes to Jerusalem; faces an insurrection and a mob bent on killing him and is moved under armed escort to Cesarea. After about 2 years he begins his journey to Rome, a prisoner for his faith. After a disastrous voyage, with his life imperiled, he arrives in Rome, still a prisoner. In Rome he is martyred for his faith under emperor Nero.**

**4. Suffering of the apostles and early disciples.**

**Freedom does not come without great cost and sacrifice. That has been true with the freedom of our country and it is especially true of the freedom we have in the gospel. The early apostles and their disciples suffered horrible fates and all died as martyrs for the faith, except John. He suffered severe persecutions and only miraculously avoided martyrdom. The following will account for this.**

 **a. We have already noted that the deacon Stephen was the first Christian martyr.**

 **b. James the great, suffered martyrdom about 10 years after Stephen. Seeing James’ steadfast courage as he went to his place of execution, his accuser fell at his feet requesting forgiveness and yielded his life to Christ.**

 **c. Phillip was scourged, thrown into prison and afterwards crucified about 54 AD.**

 **d. Matthew labored in Ethiopia and suffered martyrdom for his faith, AD 60.**

 **e. James the less, at the age of 94, was beaten and stoned by the Jews, and finally had his brains bashed out.**

 **f. Matthias was stoned and beheaded in Jerusalem.**

 **g. Andrew, Peter’s brother, was crucified.**

 **h. Mark was dragged to pieces in Alexandria.**

 **i. Peter was crucified for his faith in Christ.**

 **j. Paul was beheaded, after he offered a prayer for the messengers of Nero, who asked Paul to do so. Then he gave his neck to the sword.**

 **k. Jude was crucified at Edessa.**

 **l. Bartholomew was cruelly beaten and then crucified.**

 **m. Thomas was thrust through with a spear by angry Pagan priests.**

 **n. Luke is said to have been hanged on an olive tree by the idolatrous priests of Greece.**

 **o. Simon preached as far away as Britain, where he was crucified.**

 **q. John, was sent to Rome from Ephesus and it is said he was cast into a cauldron of boiling oil, from which he miraculously escaped. Domitian banished him to the isle of Patmos, where he wrote the book of Revelation. Nerva recalled him from this isle, and he was the only apostle who escaped a violent death.**

 **q. Barnabas was killed about AD 73.**

**5. Imperial Persecutions of Christians: 64 AD to 313 AD.**

**From the very beginning of the Christian era, there was no favor shown to followers of Christ by the Pagan population of Rome or her leaders. It was Pilate that turned Christ over to be crucified and Roman soldiers that performed the task. Even though the earliest persecutions were mostly from the Jews, there are many examples of persecution from members of the Roman government and others. When Paul was in Athens, Ephesus, Corinth, Phillipi and other locations, much of his suffering was at the hands of Romans. But there had not been any emperor of Rome who set out to specifically persecute the Christians and certainly not one that made an effort to totally destroy it, that is until the emperor Nero, 64 AD to 68 AD. Dating from his reign, until 313 AD, there were 10 different emperors that persecuted the Christians. Not every emperor in those years were guilty of this, though many were. Next is an accounting of these 10 imperial persecutions.**

**Nero became emperor of Rome in 64 AD. In his diabolical whims and extreme temper, he ordered the city of Rome set fire. This turned public opinion against him, and in order to divert attention, he blamed Christians. Thus began nearly 250 years of imperial persecutions against the Christian church. Over the next 2 ½ centuries, the power and force of the empire was aimed at the destruction of Christianity. There was a vast chasm between the polytheism of pagan Rome, and the Christians whose God was one, the Lord Jesus Christ. Christianity also denounced the idolatrous worship of the Pagans, which certainly did not gain for them much public favor.**

**Under Nero, Christians were forced underground in the catacombs to find a place to worship. The emperor made sport of them in the public arenas, by throwing the Christians to wild animals to be mauled and killed. Christians were treated very badly by the Roman world.**

**The second imperial persecution was under emperor Domitian, AD 81. Timothy was bishop of Ephesus until about AD 97. During a pagan feast celebration, Timothy reproved them for their ridiculous idolatry. Because of this the Pagans fell on him with their clubs and beat him so dreadfully, that two days later he died.**

**The third imperial persecution was under Trajan, AD 108. During his reign the beloved Ignatius, bishop of Antioch was martyred by being thrown to wild beasts and ground to pieces. As he faced his doom by the beasts, he cried out saying: “I am the wheat of Christ: I am going to be ground with the teeth of wild beasts, that I may be found pure bread”. Sometime later, Alexandria, bishop of Rome, with his two deacons was martyred, as a Roman nobleman and about 10,000 other Christians.**

**The fourth persecution was under Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, AD 162. The cruelties used against the Christians under him were so unspeakable that even the spectators cringed with horror at the sight of them.**

**Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, was sought out and apprehended. He desired an hour of prayer from his guards before his execution. He prayed with such fervency that his guards repented that they had taken him. The proconsul urged him to swear against Christ and he would be released. Polycarp answered, “eighty and six years have I served him, and he never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme who has saved me? The reign of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus was especially grievous both for its beastly cruelty as well as the number martyred.**

**The fifth persecution was under Severus, AD 192. Leonidus, father of the famous Origen, was beheaded for being a Christian. Five of Origen’s brothers were beheaded, and his sister had boiling oil poured on her head and then burnt, as well as her mother. The famed Irenaeus was beheaded. Many in Africa suffered beastly methods of beatings, beheadings and gored by mad bulls. Cecila, a young lady of good family in Rome, was married to a gentleman named Valerian. She converted her husband and brother, who were beheaded; the officer who led them to their execution, became their convert, and he too was beheaded. The lady was placed naked in a scalding bath, and after some long time, her head was struck off with a sword.**

**The sixth persecution was under Maximus, 235 AD. The principal persons who perished under this reign were Pontianus, a bishop of Rome; Anteros, his successor. Pammachius, Quiritus, Roman senators, with all their families; Simplicius a senator; Calepodius, a Christian minister, Martina; and Hippolitus, a Christian prelate, tied to a wild horse and dragged until dead.**

**The seventh persecution was under Decius, AD 249. Under his reign, Julian, a native of Cilicia, was put into a leather bag with a number of serpents and scorpions, and thrown into the sea. Peter, a brilliant young man, was beheaded for refusing to worship Venus. He was placed on a wheel and stretched until his bones were broken, and then beheaded.. Trypho and Respicius, two eminent men, were first imprisoned at Nice. Their feet were pierced with nails, they were dragged through the streets, scourged, torn with iron hooks, scorched with lighted torches, and then beheaded. When Quintian, governor of Sicily, was unable by ever seductive attempt to seduce a chaste, virtuous, pure Christian lady, he turned his resentment on her for being a Christian. She was scourged, burnt with red hot irons and torn with sharp hooks. Then she was laid naked upon live coals mingled with glass, and she ultimately died.**

**The eighth persecution was under Valerian, AD 257. Many eminent people suffered martyrdom under his reign for being Christians. Saturninus, a pious Christian bishop, suffered barbarous indignities, and with his feet fastened to a bull, he was dragged down the steps of the pagan temple and killed. At Utica, 300 Christians were placed around a burning lime kiln. They were commanded to worship Jupiter, or be thrown in the burning lime kiln. They all refused, and bravely jumped into the burning pit.**

**The ninth persecution was under Aurelian, AD 274. Quintin, a very zealous minister of the gospel, was stretched with pulleys until his joints were dislocated; his body was torn with wire scourges; boiling oil and pitch was poured over his naked body until he died.**

**The tenth persecution was under Diocletian, AD 303. Under his reign an attempt was made to destroy all Christians. The persecutions did not favor age or sex. Houses were burned with whole families inside. Racks, scourges, swords, daggers, crosses, poison and starvation were used to destroy Christians. They had their ears cut off; their limbs rendered useless by dreadful dislocation, and their flesh seared with red hot irons in conspicuous places. A young couple, married only 3 weeks, were tortured very cruelly and then crucified. Sabinus, bishop of Assisium , refusing to sacrifice to Jupiter, had his hand cut off by order of the governor of Tuscany, and imprisoned. While in prison, the governor and his family were converted, and all of them were martyred.**

**Finally, in 313 AD, Emperor Constantine, decreed that Christianity should be put on equal footing with all other religions of the empire, thus ending the imperial persecutions of the church. From this event, the church began to grow in the esteem of everyone of the empire. The reasoning was that if Christianity was good for the emperor, it was good for the whole empire, including the highest ranking officials of government. As a result, in about 2 centuries, the church filled the empire. Persecutions and martyrdom never did slow down the spread of Christianity. As it has been said, “the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church.” Under emperor Theodosius, 380 AD, Paganism was outlawed, but not completely eliminated. Later, under Justinian, Paganism was totally eliminated. By this time however, the church itself had become paganized, and it became the instrument of persecution toward anyone who did not embrace the orthodox, Catholic form of Christianity. Thus began an entirely different era of suffering saints. That era is the subject of the next lesson on “The Trail Of Blood And Tears”.**

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