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The Trial and Testimony of the Early Church

PROGRAM 1 FOUNDATIONS

STEVE: There are more than 5 billion people alive on the earth today. Nearly one third of these, or about 1.6 billion, would identify themselves as Christians.

Today the Christian faith is alive on every continent and in every major geographic area of the world in over 22,000 different denominational expressions.

But it was a faith that most people simply did not want in the world into which it was first born, here in Jerusalem almost 2000 years ago. Its founder was killed and his followers, who became known as "Christians," were from time to time victimized and put to death. The most powerful political empire the world had ever known used its vast legal and administrative machinery in a strenuous effort to suppress this feisty, fledgling faith. But it failed.

NIGEL: In this series of programs, we will look at the Christian church in its early period when it was under attack, a period covering almost 300 years— up to the Edict of Milan in 313 when the church was finally given legal status. This is one of the most incredible stories in all of recorded human history.

STEVE: We will look at the foundations of the church and how it spread, also the accusations hurled against it, the persecution that threatened to destroy it and the stories of martyrs who gave their lives rather than surrender their faith, and the transition whereby Christianity in the early 300's became not only a legal religion but eventually the official faith of the Roman Empire.

SERIES LOGO

2:35 RUSSELL: As we proceed through this series, you will see us slip into the roles and play the parts of some of the key characters in this story which covers almost 300 years.

JANE: I think you will find it an amazing drama, for it's a story filled with danger and suspense. It copes with the questions and problems of life that we find in every age.

NIGEL: We will be your guides as we find out what Christianity was like long before it had so much of what we identify with the church today.

JANE: Perhaps a good place to begin might be by asking the question, "What is a church anyway?" Is the church really a building? Is it still a church if we would take away the hymn books or the Bible? What if the organ were removed? What if we take away the pulpit and the vestments of the clergy?

RUSSELL: The answer to all of the questions Jane asked would be an immediate "yes," if you were a Christian living in the period of early Christianity that we are looking at in these programs.

NIGEL: The early Christians had none of the things that we think about when we think of the church today.

RUSSELL: They did not have church buildings. They didn't have different denominations or publishing houses or big bureaucratic organizations or a complex hierarchy.

NIGEL: But they were still a church. The church was not buildings but people. They did have two things that they considered of utmost importance—indeed irreplaceable—they had a faith and a fellowship.

JANE: And both of these were centered on the one they looked to as the foundation.

4:23

STEVE BELL: Christianity begins with Jesus of Nazareth and the Jewish people in first-century Palestine. Although no one in history has been depicted by great artists more than Jesus Christ, we actually have no specific knowledge of what he looked like. In the entire New Testament there is no clue at all to his size, build, or any other physical characteristics. Yet the question that was asked when he walked this earth is the same question that has been asked ever since—Who is Jesus?

NIGEL: We do not have any complete biography of Jesus' life in terms of the modern expectations of biography. But there are some things that we know about him beyond any reasonable doubt. Even those who do not follow him or even those who despise him would admit that at least this much can be said about him.

STEVE:

5:19

*Jesus was born into a humble family.

*Yet he came from a distinguished family tree even by careful Jewish standards.

*His teachings were perceived as extraordinary, and he gained a reputation as one who could perform wonders and miracles.

*His message announced the beginning of an entirely new order, summed up in the phrase "The Kingdom of God" which, although not immediately recognized or realized, was nevertheless inevitable.

*Jesus gathered around him a group of followers who were mostly common working people, yet He trained them to become His messengers.

*He caused great controversy and aroused vehement opposition.

*He was condemned by Jewish leaders and crucified by Roman authorities.
*His followers believed and testified that He rose from the dead on the third day and met with them, talked and ate with them.
*Jesus' followers were convinced it was God who had raised Jesus from the dead, thereby validating His claims and teachings; further they believed that Jesus was the divinely appointed Savior of humankind, the Lord to whom all owed faith, loyalty, and total obedience.
*And there can be no doubt that these followers soon believed they were to take this message to everyone at any cost. They were to call all peoples to repent and believe in Jesus. And we know that they took this word with remarkable energy and fortitude far beyond the confines of their homeland.

6:46

STEVE: Jesus was a Jew and much of his ministry was based at the synagogue here at Capernaum in Galilee where he worshipped and ministered. In fact, it's believed the ruins of that synagogue lie right beneath this very sight. Jesus' first disciples or apostles also were Jews. They did not see themselves as forming any new religion nor a breakaway group from Judaism. On the contrary, they saw themselves as loyal to their Jewish heritage and a part of the people of Israel; they also believed in the promises given to Israel by God through the writings that we now commonly refer to as the Old Testament. So in the first years after Jesus left them, his followers continued within the Jewish community. They were active in synagogue, testifying to and disputing with their fellow Jews about just who Jesus was and what He was calling Israel to become.

Communities of Jews were scattered throughout the Roman Empire. It took ten Jewish men to establish a synagogue, so synagogues were formed wherever they went. The synagogue offered an ideal setting to spread the word about Jesus as the disciples moved out into wider circles. At that time conversions to Judaism were more common than we find today. Non-Jews could come and worship in the synagogues, and those who did not become full-fledged Jews could still find a place to share in community life. Those worshipers were known as "God fearers" and many proved to be receptive to the message about Jesus.

NIGEL: But the Word was for everyone. Jesus' parting instructions were to go into all the world—and the world to them meant the mighty Roman Empire.

8:27

STEVE: The Roman Empire was the largest empire ever known to Western antiquity with some 50 to 60 million inhabitants. That's about as many people as Germany or Britain today-- or approximately one-fifth the population of the United States. It included all of the nations directly touching on the Mediterranean Sea and also portions of the Netherlands, all of Belgium, part of West Germany, all of Austria and Switzerland, and most of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, England, Wales and Southern Scotland.

Rome, with 1 1/2 million residents, was the capital and center of this vast geopolitical domain. Rome was THE city, but wherever the Romans ruled they built new cities if they were not there already. Thus, the world into which early Christianity spread was primarily an urban world.

After Jesus, the apostles formed the backbone of the church. Nearly every Christian tradition today still looks to the apostles as the ones to whom the original treasury

of the faith was entrusted and of course some of the apostles' names have become the most common men's names throughout the Western world. How many men do you know named John, James, Peter, Thomas, Philip, or Andrew? And these common names came from very common men. Five of them were humble fishermen. They worked here on the Sea of Galilee, and it was by this very shore that Jesus came and invited them to give up their trade and follow Him.

NIGEL: What happened to this rather ordinary group who were given the most extraordinary of assignments after Jesus left earth?

10:05

STEVE: The New Testament gives us an account of the deaths of two of the apostles — Judas and James.

Judas, who betrayed Christ for thirty pieces of silver, committed suicide by hanging himself.

James, the son of Zebedee, was put to death by the sword, probably beheaded in Jerusalem around 44 AD. According to tradition, he died after preaching the Gospel in Spain.

Andrew is reported to have journeyed to Scythia, the region north of the Black Sea, now part of the Soviet Union. More certain is his preaching in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) and in Greece where he was said to have been crucified.

Thomas, "doubting Thomas," was most probably active in the area east of Syria. Tradition has him preaching as far east as India where the ancient Marthoma Christians revere him as their founder.

Philip, so tradition records, preached the Gospel in Heirapolis in Asia Minor where he converted the wife of the Roman proconsul. In retaliation, her husband had Philip arrested and cruelly put to death.

Matthew, also known as Levi, is credited with writing the Gospel that bears his name. Different traditions place him preaching the Gospel in areas as far apart as Persia and Ethiopia.

Bartholomew, too, had widespread missionary travels attributed to him by tradition: to India with Thomas, back to Armenia, and also to Ethiopia and southern Arabia. There are various accounts of how he met his death as a martyr.

James, the son of Alpheus, is one of at least three Jameses referred to in the New Testament, and there is some confusion as to which is which. But this James was reckoned to have ministered in Syria, and the Jewish historian Josephus says he was stoned and then clubbed to death.

Simon the Zealot, so the story goes, went to Persia and was killed after refusing to sacrifice to the sun god.

Matthias was the Apostle chosen to replace Judas. Tradition sends him with Andrew to Syria and to death by burning.

The Apostle **John** is perhaps the only one of the company thought to have died a

natural death from old age. He was the leader of the church in the Ephesus area and is said to have taken care of Mary, the mother of Jesus, in his home. During the persecution in Domitian's reign in the middle 90's, he was sent into exile on the island of Patmos in the Aegean. There he is credited with writing the last book of the New Testament, the Revelation of John.

NIGEL: If they did go to all the places that claim them, then we can see that the apostles covered a very wide expanse, bringing their message about Jesus.

STEVE: But we emphasize again that it is not possible to sort out where historical fact ends and fanciful legend begins. It is generally regarded that in most cases there was some truth that gave rise to the legends, which would then become embellished over a period of time.

12:54 But for two of the apostles, **Peter** and **Paul**, we have more information that is considered reliable.

CARSTEN THIEDE: After the resurrection, Peter, the man who had betrayed Jesus, was reinstated by the risen Lord at the Sea of Galilee. From then on, Peter is indeed the rock, the pillar of the early church. He is their first public speaker, their first evangelist. He defends them before the Sanhedrin. He, as it were, institutes missionary journeys. He is the first to begin a mission to the Gentiles, long before Paul. When Paul finally comes to Jerusalem, he, Peter, is his teacher. He informs him about the history of Jesus, about the beginnings of the church. Finally, he proves himself to be an able administrator when he himself leaves Jerusalem for Rome.

DAVID WRIGHT: Peter is one of the best-known of the early Christians. He was a man just as we are. He was a disciple, apostle, martyr. A disciple of Jesus, an apostle who preached and declared the Gospel and laid the foundations of the early church back in Jerusalem, a martyr in Rome probably along with Paul under Nero. Yet, in all three of these roles the important thing was what he confessed: when he first recognized in Jesus the Messiah, who was promised; when he declared to the assembled Jews at Pentecost and the days that followed the same message that Jesus was indeed the Christ who was to come; and as he died in Rome, faithful to that confession to the last.

14:31 NIGEL: The apostle Paul was not one of the original twelve apostles of Jesus, but he was almost certainly the greatest missionary for Christ who ever lived.

STEVE: As a devout Jew, Paul had been a fierce persecutor of the early church but then came an experience on the road of Damascus where Paul claimed Jesus himself had appeared to him. Paul became a man obsessed with one task in life: to bring the Gospel of Christ to as many people as possible with no regard for what he would suffer personally. During one of his many imprisonments, Paul shared his zeal in a letter to his young disciple, Timothy.

PAUL (dramatization): "Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the Gospel according to the power of God; who hath saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began. But is now made manifest by the

appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel: unto which I am appointed a preacher, and an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles.

STEVE: Paul's pattern was to go into the synagogues. But he also taught and preached in the streets, and marketplaces, the Areopagus, Mars Hill, and anywhere he could gain a hearing. Here are the routes of his three recorded missionary journeys. Just about everywhere Paul went, some would respond positively, becoming new disciples of Christ. But inevitably he found resistance from others. He would often be arrested, beaten or stoned before he was chased out of town.

Paul helped the church understand the universality of the faith better than any other. And it involved him in some intense controversy with other apostles, including a showdown with Peter, but ultimately, he opened up the doors to the Gentiles to become full participants in the fellowship of Christ, and he distinguished those parts of the Jewish heritage that were to be maintained from those that were optional or superseded with the coming of Christ.

Eventually Paul ended up in Rome, where he traditionally is said to have been beheaded outside the city limits.

DAVID WRIGHT: It's easy to miss the enormous contribution that Paul made to the early Christian church. One could ask, in fact, what the church would have become had it not been for Paul, because there were pressures around that would have kept the new movement within the fold of Judaism. And it was above all Paul who saw more clearly than anyone else that the new faith could not be confined within the bounds of Judaism alone. He spoke of the mystery that had been given to him to declare. That mystery was an open secret that the Gospel of Jesus was for all peoples. He was himself a man of remarkable gifts. Evangelist, teacher, miracle worker, prophet, writer (many of the New Testament writings come from Paul), theological thinker, but the thing I would like to stress is that he was a strategist, a visionary, someone who saw that the Gospel had to be free from Jewish requirements like circumcision and keeping of the law, if it really was going to appeal to the peoples of the Roman world.

18:59

STEVE: It wasn't long after the death of Paul that Christians began to understand more clearly that they were a community distinct from Judaism. Yet at the same time the church still thought of itself as the true Israel and inheritor of God's covenant promises to Israel.

A major step in this transition can be seen in the events associated with the Jewish revolt against the Romans in 66 AD. Eusebius, the first major historian of the church, writing in the early fourth century, reports that Christians in Jerusalem were continually harassed by Jews, and many left Jerusalem. When the Jewish revolt broke out, the remaining Christians did not side with the Jews but fled to Pella, a town in Trans-Jordan. In 70 AD, the Roman forces led by Titus, the emperor's son, attacked and captured Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. Today there are only remains like these, the Western wall, or wailing wall, still visited by the devout as the most sacred site in Judaism.

A band of the Jewish Zealots had escaped and taken refuge in the natural fortress

offered at Masada. On May 2, in the year 73, the Jews barricaded here, numbering almost 1,000, committed suicide rather than be captured or resubmit to the Romans. The failure of the revolt and the destruction of the temple were major disasters for the Jewish people; nevertheless, they found the resiliency to reorganize their religious life around the Jewish Law.

The rift between Christians and Jews only deepened as the centers of the Christian movement shifted to other cities beyond Jerusalem. By the end of the century the Jews had even excluded Christians from the synagogues by changing their liturgical prayers to add a curse upon heretics.

20:46

RUSSELL: After the apostles died, the faith was carried on by those who had been taught by them and their associates. But we no longer find missionaries of the stature and effectiveness of Paul leading the way.

JANE: In fact we do not have much by way of records to tell us how the faith spread or who spread it.

RUSSELL: Remember that until about the year 312 the church had been unlicensed, or unregistered, and as early as the Emperor Nero in the AD early sixties it was considered a "religio prava:" that is, a depraved or evil religion, therefore having no legal status and often considered as an enemy both to the state and to the people.

NIGEL: These were not the kind of people that you would erect monuments to, or celebrate in the public arts for posterity to remember. Or, if you do, it was more in ridicule as in this piece of graffiti on the wall of a house on the Palatine Hill in Rome, which, by the way, is the earliest known representation of Christ's crucifixion. Here you see hanging from the cross the body of a man with the head of an ass. The words of ridicule written beneath: "Alexamenos worships his god."

JANE: Nevertheless, we do know that the faith spread like wildfire, making its way throughout the whole Roman Empire.

RUSSELL: Now stop and think of the absurdity of the task: A small group in a remote corner of a mighty empire, a group considered to be a small sect within Judaism (and the Jews were not well liked across the empire), this group sets out to convince the world of their faith.

NIGEL: They preach commitment to one who has died a despised criminal-that's strange enough-but they also affirm that this same one rose from the dead and is alive today through His Holy Spirit. The world that they are so bold to speak into is steeped in fierce loyalty to inherited traditions and local religions.

JANE: And it wasn't as though the Christians were asking the world to make room for just one more god--one more faith that they could practice privately. The Romans were very tolerant, really. They could have accommodated that.

RUSSELL: No, the Christians came saying that their God was the only true God, that all were obliged to repent, change from their sinful ways, and follow the Christ they proclaimed as the Lord of heaven and earth.

JANE: They were compelled by an unshakable conviction that Jesus was Lord and

that they were duty bound to bring His gospel into the whole world.

23:34

STEVE: The aqueduct here at Caesarea still stands as a visible symbol of Roman power. Yet conditions in the empire at the start of the Christian movement were better suited for the spread of a faith that claimed to be for all people than at any other time in human history. In fact, the Christian historian Eusebius, writing in the fourth century from here in Caesarea, claimed that God had providentially prepared the Roman Empire and the cultural setting that it provided for the spread of the Gospel. And even earlier, the pivotal theologian Tertullian saw the empire and the emperor as God's agents to preserve society. He made this surprising claim around the year 200.

NIGEL as TERTULLIAN: "We must respect the emperor as the chosen of our Lord. Therefore, I have a right to say that Caesar is more ours than yours, appointed as he is by our God."

STEVE: Not surprisingly, the empire did not share that view. To put it simply, Christians were not wanted. Yet, they managed to take advantage of the times and the conditions offered by the Roman Empire to spread rapidly. Over their first 300 years a presence was established in most parts of the empire and across all classes and social boundaries. In our next program we will take a close look at the spread of the faith

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The Trial and Testimony of the Early Church

PROGRAM 2 SPREAD

DAVID WRIGHT: Dead as a dodo. That's the fate of most of the cults and religions of the ancient world. Have you ever met Mithra-ist or a Manichean or a devotee of Isis and Osiris? And yet the movement started by Jesus did survive. And more than survive, it grew to conquer and win the allegiance of the whole Roman world and beyond it.

NIGEL as TERTULLIAN: We are but of yesterday and have filled everything you have—cities, tenements, forts, towns, yes, and camps, tribes, palace, senate, and forum. All you have left to you is your temples!

CARSTEN THIEDE: After the resurrection, Jesus told his followers that they were to take the Gospel to the farthest ends of the world. It had to have sounded preposterous, ridiculous even; how should they do it? A mere twelve apostles, no mass media, no financial means, a minority group, threatened by persecution. It was impossible.

STEVE: In our first program we showed how Christianity emerged from its Jewish roots, It was a new faith in a world that revered tradition, a universal faith in a world loyal to local deities, an exclusive faith in a world that celebrated its tolerance.

From their roots in Palestine as followers of a humble working-class carpenter-turned-preacher—Jesus of Nazareth—the Christians set out to bring their faith to the whole world. By any normal calculation this was an impossible job because Christian teachings simply could not be accommodated or reconciled with the most sacred assumptions of the Roman world.

NIGEL: Yet, in spite of incredible difficulty the faith managed to spread and in some places even to thrive. What happened?

SERIES LOGO

2:45 STEVE: It all began at a place like this, a first century tomb in Jerusalem. After his crucifixion, Jesus was buried in just such a tomb. But two days later the massive stone that covered the entrance was found pushed aside and there was no body in the tomb. His followers reported that Jesus was alive again. They had seen Him, talked with Him, even eaten bread and fish with Him. His followers proclaimed, "Christ is risen," and they called it the Good News! To pick up the story, let's go to my three colleagues in our series, Jane, Russell and Nigel.

RUSSELL: The disciples of Christ had shown themselves to be rather fickle, even cowardly, under pressure before the resurrection, but after the resurrection and the day of Pentecost, they went forward as passionate messengers that Jesus was their Lord.

JANE: But they didn't just proclaim Him as their Lord. They came to see Him and announce Him as their Lord and Savior of the whole world!

NIGEL: "When the fullness of time had come," as the apostle Paul put it.

RUSSELL: The disciples of Christ clearly understood themselves to be under a divine mandate to bring this news about Christ to the whole world. But how do you do it, particularly when you are so few in number, very limited in resources, and have no game plan?

JANE: That's right. Jesus really didn't even give his rather unimpressive group of followers any clear-cut strategy.

NIGEL: Well, maybe there was a reason for this, Jane. If they had known what it would take to get the thing started, then would any of them have had enough faith to move out and begin?

RUSSELL: To understand how the faith spread, we first have to understand a little about the world into which it was born.

4:24 STEVE: Prior to the emergence of Roman power, a few centuries before Christ, the Greek conqueror, Alexander the Great, laid the groundwork as he expanded his domain. The Greeks loved cities. Of course they had their farmers, but the city was the place to be—and the Greeks had some great ones like Athens and Corinth. Everywhere Alexander went he would build new cities like Alexandria, or rebuild old ones. His successors followed the pattern, founding Antioch among others. Thus, the Mediterranean societies became more and more Greek, with the Greek language becoming a common language used almost everywhere in the empire.

When the Romans took over, they maintained this pattern and continued to build cities across the expanse of the empire. And wherever they went, they took with them their advanced administrative skills and amazing engineering abilities. Imagine the engineering skills needed for the systems of aqueducts they built to supply water for their citizens.

This is the aqueduct built at Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast, a key departure point in the advance of the early church.

So when Christianity began to spread under Roman rule, it spread through a world of cities, most of them, of course, very much smaller than Rome. These cities were linked together by an incredible network of well constructed roads. There were more than 50,000 miles of roads, or a distance twice the circumference of the earth, and many of these roads have outlasted the empire itself by more than 1500 years. And they can still be seen and used today.

Where the roads touched the sea there were good harbors for sea travel. And the *Pax Romana* (or “Peace of Rome”) meant that the roads and seas were relatively safe for travel without fear of robbers or pirates. There was also an efficient postal system. With the Greek language spoken and understood in the main centers of the empire, communication and travel for government, commerce, and trade were greatly facilitated. And for the spread of ideas, conditions had never been better.

6:23 STEVE: By the year 100, just 70 years after the death of Christ, the faith had burst forth from its Judean womb to many of the major cities of the empire. Jesus, from the accounts in the Gospels, never traveled more than 100 miles from home during his entire adult life, but now there were communities of followers thousands of miles from where it all began. And the places highlighted on this map are not just places where the Gospel was preached but locations where there were actual communities of believers.

JANE: A band of followers, a growing band whose names have now been lost to us, shared their new-found life all around the apartment buildings of the cities in the Mediterranean world.

STEVE: A fascinating report on the Christians was written by an unknown author around the year 180. It is called the Epistle to Diognetus.

JANE: Here we catch a glimpse of how the believers’ lives were ordinary and yet, at the same time, so very extraordinary: “Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind by country, by speech, nor by customs. But although they live in both Greek and foreign cities, and follow the local customs, both in clothing and food and the rest of life, they exhibit the wonderful and admittedly strange nature of their own citizenship. They live in their own homelands but as sojourners; they share all things as citizens, and suffer all things as aliens. Every foreign country is their homeland and every homeland a foreign country. They marry as all do; they bear children, but they do not discard their children as some do. They offer a common table but not a common bed. They find themselves ‘in the flesh,’ but do not live ‘according to the flesh.’ They pass their time upon earth, but are citizens of heaven. They obey the established laws, and surpass the laws in their own lives.

“They love all and are persecuted by all. They are put to death and are made alive. They are poor but make many rich. They lack all things yet abound in all things. They are abused and give blessing; they are insulted and give honor. When they do good they are punished as evildoers; when they are punished, they rejoice as those receiving life. By the Jews they are attacked as foreigners, and by the Greeks they are persecuted; and those who hate them are not able to state the cause of their hostility.”

9:13 DAVID WRIGHT: Christianity traveled along the ordinary highways and byways

of the Roman world through travelers of various kinds, merchantmen, businessmen, soldiers, prisoners, slaves and hostages, Christian lay people of all kinds moving around and being moved around the great roads of the empire. Students, teachers, philosophers, refugees, pilgrims, professionals, doctors, lawyers, people of many kinds taking their Christian faith with them: bearers of the Christian message as they traveled around. So largely, expansion was not, it seems, the work of clergy, of ministers, of pastors but of Christian men and women in their ordinary paths and routines of life.

JANE: Here is another very helpful document written by a Christian to the emperor Antoninus Pius. It gives us a valuable insight into the lives and attitudes of Christians who lived during this vital period of church history and who tried to manage the affairs of the church without the first-century apostles left to guide them. The writer here is Justin, who himself was to become a notable martyr, a victim of persecution. Listen as he tells us:

10:31 RUSSELL as JUSTIN: "Before, we rejoiced in uncleanness, but now we love only chastity; we used to practice magic arts, but have now dedicated ourselves to the true and unbegotten God; we used to love money and possessions more than anything, but now we share what we have and give to all of those in need; we used to hate one another, kill one another. We would not eat with those of different races. But now, since the manifestation of Christ, we love our enemies and pray for those who hate us without just cause."

11:15 STEVE: The faith continued to spread rapidly despite mounting opposition. Here we see where Christian communities were established by the year 200, but how are we to account for the continuing advance? Keep in mind that the churches had no impressive public ceremonies to attract the masses. For generations they also had no church buildings. And if you went to a service in a home, you would find no bizarre spectacle or compelling entertainment and none of the depraved orgies they were falsely accused of in the earliest years. Instead, you would find scriptures read, some prayers, exhortation, and finally the Eucharist, but if you were not baptized, you would not even be invited to stay for that.

NIGEL: There is every evidence that the church was never without its internal tensions. They did not break off into denominations as we know them today, but serious conflicts were part of their ongoing life—for they considered that they were dealing with matters of truth and error—perhaps the clue to the secret of the spread of the early church. As we have pointed out, early Christianity was an urban movement. The people lived in cities, and in these cities you lived very close to your neighbors. You did not have many secrets in such a setting. Your neighbors had a very good idea of who you were, how you lived your life, and what was important to you.

12:49 DRAMA SEGMENT (NIGEL AND RUSSELL).

RUSSELL: May I talk to you; I need to talk to you. Look, I know I have no right to ask you anything, especially after the way that I insulted you last week. My wife is dying. The doctors have done all they can. There is nothing else they can do. She doesn't have much time. Look, it is said about town that you Christians pray for healing, that the god you pray to sometimes answers your prayers and grants a healing.

NIGEL: Yes, that's right, He does grant us healings sometimes.

RUSSELL: Please, would you come pray for my wife? I'll give you anything you ask. I don't know what else I can do!

NIGEL: Let's go quickly. . . . I am going to pray to the Lord to heal you. Then, I'll go get the sisters and they will come to you. They will look after you. They will pray for you. I am going to pray for you.

14:31 STEVE: It was through such countless everyday acts of compassion, concern, and love for the neighbors that the Gospel spread. It was a grassroots people movement that found its opportunities in serving human needs, caring for the unlovely, even rescuing and taking in children who had been abandoned on the garbage dumps. In Rome, by the year 250, in what was perhaps the first "meals on wheels" program, the church was providing for more than 1500 widows.

NIGEL: But there was also the element of the miraculous in reports of early Christian life. Christians became known as those who would care for the sick and had healing powers and also powers to drive out demons.

DAVID WRIGHT: If we are to understand early Christianity, we've got to take proper account of the miraculous. Miracles are attested right from the beginning of the movement. We find Peter, for example, healing a cripple at the Beautiful Gate of the temple. Miracle stories are found right through the second and third centuries. Writers like Justin and Irenaeus and Tertullian make a great deal of the Christians' ability to perform miracles. They offer even to work miracles under laboratory conditions in court in order to demonstrate the power of the Christian God.

CARSTEN THIEDE: Miracles were an integral part of life in Palestine and, of course, in the early church. Exorcisms, healing, it had to be done. Many people did it, not only Jesus, incidently, his contemporaries, so he had to prove himself as it were to his contemporaries as one who could do what others did and then go on and explain why he did it and what the purpose of it all was. And that's what Peter and Paul did when they performed miracle healings and so on. Or look at certain instances in the history of the early church. Peter's escape from the prison of Herod Agrippa was a miraculous escape. It couldn't be explained by human or natural means. Or look at the survival of the important manuscripts of the New Testament writings. It was the avowed aim of persecution after persecution to destroy all these manuscripts, but yet they have survived. The New Testament, the whole Bible, has survived. We could go on and give many more examples of the necessity of the importance of the miraculous in the history of the early church.

16:56 STEVE: By the early 300s the faith had continued to spread, new centers were established, and existing centers strengthened. In some regions there was actually a Christian majority, and in other places, while still a minority, Christians maintained a strong presence.

NIGEL AND RUSSELL (in adaptation of comments from the writings of Justin Martyr).

RUSSELL: From all over the world there are those of us who have put our faith in

Christ Jesus. When we truly do, there is no one that can make us afraid. True, there are those among our number, some who have been beheaded and crucified, others tortured in other ways, thrown to wild beasts and burned, but it is now plain that even these horrible things cannot make us forsake our precious faith. I look at it like this . . . it's like when you cut back the part of the vine that has borne fruit already. Cut it back, other flourishing fruit bearing branches grow to take its place. . . . Now please understand us that we are not contentious. Christ has taught us how, by patience and gentleness, to lead those from shame and the love of evil.

NIGEL: Do you have many that have joined you?

RUSSELL: I can show you many who have turned from a violent and tyrannical disposition. People who have been convinced by the quality in the life of their Christian neighbors: the extraordinary forbearance they show after they are cheated, how they conduct their own business affairs with the utmost honesty.

18:27

STEVE: At this time the empire had a population of 50 to 60 million people. Estimates are that five to ten percent were Christian believers or somewhere between three to six million people from all walks of life and every social rank. As more and more people became Christians, their presence permeated society. And in the early 200s the colorful theologian Tertullian could boldly challenge the empire, no doubt with a bit of rhetorical exaggeration.

NIGEL as TERTULLIAN: What if so vast a people as we had broken away from you and moved to some other part of the world? The loss of so many citizens would have brought shame upon your rulers. You would have to find other people to rule. You would have more enemies than citizens. But, as it is, you have fewer enemies because of the multitude of the Christians. Indeed, it would seem that in nearly all the cities nearly all the citizens are Christians.

19:47

STEVE: The catacombs, underground tunnels and rooms with art work and inscriptions celebrating central themes of the faith. They had been dug out by the early Christians to bury and honor their dead. Today they are a vivid symbolic reminder that Christianity in its first few hundred years was a kind of underground movement. But in 312 the emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity after a reported vision. His victory, at the Milvian Bridge north of Rome, consolidated his political power. It is a convenient point in time to mark the great divide between the era when Christianity was a despised, harassed minority and later in the fourth century when it became the dominant and official faith of the empire.

Success would bring its own problems and challenges, but that subject is for another time. For the moment consider that the early years of Christianity represent one of the most astonishing peaceful revolutions and transformations of established cultural norms ever seen at any time.

20:47

How can we account for the remarkable spread of the Christian faith? No simple answer is possible, but at least part of an answer may be found in considering what happened at this place. This is where Jesus gave what we now call the Sermon on the Mount, and part of that sermon is known as the Lord's Prayer. What a jolt that brief prayer now so familiar must have given to first-century hearers. After all, it told people how to think of God and themselves in a new way. Look at this.

ROTAS
OPERA
TENET
AREPO
SATOR

This Latin word square has been found in widely divergent places including England, Dura Europos in Mesopotamia, and the two found at Pompeii, which have to date back earlier than 79 AD when the city was destroyed. No one knows for sure what it means.

Notice the palindrome: how the same words are spelled forwards and backwards. See how the letters can easily be rearranged to spell "Paternoster" twice in the form of a cross. The N of Noster forms the intersection with an A and an O left over. Paternoster are the first two Latin words of the Lord's Prayer, "our Father," and the A and the O could represent the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, Alpha and Omega. That's the term applied to Christ in the book of Revelation in the New Testament meaning "the beginning" and "the end."

NIGEL: Paternoster, "our Father." Maybe in those two words we get a clue as to how the Gospel was spread throughout the world.

RUSSELL: For the world into which the Gospel was born was a world in which people felt themselves to be at the mercy of fate, victims of chance, their lives controlled by impersonal astrological forces.

JANE: Yes, because it was a world where, for the most part, religion was tradition rather than a personal belief.

STEVE: So into this world came Christianity proclaiming that your life has meaning, you are known, you are loved, and that a God greater than any you could ever have imagined is creator of all. He has visited our planet in the person of his son Jesus Christ to show His love, and His love is so intimate he can be approached and addressed as "our Father." Such a concept was totally new and yet it seemed to be exactly what many were waiting for. It was a concept that found a home across the diverse cultural, religious, and social backgrounds that made up the Roman Empire.

NIGEL: Of course this is not a full explanation of why and how the faith spread, but it would seem to be a necessary part of any explanation that would adequately account for what happened.

23:28

STEVE: Over the following centuries, Christianity continued to grow and spread at an even faster rate than in the first three centuries. And we should note that, ironically, this faith born in the Middle East would find its strongest reception the more it moved west through the Greco—Roman world. It would become a foundational institution for western civilization itself.

NIGEL: But it is in this present century that there has perhaps been the most exceptional spread of Christianity in all of its history--and in the most unexpected

places.

STEVE: For example, dramatic spiritual awakenings have been quietly advancing in some communist countries. In fact, it's possible that one of the most rapid expansions of the Christian faith in its entire history has taken place in our generation in communist China. Spreading through an informal network of house churches, some observers estimate that Christianity in China has grown from some 800,000 adherents to many millions in the past forty years.

The message the Christian church has brought to every generation is called the "Gospel," which means literally "good news." But the good news has often meant persecution for those who proclaim it. In our next episode we will look at the resistance to the early church and the range of charges and accusations that were hurled against it.

The Trial and Testimony of the Early Church

PROGRAM 3 ACCUSATION

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NIGEL as CAECILIUS: You people are happy to benefit from all that is ours, living in this greatest time of all history. But where is your gratitude? You are all anti-social snobs. You will not show proper respect for our anniversary festivals. You will not sacrifice to the genius of the emperor. You will not fight and join the empire.

STEVE: In previous programs we have seen how the early Christian church spread here in Jerusalem to the farthest reaches of the Roman Empire. But the price was repeated outbursts of horrible persecution that produced many noteworthy martyrs.

In future programs we will take a look at these persecutions in detail, but today our focus is on what was behind the persecutions. It's important to remember that the Roman Empire tolerated many religions, almost any religion. Yet there were aspects to Christianity that the Roman world simply could not abide.

NIGEL: In today's program we look at what made Christianity so intolerable and such a threat. What were the accusations?

SERIES LOGO

1:55

STEVE: This is the only above-ground section that remains of the praetorium of Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem. Here Jesus was brought before Pilate, accused, and tried. Later his followers found that they too would continually be brought before the authorities and accused.

The actual charges typically brought against the Christians are fascinating and varied. Some were frivolous, others maliciously false, but still others were valid and right on target and they show just how Christianity did indeed represent a genuine threat to some of the most deeply held convictions and cherished values of the

Roman world.

Some of the charges will no doubt surprise you. Among them: cannibalism, disruption of business, gross immorality, anti-family, poverty, atheism, novelty, lack of patriotism, anti-social behavior, cause of disasters.

Among the writings of the church fathers, there is a document written about the year 230 called the OCTAVIUS OF MINICIUS FELIX. It describes a debate between a Christian and a pagan at the Roman port of Ostia. Only one copy of this work has survived.

Minicius Felix was walking about Ostia with two friends, Octavius a Christian, and Caecilius a pagan. When Caecilius pauses to pay his respects to a pagan idol, Octavius feels obligated to object. An extended debate develops with the pagan Caecilius presenting the main arguments of the Romans against Christianity. And the Christian Octavius replies.

We now adapt and recreate the debate with arguments drawn not only from the writing of Minicius Felix but also from other sources, so we can include other accusations leveled against the Christians in the early centuries. The setting where the filming takes place is at the remains of the villa of the emperor Hadrian at Tivoli, not far from Rome. Caecilius is played by Nigel, and Octavius by Russell. Jane comes in from time to time to offer comments.

3:25

CAECILIUS: You Christians are the worst breed ever to affect the world. You deserve every punishment you can get. Nobody likes you. It would be better if you and your Jesus had never been born.

OCTAVIUS: Come, come, let's not waste time with insults. Get to your specific complaints and I'll show you that, in many cases, you've simply misunderstood us. Give us a fair trial. Who knows? You may become one of us.

CAECILIUS: You are the one who needs to change your mind. We hear that you are all cannibals—you eat the flesh of your children in your sacred meetings.

OCTAVIUS: Well, that story has certainly gone the rounds— whether through malice or misunderstanding, I don't know. It's probably based on reports that we share together a meal of the body and blood of Christ. Now, that we do. But it is not human flesh we eat. It is bread and wine we consecrate to commemorate our Lord's death.

It amazes me you give credibility to these rumors of cannibalism. You know what we're like. Keep in mind that if you have a child and it is a girl but you wanted a boy or if the child is deformed or if you simply don't want it, what is done? You leave the child outside, exposed to die.

CAECILIUS: You know that it is far more merciful to let the baby die than to bring it up in a home where it is not wanted.

OCTAVIUS: We do not expose our children, and I'd love to know how many of the little ones that others have left out to die have been rescued by Christians and

given a home. So it's just the opposite of what you accuse us of, Caecilius. We don't consume human life; we rather protect and defend it.

CAECILIUS: All right. Granted, it was just a rumor, but we also hear that you meet in secret, even before sunrise, and the gross immorality that we hear goes on in those places is so disgusting I could not even describe it, except to say that it's the incest that I find most repulsive.

OCTAVIUS: You have never been to one of our meetings.

CAECILIUS: No, and I wouldn't be seen there.

OCTAVIUS: Well, if you did, you would find that the lovemaking and intimacy that you are so quick to imagine is of a totally different kind. We meet before sunrise because we are working people. We have jobs to go to. We do not always meet in secret, but we have no temples or synagogues, so we use somebody's home which has enough room. We call one another brother and sister and pledge to love one another because that is what our Lord commanded us to do. And we greet one another and bless one another with a holy kiss, not out of lust but out of genuine love and concern for one another. Come and you will see that we demand the highest standards of morality among all who join us.

6:25 JANE: The charge of cannibalism and immorality did make the rounds for some time. The Christians did not have their own public festivals nor did they have any church buildings. They did often meet in secret, which caused the imaginations of their opponents to run wild. But, as the number of Christians grew, these charges began to fade away as more and more people knew about them, their faith, and their life.

CAECILIUS: Let me move on to one you will not be able to squirm out of. Whenever your sect begins to grow in number, bad things happen. Jobs are lost. Temples are deserted. The sale of animals for ceremonies is way off. The sale of sacrificial meat is down.

OCTAVIUS: Guilty.

CAECILIUS: You could hardly deny it, so you must admit that you are bad for business and disrupt the local economy.

OCTAVIUS: Yes, you are right.

CAECILIUS: I will be generous here and admit that it is not unsolvable. There can be a reallocation of investment over time. But what cannot be fixed is the irreparable damage your kind is doing to the family. The family is the backbone of our society, and you are a clear danger when it comes to the family.

OCTAVIUS: Let me surprise you. I admit in one sense you are right. But overall you are wrong. Now hear me out on this one, friend.

CAECILIUS: I am not your friend. People who break up families are no friend of mine.

OCTAVIUS: Let's get back to your point. It is true that when we become Christians, we become members of another family. Other believers are our brothers and sisters. And, yes, in some ways that does become most important. But we do not neglect our own family. If anything, we treat them far better. Let me digress for a moment and show you what I mean. Caecilius, do you ever sleep with a woman other than your wife?

CAECILIUS: What if I do? It's none of your business.

OCTAVIUS: Do you ever compel your slave women to have sex with you?

CAECILIUS: Of course I do. That's the right of every man. What's your point?

OCTAVIUS: You're the one who wanted to talk about the family. We keep to our own wives. We love them and honor them as our scriptures teach. I think it really bothers you that we don't relieve ourselves in fornication with our slaves. We welcome them into our churches. Maybe it really bothers you that we accept the outsider, any race, any class, even slaves. And maybe that, dear Caecilius, maybe that is your problem.

CAECILIUS: I've been waiting for this one. Take a look at your churches. What are they made up of? Mostly women, gullible children, the majority are from the working classes, not well-educated, as you said yourself, even slaves. It makes me laugh when I think how poor you are, barely enough to live on. If this God of yours is so great and so loving, why are so many of you so poor? Either he's not that good and doesn't care that you are poor or he is not that loving and is unable do anything about it. Some God! No wonder you're all regarded as fools.

9:43

OCTAVIUS: Nicely done. But so wide of the mark! First of all, if you had bothered to take the time to find out, you would know that there are many from the upper classes among our number, even some of Caesar's staff. And notable scholars, who were once pagans, have written in defense of our faith for the more educated to consider. But let's not quibble. Many of our number-- most of our number are poor.

CAECILIUS: So you are ready to admit that you are poor wretches?

OCTAVIUS: Put it as you wish, but what is more important is how we regard ourselves. We consider ourselves to be rich. We have that which is most valuable, the most precious gift, which cannot be lost. And for your information, there are those of us who are wealthy. We do not despise wealth; we welcome it when it comes lawfully. But we do not lust after it. And when we get more wealth, we simply give more away. Wealth can be a great burden. It weighs you down with many cares and concerns. Traveling light has its advantages.

CAECILCUS: Sorry, I haven't noticed any. I'll take the wealth instead any day.

OCTAVIUS: You know, Caecilius talking to you makes me realize for the first time why it is God doesn't automatically bless us with wealth. Because if he did, people like you would rush to become Christians and miss the whole point. So don't pity us. We have plenty, not only for ourselves but also for those in need, the ones that

you walk right by.

CAECILIUS: You're all so pure and good. That's another thing that bothers me: you all think you are so righteous.

OCTAVIUS First you accuse us of cannibalism and orgies, now you're offended because we seek to lead a holy life. Let me assure you, we do not consider ourselves to be holy. Every Lord's day we have a service of communion and it is a service of thanksgiving--thanksgiving because we are forgiven, not because we are holy, and if we are forgiven, then we shall seek to lead lives that are like Christ.

CAECILIUS: What concerns me is what you really are. This is the reason that you are hated across all the lands of this vast empire. Let's get to the real problem. You are atheists.

OCTAVIUS: Yes, we are atheists—if you mean that we do not pray to or believe in all of the gods that are worshiped. But these are not gods. We worship the one true God, the Lord over all.

12:17

JANE: Now indeed they have come to a sore point. This was the most difficult thing for the Romans to understand about the Christians. You see, the Roman world had gods aplenty. Household gods kept by each family, the local region's gods worshiped for their past victories. An empire that looked to its patron gods that had protected it and given it victories, and even the emperor himself was seen as a god—the embodiment of the favors and glory that the gods had bestowed upon Rome. Not to worship the gods, or at least show some respect, was considered atheism. To affirm the one God over all the others was looked upon as presumptuous and stupid.

CAECILIUS: You act as if you people knew more than the rest of us. This is just what I am talking about, my learned and "wealthy" Octavius. You think you know more than all of our fathers, that you alone are right. What it comes down to is that you people are captive to novelty. How blind of you not to see that you lack the indispensable quality that has always been revered by the wise. I speak of respect, honor for our traditions, loyalty to the heritage that has been entrusted to us. Novelty! Novelty! That's what titillates you.

OCTAVIUS: That is simply just not the case. Why is it you do not require the Jews to sacrifice to your gods. They alone are given exemption. Why? Because of the antiquity of their religion. The one thing they can not be accused of is novelty. You give them room, even though they are largely disliked, because theirs is a most ancient religion. Well, be assured that the God that the Jews worship is the very same God that we worship. Their sacred writings, the Law and the Prophets—we revere and read aloud in our meetings. And because we worship this God of the Jews, the one thing we cannot be accused of is novelty. It is just the opposite. Our faith looks back beyond the beginning of time to the God who created all that is. What you won't listen to and what the Jews refuse to accept is that this God has come into our world to show us what he is like in the person of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, whom we love and serve. Why? Because he died for us to bring us back into relationship with this one true God, to offer God's forgiveness, new life to all who will accept him and believe him—even you, my friend.

15:07

CAECILIUS: How you tire me with this reckless babble! I shall not take the time now to answer you, except to say, how absurd to think that even if the "one true God," as you assert, were to come to earth, he would surely do better than to come as an unschooled, working-class carpenter in a place like Galilee in Judea. And, if forgiveness were to be found through some man, I assure you that that it would never come through the death of some convicted and crucified criminal. But let's put aside such simplicity and naivete for now, for we are a tolerant people and you are free to believe as you wish. In many ways you do not sound all that different from some of the mystery religions and they are left alone. But what makes you people so offensive is your stubbornness. Believe what you will, but that is no excuse for the lack of patriotism.

JANE: Lack of patriotism? Yes. Remember, the whole idea of separation of religion and the state is a relatively recent one. It was the great cause of the Anabaptists in Europe in the 16th century. And it was more effectively advanced only a couple of hundred years ago with America. In all societies and countries before that time, the political and the religious were intertwined and inseparable. The connection between the two was unquestioned. It was just one of those things taken for granted. To walk through Rome was to be constantly reminded of the place of religion and gods in Roman life. The state paid due homage to the gods on behalf of the people. Not to do so was to risk incurring the gods' displeasure and wrath. So religion was not just a personal thing. No, to deny the gods was considered atheism, but it was even more than that. It was anti-social and unpatriotic. It was considered politically subversive.

17:30

CAECILIUS: You people are happy to benefit from all that is ours living in this greatest time of all history, but where is your gratitude? You are anti-social snobs. You will not show proper respect for our anniversary festivals. You will not sacrifice to the genius of the emperor. You will not fight and join the empire. Simply put, you are disloyal, unpatriotic, and not to be trusted. As far as I am concerned, you are a danger to society.

OCTAVIUS: If you would make just one point and stick to it, I could perhaps answer you. But you are all over the place with your misrepresentations and exaggerations. We do not join the army and we do not fight because we do not believe in killing. We love our enemies and do good to them. Even though we are often hunted down and killed because of accusers like you, we do not even take up arms to defend ourselves. So, I fail to see how we are any danger to anyone. But, yes, you are right, we do not pray to the emperor or join with our neighbors in the sacrifices to the gods. But while we do not pray to the emperor, we do pray for the emperor. We recognize those in authority as appointed by God to preserve order. We seek, we pray for the peace and tranquility of the empire. God knows, if any group seeks a quiet and undisturbed life, it is us. We never know when we will be blamed for anything that is going wrong, be hunted down and arrested.

CAECILIUS: Not without cause, I assure you. Why can you not see what is so clear to everyone? Your lack of patriotism has caused us all grief and suffering. The gods have been good to Rome. They have given us great victories, good food, fertile land. That is why we must propitiate them and rid ourselves of you atheists. You are no more than criminals and must be dealt with as such.

- 19:40 OCTAVIUS: Oh yes, we have heard that before, too many times. As one of our fathers wrote:
- If the Tiber reaches the walls, if the Nile does not rise to the fields, if the sky doesn't move or the earth does, if there is famine, if there is plague, the cry is at once: 'The Christian to the lion'!* Let's get to what really unsettles you. One of the accusations leveled against us which you have not yet said in so many words is that we are a superstition. Well, it is superstition that is at the heart of this matter. This is difficult, and if you give me consideration here, then I will be able to show you that much that divides us will be cleared up. You live in such fear of offending your gods. You are so careful to make your sacrifices and make your bargains with your gods to keep them happy, so they won't send troubles upon us. What kind of gods are these anyway that you think built Rome and made her great?
- CAECILIUS: What is this? What are you saying? Be careful with your mouth, for I fear that you do not know what you are saying.
- OCTAVIUS: I know exactly, my dear Caecilius, for it is you and the masses that think like you that are the superstitious ones. Your gods did not build Rome. Rome was built on war, murder, violence, and greed. Go back to the very beginning, to the founders you exalt. Why, Romulus murdered his own brother Remus! Our history is not a gift from the gods. Ours is a history of conquest and destruction by violence and force. And that not of the gods but of our own greed and hate. They may be demons that have stood by Rome, but they are no gods.
- CAECILIUS: Enough, enough of this, I say. I will hear no more of this. This is utter blasphemy. You and your kind are perverse and wicked. Away with you.
- 21:34 JANE: In the actual account of Minicius Felix, Caecilius ends up getting converted. But we leave them here in our adaptation because here they have come to the crux of it all. Two diametrically opposed views were up against each other, and there did not appear to be a way of reconciling them. Christianity was far more than a distasteful outlook to the pagan world. It was correctly perceived as a threat. The Roman world did not easily tolerate threats.
- Look at this ancient wall, the Aurelian wall that stretches for miles through Rome. Even mighty Rome needed its defenses. The Gospel with its quiet message of forgiveness, peace, and love began to undermine the walls—and it's the familiar walls that give security. When the walls are penetrated, insecurity increases, and the the tendency is to react. Strangely, even when it is a wall of confinement, there is a resistance to letting it go. For breaking down these walls, there was a price to be paid.
- NIGEL: But there was more than broken walls behind the Roman accusations against the Christians. Christianity, from the very beginning, understood itself to be intrinsically offensive to most religious sentiments.
- 23:04 STEVE: Here are some more broken walls. They are the remains of the small Galilean city of Chorazin. Although mentioned only twice in the New Testament, we're told that Chorazin is the very place where Jesus did some of his greatest wonders. Interestingly, we're not told what those wonders were. But Jesus

pronounced woe upon the city because its residents didn't repent and turn their hearts to God in response to such wonders. Thus, these haunting remains are stark reminders that Jesus came and delivered His judgments and accusations before he or his believers became the accused. But it goes even deeper. It was not just that Jesus' words were sometimes offensive, especially to the religious establishment. No, more than that, Jesus Christ himself became an offense. The major offense of Christianity has always had to do with the very person of Jesus Christ.

The heart of the issue may have been stated best in a now classic BBC radio talk given more than 50 years ago by the British scholar C. S. Lewis.

24:05

C.S. LEWIS: There was a time when I believed that the universe was just an accident, that God was just a fantasy, and that Christ was just a good moral teacher. Not so now. You see, I discovered that Christ denied that there was any truth my arguments. What's more, He said He was the Son of God. Here I was troubled. The man who was merely a man and said the sort of thing that Jesus said wouldn't be a great moral teacher at all. He would either be a lunatic on the level with the man that says he's a poached egg, or else he would be the devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was and is the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon, or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But don't let's come up with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He hasn't left that open to us. He didn't intend to.

NARRATOR: It is this claim of Christ that has across the ages been both Christianity's biggest offense and its greatest attraction.

The Roman world could see what was at stake, thus the opposition and the accusations. In our next episode, we will look at how the accusations led to wave after wave of violent persecution.

The Trial and Testimony of the Early Church

PROGRAM 4 PERSECUTION

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RUSSELL: There is no choice when you are asked to deny the One.

NIGEL: It turned into the prolonged battle . . . the might of the Roman Empire against the unarmed, fledgling Christian church.

STEVE: It was a conflict that lasted for almost 300 years, and the results of this struggle have done more to shape our Western civilization and way of life and thinking than any other single force or influence.

SERIES LOGO

1:42

NIGEL: It started with a peasant Galilean carpenter who told his unlettered group of followers to go out into the all the world, make disciples, and spread the word of the coming Kingdom of God.

STEVE: A key development took place here in the Garden of Gethesmane. Here, Jesus had to decide if He would go forward and face the cross or turn back. He went forward. Later his followers, too, would have to decide if they were willing to bear their crosses as followers of Christ. In this program, we'll be looking at the persecution of the early centuries of the church, and we will try to understand why this group, whose motto was love posed such a threat to the power of Rome. My colleagues, Russell, Jane and Nigel join us now from Lyon in France, a notable site of persecution for the early church.

RUSSELL: Now, let's set the record straight on one count. The Christians were not under constant persecution everywhere and all the time.

JANE: No, the persecutions were sporadic and there were intervals in between.

NIGEL: They varied in their intensity.

JANE: And they were not all empire-wide. In fact, most of them were localized. The first-empire wide persecution did not begin until the year 250.

RUSSELL: Many did pay with their lives. And some sought out what they considered to be the privilege of martyrdom—to give their lives for the Lord who had given his life for them.

NIGEL: The early church taught that Christians were not to seek out martyrdom, nor was it to be glamorized.

RUSSELL: But neither should it be avoided, if it meant denying the faith.

JANE: And there were those who decided it was better to deny their faith than to lose their lives.

NIGEL: The early church father Tertullian exclaimed: “All your cruelties can accomplish nothing. Our number increases the more you destroy us. The blood of the Christians is their seed.”

JANE: We don’t actually know if that was correct. Yes, it’s true, a few people did become Christians when they saw how the believers were prepared to endure horrible torture and death for their faith. But most of the population saw these executions as public entertainment and looked upon Christians as just weird and misguided. Remember, this was a society that loved its violent and bloody sports.

RUSSELL: But we are probably safe in saying that if it weren’t for these persecutions the church may never have survived, and the very measures that were used to try to exterminate the new faith simply provided the very basis for its ultimate triumph.

4:21

STEVE: Jesus was a Jew, and so were his earliest disciples. Thus, Christianity started off as a sect within Judaism. But the radical teachings of the “Followers of the way,” as they were first called, caused deep division and hostilities.

The followers of Jesus made no effort to be subtle. They proclaimed Him to be the promised Jewish Messiah, and they regarded themselves as the new Israel, indeed, the true Israel.

In fact, in the first three centuries it was, first and foremost, the power of Rome that threatened the survival of the small but energetic Christian movement.

So, right from the beginning, becoming a Christian was a risky business, a step that almost certainly meant harsh social disapproval—and it could mean arrest, loss of property, torture, even death.

Paradoxically, even as this was expected by Christians, it was unusual for the Roman Empire--unusual to have religious martyrs, because most religions were simply tolerated, and most people kept their religion in its place. Most important for Christians was the awareness that Jesus Christ had endured cruelty, insult, torture and the shameful criminal’s death of crucifixion. He had given clear warning to his first followers that to come after him as a disciple meant to bear a cross, that if they attacked the master they also would attack his servants.

(NERO 54-68)

The first persecution came under the vicious and perhaps insane emperor Nero. The Great Fire of Rome swept through ten of the city's fourteen wards in 64 AD. The rumor circulated that Nero fiddled while Rome burned. And he was even suspected of being responsible for the awful fire. Thus, Nero needed someone to deflect the blame, and he chose the Christians.

The secular historian Tacitus, who had no personal sympathy for the Christians and considered their faith a "deadly superstition" gives us a report in his Annals:

6:14

RUSSELL as TACITUS: There were various attempts at a cover up. They could not extinguish the idea that behind the great fire stood Nero himself. He needed a scapegoat. So he chose a group well-known for their abominations. The Christians, followers of a deadly superstition. Those who claimed to be Christians were arrested, thousands of them. They were convicted, not so much for the crime of arson, but of hatred toward the human race. They were mocked, torn by dogs and nailed to crosses. Nero even used them as human torches to illumine his gardens. Now while these people were deserving of harsh and public punishment, one could not help but feel compassion for them. The punishment was out of all proportion to the crime. They were mercilessly destroyed to glut one man's cruelty.

(DOMITIAN 81-96)

STEVE: Domitian took seriously the idea of the divinity of the emperor. He was happy to be addressed as "our Lord and God" and used the expression to refer to himself.

During his reign, it was expected that citizens would offer incense to the "genius of the emperor." But because it was cast so clearly in religious terms, Christians refused to offer the incense. This time the resulting persecution was selective and mostly confined to Asia Minor and Rome.

(TRAJAN 98-117)

STEVE: Trajan was a respected ruler, considered one of the best emperors. And we get a valuable and interesting insight into the life of the church during his reign from correspondence between Trajan and Pliny. Here is their interchange summarized as if it had been a personal report rather than correspondence.

9:03

RUSSELL as messenger from PLINY: My lord emperor, I bring you a message from governor Pliny, who earnestly seeks your decision on an urgent matter.

NIGEL as TRAJAN: Yes, what is it specifically?

MESSENGER: The governor seeks your pleasure how he should deal with Christians.

TRAJAN: What has been the governor's practice until now?

MESSENGER: If they acknowledge that they are Christians, he threatens them with punishment, gives them two, maybe three, chances to change their minds, and if they don't, they are sentenced to be executed.

TRAJAN: So what is the problem?

MESSENGER: The governor is concerned because of the increasing volume of cases against Christians. Many strong accusations without signature naming many Christians are now submitted. So we arrest them. If they are willing to curse Christ—for we are told that no real Christian will do that—and if they're willing to say a prayer to the gods and worship your statue, we will let them go free. The accused are from all ages, every rank and both sexes. We have to stop them now before they get out of hand.

TRAJAN: Get out of hand?

MESSENGER: They want to reclaim them before their number gets too large. Already the temples are almost deserted. The religion of our ancestors is in decline. The income related to our ceremonies is shrinking. If we move now, we can stop these Christians, but the governor seeks only to act in accord with your wishes.

TRAJAN: Oh, very well. Here is my reply. Commend the faithful Pliny for the way he has acted in the right course. Tell him we cannot lay down specific rules in the matter, but there is one thing. Don't let him admit any accusations where the accuser is not himself present.

MESSENGER: Yes, lord emperor.

TRAJAN: And don't go seeking out Christians. If any are accused of being Christians, then they must be convicted and punished. And also make clear: those accused of being Christians, if they deny it, if they are willing to bow down and worship our gods, then set them free.

11:03

CARSTEN THIEDE: Trajan's letter to Pliny was an attempt to protect Christians from over-zealous procurators and governors like Pliny himself. Do not seek them out. Do not persecute them. Do not punish them unless they are proven to be criminals, criminals against the Roman state. Do not torture them. And, above all, do not follow up anonymous information. Do what is correct according to Roman law. But do not do anything beyond that. It was a kind of protection for the Christians.

(HADRIAN 117-138)

STEVE: Hadrian was one of the most capable of the Roman emperors, and he carried on the policy established by Trajan. Persecution was only occasional and in response to local pressure. Hadrian may even have served as a restraining influence on those zealous to have Christians attacked. A document known as the "Rescript of Hadrian" dating from around the year 125, ordered that an accuser must submit proof against the Christians before any punishment could be exercised. And accusers who brought empty and frivolous charges were to receive even greater punishment.

(ANTONINUS PIUS 138-161)

Antoninus Pius may have provided a degree of protection for the Christians, at least in some instances. However, it was under his reign that a martyrdom occurred that

left one of the most indelible memories in all of church history. That was the burning of the venerable 86-year-old Polycarp, a disciple of the Apostle John, in Smyrna of Asia Minor.

12:30

(MARCUS AURELIUS 161-181)

Marcus Aurelius was another of the good emperors and a distinguished Stoic philosopher, but he had no use for Christianity and regarded it with contempt. Under his leadership the empire experienced a series of natural disasters—floods, fires, earthquakes, and pestilence. There was a popular outcry for Christian blood to be sacrificed to propitiate the gods. So Marcus approved a horrible persecution that occurred in the year 177 in the cities of Lyon and Vienne in southern France.

NIGEL: One of their victims was Blandina. Another was the bishop of Lyon, Pothinus. He was 92 years of age. He was brutally beaten and kicked and then brought in here, where two days later he died.

STEVE: Father Jean Comby is an historian at the University of Lyon.

13:31

JEAN COMBY: What does it mean to be a martyr? The word “martyr” in Greek means “witness.” A martyr is a witness for Christ. The martyr is one who follows Christ and wants to follow Him to the end and imitate Him in everything He did. The high point of martyrdom, of course, is when a Christian, because of closeness to Christ, is willing to die as Christ did in His passion, in His death, in hope of rising again with Him. It is significant that in the letter from Christians at Lyon—which tells us about the death and martyrdom of Christians at this place—they report that quite often, through the sufferings of their brothers and sisters, they saw Christ.

(SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS 202-211)

STEVE: Under Septimus Severus, a further step was taken in opposition to the church. Conversion to Christianity was specifically forbidden, even though Septimius had some Christians in his own household. Another martyrdom that left a lasting impact on the church occurred during his reign. It took place in North Africa, where Perpetua, a young mother nursing her infant, and her servant Felicitas, pregnant and close to delivery, were arrested. They were then mangled by hungry beasts before a cheering crowd in the amphitheater and finally stabbed to death by soldiers.

Then came another interlude of relative peace, breathing space marked by rapid expansion of the church, with thousands of new believers coming into the faith.

14:59

(DECIUS 249-251, VALERIAN 253-260)

But the generation of peace and healthy growth was not to last. Under the emperors Decius and Valerian, the most ominous level of persecution thus far came with a vengeance.

If before the church had been seen as an irritant and a nuisance, now it was being seen as an actual threat that had to be wiped out. Thus, we move into the period of the first official empire-wide persecution.

Christians were denied the right to meet together and were threatened with death

if they did. They were even forbidden to visit their cemeteries and burial places. Their property was confiscated. The bishops were made a special target. The strategy was to cut off the leadership so the followers would fall away.

15:42

RUSSELL: All citizens were commanded to sacrifice to the gods, and proof was required that they had complied.

NIGEL: Those who obeyed were given a certificate as evidence. A copy was given to the individual, and there is evidence that duplicates for verification were found at the town hall.

JANE: This is all it is. It was a little certificate like this. Just like a social security card. Get one and you were safe. They discovered about forty of these in Egypt.

NIGEL: Nobody knows exactly how many, but there were more martyrs under Decius and Valerian than any of the other persecutions.

JANE: We need to emphasize that from the emperor's point of view, this was not malicious tyranny or mindless cruelty. No, he would see it as efficient leadership in difficult days. A typical emperor's reasoning might go something like this:

16:44

RUSSELL (as hypothetical emperor): The people look to me to maintain peace and prosperity. It is my responsibility to see that civic unity is preserved across the empire so that we are strong against the threat of invasion.

That is why it is so very important that we expect from everyone a clear expression of loyalty, unity, and patriotism—both to me and the great office that I hold, and the gods that made us great.

Now the Christians need not die. Do you hear me? I take no pleasure in their deaths. Indeed, I wish more of them were willing to join the army. If they did, we wouldn't have to hire so many German mercenaries to fight the other Germans trying to invade us. No, I have given the Christians every opportunity to show their loyalty and devotion. I don't need any martyrs. I don't want any martyrs.

A little certificate is all they need—and no questions asked. It is to be obtained by everyone—yes, everyone—no discrimination here.

18:14

STEVE: This first empire-wide persecution ended rather abruptly in 260 when the emperor Valerian was captured during a war with the Persians.

In the general peace that followed, the churches grew rapidly in numbers, wealth and influence. Many Christians rose to important positions. And in the latter half of the third century, church buildings began to be erected. Some of them were magnificent, with gold and silver vessels for the eucharistic services.

Thus, the first decades of the church's existence, up to the year 300, saw an ebb and flow of persecution. But now came a last great wave of repression that represented nothing less than a life-and-death struggle between Christianity and paganism.

18:55

(DIOCLETIAN 284-305)

NIGEL: The emperor was Diocletian. He was another of the more able emperors. He worked hard to re-establish the strength and unity of the perceptibly weakening empire.

JANE: For the first twenty years of his reign, Diocletian left the Christians alone. His wife Prisca, daughter Valeria, and many of his administration were Christians or at least supportive of them.

NIGEL: He appointed three assistants to rule with him: Maximian Galerius and Constantius Chlorus.

RUSSELL: But Diocletian got carried away with the idea of the divinity of the emperor, and so everyone who approached him had to do so on bended knee, forehead touching the ground.

NIGEL: Paganism was tired, its appeal waning, steadily losing ground to Christianity. To halt the decline something must be done soon and decisively.

JANE: This was one of those cases where a very determined woman got her way with a very susceptible man.

RUSSELL: Diocletian knew the risks involved putting the Christians to the fire again, and apparently he had little stomach for it. But he was swayed otherwise.

NIGEL: Remember Galerius, who was appointed by Diocletian? Well, Galerius's mother was quite a superstitious lady and very devoted to the the gods of the mountains, in whose honor she held sacred banquets daily and served meat offered to the idols to her servants.

RUSSELL: But the Christians would not partake. They fasted and prayed instead.

JANE: This made her mad. So, with some persistent nagging, she pressured her son Galerius to destroy the Christians. This meant that Galerius and Diocletian met alone for extended periods during the winter of the year 302.

NIGEL: No one else was admitted to their meetings so that everyone knew that something was brewing.

RUSSELL: But Diocletian was hesitant, sensing that a vigorous persecution against the Christians could backfire and simply serve to strengthen them.

JANE: But Galerius was by now obsessive and persisted. So Diocletian sought advice from others. He sent a soothsayer to inquire of the god Apollo.

NIGEL: The advice came back against the Christians.

21:18

STEVE: This one they would call "The Great Persecution."

February 23, 303, the festival of the god Terminus, was the date chosen to commence the termination of Christianity. Edicts were published, decreeing that:

Christians holding public office were to be put out;

All accusations against Christians were to be received;
They were to be tortured;
Their scriptures confiscated and burned;
The church buildings to be destroyed;
Their civil rights of Christians denied;
Presidents, bishops and leaders of churches were to be arrested and
compelled to sacrifice to the gods.

Wild beasts, burnings, stabbings, crucifixions, the rack—all the reliable methods of torture were mercilessly employed.

Many Christians gave in. Yet, many others refused. We don't know how many, but can safely say that multiple thousands were killed or permanently maimed. And in some areas the persecution lasted eight years.

22:16

RUSSELL: It was a life and death struggle of Christianity versus paganism. Yet the carnage was so great and so ineffective that both people and rulers just seemed to sicken of this prolonged massacre.

JANE: They had used all their might against an unarmed opponent that simply refused to die. And this opponent was not an outside invader trying to conquer them. No, it was just their own people trying to live in quietness.

NIGEL: Tired of it all, on April 30, 311, shortly before his death, weak and diseased, none other than Galerius, the instigator, issued an Edict of Toleration. In it he declared: "Christians may exist again, and may establish their meeting houses." And he added that because of his gracious indulgence, it was the duty of the Christians "to pray to their god for our good estate, and that of the state . . . that the commonwealth may endure on every side unharmed."

23:23

STEVE: That was the turning point. Constantine came to the throne. Under him, in 313, the Edict of Milan was sent forth to " . . . grant both the Christians and to all others full authority to follow whatever worship each man has desired."

In the decades that followed, Christianity would gradually become established as the official faith of the Roman Empire, and that would bring challenges and temptations of a different kind. I'm back now in the Garden of Gethsemane, and look at this. From here you're able to see the pinnacle of the temple wall. That's where Jesus at the beginning of His ministry, was tempted by Satan to cast himself down and be miraculously delivered. To do that would have been to build his ministry on the spectacular, on demonstrations of human power. But he chose instead to build his ministry on love, sacrifice, and service. In the generations since, the church has been faced with the same choice. And the question always is the same. Will the church follow the path of worldly power and influence, or will it say, as Jesus said to His Father in this quiet place: "Not my will but thine be done."

In our next episode, we will take a look at the outstanding examples of those in the early church who followed the way of Christ.

The Trial and Testimony of the Early Church

PROGRAM 5 TESTIMONY

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NIGEL: These early Christians would have a difficult time understanding our modern Christmas and all the fanfare we make over it.

STEVE: This is the Church of the Nativity in the little town of Bethlehem where Jesus was born. More than any other site, we associate Bethlehem with the celebration of Christmas. Yet, it may surprise you to hear that Christmas and the birthday of Christ were not even celebrated in the first 300 years of the church.

SERIES LOGO

1:21

STEVE: Since the early Christians did not celebrate the birth of Christ, they did not preserve for us the exact date when Jesus was born. Scholars are agreed it had to be sometime between 4 and 7 BC. But the December 25 date was not introduced until the mid 300s. And the celebration of Christmas itself was introduced late in the fourth century to adapt and replace Roman pagan festivals.

It's Easter that was the important time for the early church, but the "birthdays" that were celebrated were those of the great martyrs that died for their faith. And why birthdays? For the early church, the day of martyrdom was the birthday of entering the presence of God.

NIGEL: Here some of their names are recorded: Pothinus, Zacharias, Sanctus, Epagathus, Attalus, Maturus, Alexander, Ponticus, Asclibiades, Macarius, Sylvius, Primus.

We know so little about that vast anonymous army that joined the ranks of the early Christians and spread the message to the far corners of the empire. But perhaps indirectly, we can get a better feeling for them by looking at the stories that they treasured and the models that they sought to emulate.

2:51 STEVE: With the help of my three colleagues, Nigel, Jane and Russell, we'll now look at two of the most noteworthy and influential martyrs, Polycarp and Perpetua. Their stories were recorded, circulated, and celebrated by those who shared their faith and the threat of their fate.

RUSSELL: One of the most cherished stories of martyrdom in the early church comes from the city of Smyrna and tells of the experience and martyrdom of the aged and beloved bishop Polycarp. Polycarp was considered of exceptional importance in the early church because he had been a personal disciple of the apostle John. Right after his death a letter was written to be circulated among the churches in the region. The churches needed to know of the sufferings and the persecution in Smyrna-and how the church there and its leaders were responding to the martyrdoms.

3:41 NIGEL: The letter tells how some believers were fed to the beasts in an arena like this one, dying a horrible death as they were chewed up limb by limb. Then the crowds cried for the leader, the bishop Polycarp.

The record states that their leaders taught that Christians were not to make themselves available for martyrdom nor to seek it out, but neither were they to avoid it when there was no choice. So Polycarp went and hid on a farm. A while later he moved to a second location. The authorities arrived at the first location and, finding that Polycarp had left, arrested two slaveboys, torturing one of them into telling them where Polycarp had gone. Then they moved on to the second location, taking the slaveboy with him.

Polycarp welcomed his captors as if they were friends, talked with them, and ordered that food and drink be served to them. Then he requested that he be given one hour before they took him away so that he might pray. The officers, overhearing his prayers that went on for two hours, began to have second thoughts. What were they doing, coming and arresting an old man like this?

He was brought before the proconsul and, here again, we see the tendency of the Roman authorities to prefer that the accused renounce their faith rather than to have to put them to death. So they did their best to reason with him.

5:35 RUSSELL as PROCONSUL: Consider your age, old man. Just swear by the genius of Caesar. Just change your mind. Say, "Away with the atheists."

NIGEL as POLYCARP: "Away with the atheists."

PROCONSUL: Swear as I have said. Just curse Christ and I will release you.

POLYCARP: Eighty-six years I have served him. He has never done me any wrong. How then shall I blaspheme my King who has saved me?

PROCONSUL: Then do this. Just swear by the genius of the emperor, and that will be sufficient.

POLYCARP: If you imagine I would do that, then you pretend that you don't know who I am. Let me speak plainly. I am a Christian. If you are willing to learn of the teachings of Christianity, then appoint a time to hear.

PROCONSUL: Then why don't you persuade the crowds gathered here?

POLYCARP: I will not even try. In their present frenzied mood, they are neither worthy nor interested to hear of my defense.

PROCONSUL: You stretch my patience very thin. I have the wild beasts ready. I will have them set upon you if you do not do as I require.

POLYCARP: Bring them forth, if that is your decision. I would change my mind if it were a matter of going from wrong to right but not if it means going from the better to the worse.

PROCONSUL: I have other methods. If the wild beasts do not persuade you, I will have you burned alive, slowly roasted, so you will soon wish that you had the good sense to accept my mercy.

POLYCARP: Your fire may last for an hour, then it is over. But do you not know of the judgment to come, the punishment that is forever. Have you not thought of that Mr. Proconsul? Oh, you may do with me as you wish, but one day you will stand before the judge of heaven and earth.

8:40

NIGEL: As they went back and forth, observers said that the aged Polycarp seemed to gain strength and courage so that his face seemed to glow. The proconsul was amazed. He sent his herald into the middle of the stadium to announce three times to the crowd that Polycarp had confessed to being a Christian. Maybe he thought that the confession would satisfy the mob. But it didn't. They were hungry for his blood and screamed forth their accusations: "This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians. He is the destroyer of our gods. He leads many away from our sacrifice and worship."

So with one voice the crowd cried for him to be burned. They began to nail him to the pyre, but Polycarp said no, that the one who would allow him to endure the flames would strengthen him to stay put without being nailed. He began to pray aloud, thanking God for his goodness and for the privilege of being counted among the martyrs, to partake of the cup of Christ, and to offer himself up as a sacrifice to God.

The fire was lit, and those believers present reported how they could detect a fragrant aroma. They said it was like a loaf of bread being baked. The fire did not consume him. The executioner had to stab him with a dagger to snuff out his life, and when he was stabbed, the blood gushing forth put out the fire. Then he died.

There was resistance to allowing the Christians to gather Polycarp's remains but they were finally permitted to do so and gathered them up like precious jewels. They buried him on February 22, probably in the year 155. Polycarp was the twelfth to be martyred at Smyrna, they reported. They set aside the anniversary of his martyrdom as a day to remember. It was celebrated like a birthday in memory of those who had died for their faith and for the strengthening and preparation of those who would one day have to.

11:28 | RUSSELL: It was very important to his followers that the details of these events be carefully written down. So a report was prepared, copied, and circulated among the churches, offering them an important link back to the apostles because of Polycarp's association with the apostle John.

Now we don't know how many people were actually martyred here in the Roman Colosseum, but we do know that across the empire there were many instances of the Christians thrust into these public arenas to do battle for their faith, and on this site, a memorial cross still stands as a kind of silent reminder of how, even in their deaths, they achieved a kind of victory.

12:09 | STEVE : In the early church, women assumed a very important role. Many of them were numbered among the martyrs. Women often were central to the life and faith of the church, and they probably constituted the majority of its members. For example, after the church in the town of Cirta in North Africa was seized in the year 303, only sixteen men's tunics were found, but there were eighty-two women's tunics. The women in the early church came from all social classes, and that was illustrated well by a martyrdom account that ranks with Polycarp's as one of the most cherished by the churches. When persecution broke out around the year 200 under the reign of the emperor Septimius Severus, a young Christian woman named Perpetua was arrested in the North African city of Carthage. Also arrested were her friends, Satyrus, Saturninus, her slave girl, Felicitas, also a second slave Revocatus. Perpetua, who was fluent in Latin and Greek, kept a diary of her prison experience right up to the day of her execution. And it was carefully preserved by her fellow Christians. In fact, it may be the first document we have from the pen of a Christian woman. Let's pick up her account as Perpetua tells how her father visited her in prison, trying to convince her to renounce her faith.

13:24 | JANE as PERPETUA: "Father," I said, "do you see this water pot here?" "Yes, of course," he replied. "Well, that's just what it is. It isn't something else, like a necklace. Can it be called by anything other than what it is?" "Of course not," he replied. "Then, I can't be called anything other than what I am and I am a Christian." At that, my father was angered and rushed towards me as if to attack me. But he composed himself quickly and left. Then two of the deacons in our church, Tertius and Pomponius, who were especially concerned about us, bribed some of the guards and had us moved to a nicer part of the prison to refresh ourselves.

I was allowed to hold and nurse my baby. The poor little thing was faint from hunger. I was anxious and spoke to my mother and my brother about my little boy and gave the baby into their charge. How difficult it was to see how they suffered in their pity for me. But very soon I was allowed to have my baby stay with me in prison and then it seemed like all at once I felt much better. Relieved of the worry about the child, I regained my health. Now my prison seemed to me like a palace, and I was content to stay here.

Well, the date was set when we were to go before the governor. So my father, who was so worried about me, was allowed to visit me again. "My daughter," he said, "think of me, your father, and my gray hair. Do not bring this great disgrace upon me. I will be held in contempt by everyone. And think of your mother, your aunt, your baby. Most of all think of your baby. Give up your pride-it will destroy us all. None of us will ever be able to hold our head up in public again."

I could see that my father loved me as he spoke. I tried to comfort him. "It will be in the prisoner's dock as God wills," I said. "He will not leave us to ourselves. We are all kept in his power." My father left in great sorrow.

Then one morning at breakfast time we were suddenly rushed before the governor. The rest of our company were questioned and each admitted in turn that they were guilty of being Christians. Then when it came to my turn, my father rushed forward, pulled me from the step, and insisted: "Offer up the sacrifice—have pity on your baby." "I will not sacrifice," I said. "Are you a Christian?" Hilarius asked. "Yes, I am," I answered. My father kept trying to persuade me, and then Hilarius ordered him to be thrown to the ground and beaten with a rod. Oh, how that hurt to see my father beaten! I felt the pain as if they were beating me. Then sentence was passed, condemning us to be thrown to the beasts, but first we were returned to this prison. We were in high spirits.

My dear Felicitas was eight months pregnant when we were arrested. We were so concerned about her because it was illegal for pregnant women to be executed. She would have to wait until after the baby was delivered. She wouldn't have the company of the rest of us in her death. So in one outpouring of common grief, we prayed for Felicitas. And two days before we were due to be taken to the amphitheater, she delivered her baby. One of the Christian women promised that, if Felicitas were not allowed to live, she would take care of the baby and bring it up as her own. How Felicitas rejoiced that she had been safely delivered and could now go and face the wild beasts! She said she was ready to go from the blood of childbirth to the blood of the gladiator to wash after childbirth with a second baptism.

19:56

RUSSELL: That's as far as Perpetua could take the story in her diary. The events that followed were carefully written down by her fellow Christians and saved with her account.

The day arrived. Satyrus, Saturninus, Revocatus, Felicitas, and Perpetua were taken from the prison to the amphitheater. There the Roman officers prepared to dress them in the pagan religious costumes. This was the practice to signify that they were being offered as a sacrifice to the gods. Perpetua strongly objected, saying, "We came here of our own free will, so that our liberty would not be violated. We pledged our lives in order not to sacrifice to these gods. And you agreed with us about this!" So the officer relented, and they were allowed into the arena in their own clothes.

They were brought before the waiting mob. As they approached the Governor Hilarius they gestured to him, saying, "You have condemned us, but God will condemn you." At this the crowd was enraged and ordered that they be scourged before a whole line of gladiators. They simply rejoiced that they obtained a share in the Lord's sufferings.

For the women, a mad heifer was brought forth. They stripped Felicitas and Perpetua naked, placed them in nets and dragged them to the center of the arena. Even the crowd was appeased when they saw that one was a delicate young girl and the other fresh from childbirth with milk dripping from her breasts, so they were taken back and given unbelted tunics to wear.

Then they were set before the heifer, who threw Perpetua to the ground, and she tore her tunic. She quickly covered herself, as much for her modesty as for her pain. Then she asked for a pin to fasten her hair, for she did not see it fitting to die with her hair unkempt and miss her hour of triumph.

She had seen that Felicitas had been thrown to the ground. She ran to her, picked her up, and the two stood together side by side. The crowd was appeased, and she was taken back to the gate where she spoke to her brother and the other catechumens, saying, "Be strong in the faith, stand firm, love one another. Do not be weakened by what you have seen us going through." Then, as the contest came to a close a leopard was brought forward. It bit Satyrus and, drenched in his own blood, he was taken to the usual spot to have his throat cut. Then all the other martyrs went to that spot of their own accord. Then they took the sword silently without moving. Then Perpetua was struck to the bone and she screamed out, but then she took the trembling hand of the young gladiator and guided the sword to her own throat. It was as if she could not be dispatched unless she herself were willing.

23:16 KEN CURTIS: It was these stories of Polycarp and Perpetua and others that played such an important role in the early church. For they found strength in these stories to meet the later times of persecution. As a result, we have a movement that could not be intimidated. It seemed that no torture could be developed, no threat devised that could break the resolution of those who were determined to stand firm for their faith. How many died in the persecutions up to the year 312 when Constantine made the faith legal? We really don't know. But we do know that the church would not have been the same kind of church without its martyrs. Indeed, the church may not have even survived without its martyrs. And keep this in mind, too: martyrdom was not something that was confined to the early centuries and years of the church. In every single period, there have been those courageous men and women who have been willing to surrender their lives rather than deny their faith.

24:09 STEVE: In fact in our own 20th century there have been far more martyrs for the Christian faith than in the first 300 years.

Today in at least dozens of nations, Christian believers are prohibited from propagating their beliefs, and in many of these countries they face persecution, imprisonment, and even death.

STEVE: In our next and final program we will look at the great transition that took place under the emperor Constantine. It was the period when the church went from being the persecuted to becoming the privileged and the favored faith of the empire. We will also see what it was about the life and faith of the early Christians that enabled them to survive and to thrive.

The Trial and Testimony of the Early Church

PROGRAM 6 TRANSITION

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STEVE: It was one of those events that would help shape the future for centuries to come. The month: October. The year: 312. Constantine is preparing for battle. The stakes are high. Who will control the Roman Empire? Constantine pauses to pray. Suddenly, he has a vision. He sees the sign of the cross and the words, "In this sign you will win." He accepted the vision. He adopted the sign. He had the cross inscribed on his soldiers armor. He went into battle and he conquered. The momentous battle took place at the Milvian Bridge at Rome. After this battle, the church would never be the same. It is safe to say, the world would never be the same either.

OPENING LOGO

1:45

Hello, I'm Steve Bell at the Sea of Galilee in the Holy Land, and this is the final chapter in our six part series. In previous programs, we have looked at Christianity through its stormy and unpredictable early centuries. We have seen: the foundation—Christ, his apostles, and the great last apostle, Paul; the spread of the faith throughout the far reaches of the Roman Empire over its first 300 years; the accusations brought against the Christians by the pagans; the outbursts of persecution that threatened to wipe the young and fragile movement; and the testimonies of those who stood fast, willing to pay with their lives, who gave such strength and courage to the community of believers.

The last persecution, called the Great Persecution, was carried out by the Emperor Diocletian and his co-rulers. It was the worst and most savage of all. It was a desperate effort by paganism to reassert itself and to drive back the steadily expanding presence and power of Christianity.

Paganism did not prevail. Christianity had established deep roots in the heart, mind, and life of the empire. A transition began that is foundational to our modern world. To describe what happened let's go to my colleagues Russell, Nigel and Jane above Neumagen, near Trier in West Germany.

3:06

NIGEL: Constantine and his troops were marching on Rome from the west to do battle with his opponent, another would be emperor, Maxentius. It was before they engaged in battle that Constantine had his vision.

JANE: It has been traditionally thought that Constantine had his vision just before the battle outside Rome. We have two accounts of his vision. One is by Lactantius. The other is by Eusebius. Lactantius said that the vision took place the night before the battle. If that is the case, it would have to have had to take place near Rome. But the Eusebius account is based on a first-hand conversation with Constantine, who swore to him that he truly had had the vision. Eusebius places the vision after they left Trier.

RUSSELL: This would have been the first natural stopping point for his troops, about one day's march from Trier.

NIGEL: And this is the only place with a tradition. There are no other places with claims as the site of the vision.

JANE: Psychologically, it would make sense that the vision occurred here. Constantine loved Trier. He even built a palace here.

RUSSELL: Constantine preferred Trier to Rome. He spent his summer vacations here. So it's very possible that the vision occurred here on that autumn day in this lonely spot near Trier.

NIGEL: After the vision, he moved confidently to Rome and the decisive battle under the sign of the cross.

RUSSELL: This is a commemorative cross, placed here by the local people, and the inscription: "In this sign you will conquer. Good Christian, do not pass the spot without recognizing Jesus Christ our redeemer. Praise be to Jesus Christ forever and ever. Amen."

5:14

STEVE: Thus, Constantine effectively consolidated his hold on imperial power and determined to make Christianity his own religion and, eventually, the religion of the empire.

CARSTEN THIEDE: There are people who think that Constantine was about the worst thing that could have happened to Christianity. It took the church on its way towards a state church, an institution, with all that went with it.

STEVE: It didn't happen all at once, of course. But with Constantine the church moved in a dramatic new direction. Christianity had prevailed. And the more the political power of the empire waned, the more the church became the stabilizing and unifying source for Roman society. It outlasted the empire, and in a sense it replaced it.

But it remains for us in this program to ask: "Why did the church succeed? What did it have to offer?" No thinking person at the beginning of this era would have given it the slightest chance of prevailing. Recall how Jesus himself had only three years of public ministry, and his message was confined to a small remote area of the

empire. In the process Jesus made no discoverable impact outside of Judaism, and within Judaism he managed to alienate the two most important groups in power.

So Christian believers have always credited the providence of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit as the explanation for their survival and growth.

Of course, famous historians have set forth other reasons. Gibbon gave these: intolerant zeal; threat of Hell; miracles and exorcisms; sober lives; church government.

Each viewer will, of course, have to draw his or her own conclusions, but there are some other characteristics of early Christianity that would be essential to take into account. This is far from a complete list but it covers some of the prominent aspects that the latest research would support: promise of eternal life; simple message; universal appeal; close knit community; concern for others; and the person of Christ..

7:15

1. The promise of eternal life

JANE: No series on early Christianity would be complete without a visit to the catacombs.

RUSSELL: So often we're told that the catacombs are a symbol of the early church. And it is still a popular idea that Christians met here to worship, pray, and to hide for their lives. That is really a misconception. The believers dug out these catacombs to bury their dead. They are cemeteries. But what's important is that, as a place for the dead, they so strongly symbolize life.

NIGEL: They are an artistic expression of tunnels with biblical symbols depicting the gatherings of early Christians.

JANE: The Christians made a lot out of death. The early churches were formed as burial societies, and the Romans permitted this. Whereas it was not uncommon for the Romans to burn their dead, the Christians were careful to provide a dignified burial and respect for the dead. For to the believer, death was not the end but the doorway to life.

NIGEL: The martyrs were especially honored. Their deaths were commemorated. These memorials were held in sub-terranean tunnels.

RUSSELL: The dead were treated with such respect and their bodily remains lovingly cared for because of the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body. Just as Christ had been raised from the dead, so, they taught, his followers would also be raised and given new bodies and the gift of eternal life.

RUSSELL: The idea of the bodily resurrection was generally quite distasteful to the surrounding society, but it offered hope and solace to many. It was one of the definite promises given to new converts.

NIGEL: This also illustrates how the Christians valued not only the spiritual but the material world as well. Creation was from God.

JANE: Yes, creation was from God, and re-creation and resurrection of the body were also from God.

9:46

2. A simple message.

STEVE: The message that the Christians spread was on the one hand very complex and profound. The best minds of the church in the early centuries worked hard to show how the Gospel caught up the deepest and best from respected philosophers of previous ages, but they also argued that the Gospel went far beyond these philosophers to show the God who had revealed himself.

The job of clarifying and developing the ramifications of the faith has continued to occupy scholars ever since. One could not even begin to master in one lifetime all of the books that have been written just about Jesus.

But the communication of the faith to early church inquirers was done in simple terms that could be grasped by anyone, no matter how uneducated. The substance of that message was capsulized so well by the renowned Harvard historian Arthur Darby Nock more than 50 years ago:

STEVE: Christianity said, "You are in your sins, a state inevitable for you and aggravated by your willfulness. No action of yours will enable you to make a new start. No effort of yours will enable you to put aside your guilt in God's eyes, and you are doomed to endless suffering hereafter. So turn to us. Stake everything on Jesus the Christ being your Savior, and God will give to you the privilege of making a new start as a new being, and will bestow upon you grace which will enable you so to live here as to obtain a share in the life of the world to come. By using our sacraments, you will here and now triumph over death and will have a foretaste of the joys that await you in heaven. Christ became man so that you may become as God."

In language understandable to any age level, these basic teachings put Christianity within reach of all those prepared to listen and believe.

11:37

3. Universal appeal

STEVE: In the tenth chapter of the New Testament book of Acts, the apostle Peter had an amazing vision. It occurred on the rooftop of one Simon the tanner, here in the city of Joppa, on the west coast of modern day Israel, overlooking the Mediterranean. In fact, where I am standing right now is believed by many to be the actual location.

Incidentally, it is quite interesting that Peter would choose to stay with someone who tanned animal hides. It was a process that gave off a notoriously bad odor. Peter's vision represents an important landmark in Christian outreach because it shattered beliefs about religious separation that he held as a first-century Jew. After the vision, Peter exclaimed: "God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean . . . but any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

NIGEL: So now, related to the simplicity of the Christian message, there was added the appeal of universality.

STEVE: Consider that the Roman world had room for all kinds of gods. Everyone could find a god to their liking and appropriate to their fears. But Christianity now turned this inside-out, proclaiming that there was only one God who had chosen everyone—everyone, that is, who would believe and obey him. There was no spiritual elite. Rich and poor would sit together, the educated and the ignorant, different racial groups, and social classes, slaves sitting right beside masters. In fact, a former slave who had worked the mines actually became bishop of Rome—Callistus in 217.

NIGEL: So, the invitation was without discrimination and without qualification. If you were ready to repent of your sins and accept Christ as Lord and Savior, you were as important as anyone else and you were welcomed, no matter where you came from.

STEVE: The Roman Empire gave political unity to an amazing diversity of cultures, nationalities and class groups and now the universal invitation of the Gospel message would go forth from here, offering spiritual unity to the same diversity of peoples.

13:41

4. Acceptance in a close-knit community

STEVE: And this spiritual unity of diverse peoples drew one into an intimate fellowship or community. The Christians typically met in homes. Evidence of actual church buildings being erected is not found until the mid 200s. Becoming a Christian in the early church was not a private act, even though it was a personal decision. To become a Christian meant becoming part of a community that would regularly meet in places not unlike this.

What was it like to be part of a Christian community? Well, for one thing, you were accepted regardless of your past life. Even the apostle Paul, once a fierce persecutor of the church, was accepted and became one of the most prominent leaders.

KEN CURTIS: The early church was a community where you were loved. “Behold how they love one another,” it was said of them. And it was a community where you were touched. When the pagans heard of the “kiss of peace” that was practiced in the Christians services, they naturally assumed something lustful had to be going on. But it was really nothing more than the kind of affection you would expect to be expressed within a family. And that’s exactly what the early church was. It was a new family. Your fellow believers were your new brothers and sisters in Christ.

Now if this sounds soft and sentimental, bear in mind that then it was revolutionary. Because this new family became your first loyalty. That could upset the age old patriarchal family system, and it did other things. It raised the status of women and even caused children to be looked on in a new light. Up to that time, children were seen as property and as labor. But now Jesus set them forth as the very model by which one had to approach the kingdom of heaven.

STEVE: And it was a community and family that knew no bounds. You could go almost anywhere in the empire and find a welcome from other Christians. In fact it was a rather amazing kind of “bed and breakfast” network.

The Christian community set forth expectations that by today’s standards might be

considered excessive. Anyone could become a Christian and be welcome-anyone, that is, willing to follow the very narrow path that led to the door.

For example you didn't just join the church. You went through an extensive period of training as a catechumen. That could last up to three years, during which you were closely monitored in your behavior to see if you indeed were sincere in seeking a totally new life within the Christian community. Those that were part of the church would fast two days a week, share their goods with those in need, and be expected to live by a strict moral code. Thus, the church became a well-defined, close-knit community where a person could be intimately known and strongly affirmed.

16:24 **5. Care for others**

RUSSELL as EMPEROR JULIAN: "Atheism is being specially advanced through the loving care devoted to strangers and through their care of the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jewish beggar; while these godless Galileans (whom some call Christians) care not only for their own poor, but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the service we should render them."

NIGEL: A great pestilence afflicted Carthage in North Africa in the year 252. Sickness afflicted many, many people. Corpses lay about in the streets. It was a time of great persecution for the Christians. The bishop Cyprian sent Christians out to minister to those who were sick and dying, and this meant caring for some who had so recently been persecuting them.

JANE (as early Christian ministering in the street): It was important for us as Christians not just to talk about our faith, but to do something about it. And we found that by taking care of those who were in need, that we really were able to make contact. Now, I want you to understand that it was not just a contrived publicity stunt to attract attention. No, it was simply an accepted expectation that Christians would take care of the needs of others.

NIGEL: One of the church fathers said it well: "We hold everything in common except our spouses. . . ." And he added, "Christians voluntarily contributed to support the destitute and to pay for their burial expenses, to supply the needs of girls and boys lacking money and power, and to support old people confined to the home"

STEVE: Community, caring, acceptance—all are essential elements of early Christian faith. But there is one more that transcends all the others, the person of Christ.

19:02 **6. The person of Christ**

STEVE: Here at the sea of Galilee, they catch what the Israelis call "St. Peter's fish." And I can assure you it is delicious. But I wonder how many of us have ever considered the important place of fish in early Christianity. At least five of Jesus' original apostles were fishermen by trade, and when he called them, he promised to make them "fishers of men". Also, several of his miracles involve fish, and the Gospels say that, when he met with some of his disciples after his resurrection, he served them fish. So it is not surprising that the fish became one of the important early symbols for Christianity.

Some have said the fish was a simple sign that Christians used to secretly identify

themselves to each other in times of persecution. You could draw a sign in the sand like this, or put it over your door to designate a place of meeting. But the fish also stood for the central confession of the Christian faith, centered in Christ. It was kind of an abbreviated summary.

KEN CURTIS: Of course, many of the teachings of early Christianity had parallels in the other religions of the day, but there was something different. What was absolutely unique to Christianity was the person of Christ. To the early Christians, Jesus Christ was more than a doctrine. He was alive, He was in heaven, present, available, ready to hear their prayers, ready to give them strength in their hour of need.

20:32

DAVID WRIGHT: Jesus was the promised one. That's what the first Christians believed. His life, his death, his resurrection, they were right at the heart of things. Hence it is no accident that eventually the followers of Jesus came to be called Christians.

BARGIL PIXNER: The eleven apostles must have seen something, and were convinced that Jesus was alive, because their attitudes were changed so completely. Before, they were frightened and hopeless. They didn't know what to do. They closed themselves up and locked themselves in behind doors. But then suddenly they went out without fear and preached the Gospel. Because of their conviction that Jesus was really the Son of God, the Messiah, they went everywhere preaching and talking about him. Nobody could stop them anymore. What a change! I just can't figure out how these people could have done that without a tremendous conviction that they knew Jesus was alive, Jesus lived.

STEVE: Christians now make up about a third of the human race. Today major organizations of Christians have committed themselves to reach the remaining two-thirds of the world with the Gospel of Christ by the year 2000.

No, they don't expect everyone to become a Christian. They know that many, perhaps most, will choose not to. But the goal is at least to present the invitation to every cultural group on earth before the beginning of the third millennium.

As this takes place, could we not see yet another major transition in the history of the church? In this series, we have covered two major transitions. First, when Christianity expanded its mission beyond its Jewish roots and became a faith for all the other peoples as well. Second, when under Constantine the church went from being a persecuted minority to become the official faith of the Roman empire.

NIGEL: The major transition taking place right now will see the historic Western concentration of the church give way to a new configuration of races and peoples who follow Christ.

23:00

STEVE: By 1900 there were some 558 million Christians on earth and 64 % of this Christian population was to be found in North America and Europe, but today the Christian church is in another period of rapid expansion, with more people becoming believers than at any time in history.

And the way this is happening could mean that by the year 2000 Europe and North

America no longer will represent the majority of Christians, but barely a third. South America and Africa, which in 1900 represented only 12 % of the church, by the year 2000 will boom to be about 48 %. And as the era of American and European concentration recedes, we're likely to see new kinds of church expressions, new emphases in theology, and new styles of worship. There are scholars who project there will be two billion Christians on earth to greet the year 2000. Much of the leadership the church will need in the unpredictable days ahead will emerge from these new areas of the world where vital expressions of Christianity are now manifest. Many of the problems they face will be the same ones we have seen encountered by the early church. But they also will face challenges unknown to the previous generations. Yet it will be the expectation of these leaders to find their strength in the same words that provided such sustenance to the early believers we have seen in the series. The words of Christ to his followers: "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

I'm Steve Bell. For my co-hosts Jane, Nigel and Russell and for the many other people whose participation made these programs possible, I thank you for joining us.