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HISTORY LIVES

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VOLUME I

PERIL & PEACE: CHRONICLES OF
THE ANCIENT CHURCH

HISTORY LIVES



VOLUME I

PERIL & PEACE:
CHRONICLES OF
THE ANCIENT CHURCH

MINDY AND
BRANDON WITHROW

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For Eilidh,
Jonah,
Eoin,
Elizabeth,
Amelia, and
Máire

May you be God's gladiators,
with helmets of faith and spears of love



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ANCIENT CHURCH TIMELINE

3 B.C.-590 A.D.



- Jesus is born (3-4 B.C.)
- Jesus dies and is resurrected (ca. 33 A.D.)
- Paul is converted on Damascus road (34)
- Paul begins his missionary journeys (46)
- Rome burns; persecution under Nero begins (64)
- Peter and Paul are martyred under Nero (64, 67)
- Jerusalem is destroyed by Titus (70)
- The volcano Mount Vesuvius destroys Pompeii (79)
- Colosseum in Rome is completed (80)
- Domitian persecutes the church (81-96)
- The Chinese refine papermaking (105)
- Persecution under Trajan (98-117)
- Ignatius is martyred (110)
- Rome's population exceeds 1 million (118)
- Persecution under Antonius Pius (138-161)
- Polycarp is martyred (155)
- Tertullian is born (ca. 160)
- Justin is martyred (165)
- Marcus Aurelius begins his reign (177)
- Greek doctor Galen makes important discoveries about heart and brain (180)
- Origen founds his school in Alexandria (ca. 200)
- First Persian war (230)
- The Chinese invent the magnetic compass (ca. 250)
- Persecution under Decius begins (250)
- Cyprian is martyred (258)
- Mani, leader of the Manicheans, is executed (276)
- Library in Alexandria reaches 500,000 volumes (ca. 300)

- Persecution under Diocletian begins (284)
- Diocletian divides empire into East and West (285)
- Constantine conquers Rome and reunites empire (312)
- Parchment replaces papyrus as standard writing material (ca. 300)
- Edict of Milan (313)
- Arian controversy begins (315)
- Council of Nicea (325)
- Athanasius becomes Bishop of Alexandria (328)
- Gregory Nazianzus is born (329)
- John Chrysostom is born (347)
- Emperor Julian reinstates paganism (362)
- Basil the Great becomes Bishop of Caesarea (370)
- Books replace scrolls (372)
- Council of Constantinople (381)
- Ambrose defies Emperor Theodosius (390)
- Library in Alexandria is destroyed (391)
- Roman Empire divided again after death of Theodosius (395)
- Council of Carthage (398)
- Jerome publishes his final installment of the Vulgate (405)
- Rome is conquered by Alaric I (410)
- Augustine begins writing City of God (413)
- Patrick becomes missionary to Ireland (430)
- Council of Ephesus (431)
- Attila the Hun attacks the Roman Empire (433)
- Council of Chalcedon (451)
- Roman Empire captured by the Franks (476)
- Benedict founds monastery at Monte Cassino (529)
- King Arthur dies (537)
- Bubonic Plague devastates Europe (541)
- Totila captures Rome (549)
- Mohammed, founder of Islam, is born (570)
- Gregory the Great becomes the first pope; beginning of medieval church (590)
- “Ca.” stands for circa, a Latin word meaning “around or about.”



BACKGROUND TO THE CHRONICLES: WHAT WAS THE ANCIENT CHURCH?



AFTER JESUS ASCENDED into heaven (in 30 or 33 A.D.), he sent the Holy Spirit to guide his apostles. Through these men, Jesus established his church. The apostles wrote the books of the New Testament and started churches throughout the Roman Empire. When the last apostle, John, died around 90 A.D., the work of the apostles was carried on in the ancient church by the church fathers. The earliest of the church fathers were friends of the apostles.

One of the first is Papias, a student of the Apostle John. Others like Ignatius of Antioch and Clement of Rome also lived during John's lifetime and may have known some apostles. Many letters and books that they wrote still exist. These help us understand the life and beliefs of early Christians.

As Christianity spread throughout the world, the church developed different kinds of officers to perform various tasks. A deacon collected offerings, cared for the poor and sick, and helped serve communion. A presbyter cared for the spiritual needs of a particular congregation,

preaching, teaching, and baptizing. A bishop also preached, trained presbyters, supervised all the churches in a particular city, and represented his city at church councils. An abbot was a presbyter who led the congregation of a monastery, or abbey.

Some of the early Christians wrote books to defend Christianity against attacks from other religions. These writers, like Justin the Martyr, were called apologists. Their books are some of the earliest Christian writings. Most of them were written during the years of persecution. Some of these books were even addressed to Roman emperors, in an attempt to convince them to stop persecuting Christians.

Persecution continued for the first 300 years of the church, until Emperor Constantine declared Christianity a legal religion. Christians then became free to worship publicly. Without persecution, Christianity spread quickly throughout the empire. But so did false teaching that claimed to be Christian.

When false teachers, or heretics, taught ideas contrary to God's Word, the fathers corrected them. If the false teaching became a common problem within the church, the fathers would gather together to make church-wide decisions. They traveled from their local cities to hold councils. These councils influenced how we understand the Bible today, and they tell us that early Christians were united in their beliefs.

The most famous heretics were the Arians, who rejected the teaching that Jesus is God. Those who defended the truth became known as the orthodox. Some of the emperors after Constantine were Arian, and some were orthodox. When an Arian emperor was on the throne, orthodox Christians, and especially the bishops, sometimes had to flee for their lives. For over fifty years, the official policy of the Roman Empire switched back and forth from orthodox to Arian, depending on what the emperor believed. More lives were lost during those years of conflict. But the orthodox persisted in resisting the Arians until their ideas were officially declared unbiblical at the Council of Constantinople in 381.

Some of the fathers believed that the more popular Christianity became in the empire, the more the truth was compromised. They felt that many Christians had lost the physical and mental discipline to serve Christ. To keep themselves from being corrupted by the world, they formed societies, called monasteries, outside of normal city life. The monks spent their mornings in prayer and their afternoons working in the fields or hand copying the Bible or other books. Most of what we know about the ancient church is from the books they preserved by copying.

Men and women lived in separate monasteries. We sometime picture these monks as hermits who never left their prayer cells, but monasteries were actually busy places. Here, the monks fed the poor, cared for sick people, and provided food and shelter for travelers on the road. They were places for Bible teachers to meet and talk about Scripture. Monks even traveled distances to preach the gospel in other regions.

Monasteries became more common after the Roman Empire was defeated by Gothic invaders. The life of the last church father, Gregory the Great, who was born in 540 A.D., marks the beginning of a new period in church history known as the medieval church.

We often ignore the ancient church because they seem different. Some of their ideas are foreign to us. But despite the differences, the earliest Christians have much in common with us today. Like the church fathers, we preach the gospel, feed the poor, and build hospitals. Like the fathers, modern Christians around the world are persecuted and murdered because of their faith. The perils of false teaching, sin, and evil rulers are part of our Christian heritage.

The lives of the earliest Christians are marked by love, pain, peace, war, and death. Like gladiators, they entered the arena and faced swords, wild beasts, and fire. These Christians preserved the message of Jesus' salvation and passed it on to us so we could tell others. They are the roots of our family tree of faith.



A SERVANT ⊕ OF THE TRUE G⊕D

Paul: 59 A.D. The Adriatic Sea, off the island coast of Malta.



THE SEA SURGED, and a wall of foamy water forced him below the surface. He thrust his head above the waves, sputtering for air in the driving rain. It's not that far, he told himself. He'd have reached the shore by now if the surf didn't keep pushing him under. Almost there. Another swell broke over him, dragging him toward the beach. He stopped struggling and held his breath, letting the furious water propel him forward. When the foam drained away, he was left behind on the sandy strip, exhausted, his tunic twisted around his legs. He coughed up seawater. This is how the prophet Jonah felt when he was vomited up by the fish, he thought.

Something hard pressed into the small of his back. He rolled over and clawed at the wet sand. It was a bowl from the ship's galley. He tossed it aside and sat up.

"Paul!"

Turning in the direction of the shout, he saw dozens of men climbing out of the water or picking themselves up from the beach, still clutching

debris from the wreckage. Running against the rain, two men came across the beach toward him, waving their arms and yelling.

“Paul! You’re alive!”

They pulled him to his feet.

“I told you we would survive,” he said, brushing shells from his beard.

“Can’t say the same thing about the ship.”

Turning, he squinted through the dark raindrops at the churning Adriatic Sea. The ship’s bow was stuck fast where they had run aground on the reef, and the pounding surf had finally carried away the splintered stern. They had thrown the mast and sail overboard in a final attempt to right the ship. Now, missing her tackle, the carved swan head at the prow slowly disappearing beneath the waves, she looked like a wounded sea monster sinking proudly to her final resting place.

“I am sorry that I didn’t take your advice.”

Paul turned to the muscular man behind him. He had lost his helmet, and rain and seawater dripped down his nose and armor, but the centurion was clearly still in charge.

“We never should have left Crete in the stormy season, but the captain assured me he had good reasons to avoid wintering in that harbor.”

Paul waved the apology aside. “Julius, if I had to choose between an experienced sea captain and a prisoner under my guard, I would have made the same decision. Where is the captain?”

Julius peeled off a strand of seaweed tangled around his sword. “He’s rounding up his sailors. My men are gathering the rest of the imperial prisoners. Including you and your two slaves here, it looks like all 276 of us are present and accounted for.”

“I know it’s hard to believe, Julian, but I told you yesterday that this is exactly what the angel promised when he appeared to me. We would run aground on an island, he said, but no lives would be lost.”

“Well, next time an angel appears to you on a sinking ship, I’ll listen to you! My troops wanted to kill all of you to keep you from escaping, but

I vowed to get you to Rome safely for your trial before the emperor.”

A soldier approached with word that all the passengers had been pulled from the water and were assembled just beyond the beach. “Apparently we’re on the island of Malta, sir,” he reported. “The sailors didn’t recognize it earlier because of the storm. Some of the natives spotted the ship and have come out to help us.”

“The gods be praised,” Julius said, turning away from the shore and attempting to shield his face from the rain. “Let’s find some shelter on this rock.”

The two slaves behind him, Paul followed Julius to the waiting troops. Next to the tall, broad centurion, the bow-legged prisoner was short, his shoulders slightly hunched from repeated beatings. He tried to wipe the rain from his head, but his cloak was soggy and he succeeded only in smearing wet sand across his bald spot.

The natives were eager to show hospitality. “There are too many of you to stay in the village,” said a young man, “but I, Symeon, can take you to a large cave that will at least get you out of the rain. This way.”

The tattered band moved inland. At a rocky outcropping, Symeon located the entrance to a cave. It was dark and stale inside, but dry. They started a bonfire, and spread their clothes out on rocks to dry in the warmth.

“We’re going to run out of dry wood before we drive the chill out of all these men,” Paul said. “I’ll go see what else I can find.” He nodded to Julius and went out to the mouth of the cave.

The rain had slowed to a drizzle. The little sunlight they had seen that day was fading and the air was turning colder. He collected a smattering of dead brush lying just outside the entrance. It’s wet, but it might burn, he thought. As he carried it in to the fire, he felt a sharp pain in his wrist. With a cry, he dropped the bundle into the fire, and a puff of smoke curled around him. A viper dangled from his arm, its fangs sunk deep in his skin.

The men leaped back in alarm.

Paul shook his hand violently, wrenching the snake loose. It fell into the fire with a hiss and the sudden stench of burning flesh.

“Paul!” One of his slaves rushed to his side. “Let me look at it.”

“No, Luke, it’s fine.” He shook his hand again, wincing from the pain.

Symeon stepped forward with a trembling finger pointed at Paul. “You must be a murderer! You thought you had escaped your punishment at sea, but Justice is making sure you die for your sins!”

Julius rose anxiously. “Paul, I haven’t gone to all this trouble of providing you with safe passage to Rome for you to die on the way there!”

“I’m not going to die.”

“Paul, let me see,” insisted Luke.

Julius stopped pacing and waved Luke away. “What does a slave know about snakebites?”

“I’m not a slave. I’m a doctor.”

Julius looked up sharply. “What do you mean you’re a doctor?”

Luke pulled Paul into the circle of firelight and examined the two red slits in his wrist. “I just pretended to be his slave so you would let me travel with Paul.” He pointed to their other companion, who was biting his lip. “Aristarchus isn’t a slave either.”

The centurion raised an eyebrow. “You tricked me? I’m impressed. How can an educated doctor be convincing as a slave?”

Luke shrugged, more concerned about Paul’s wound than his secret. “I had to do it. Paul is my patient, and my dearest friend.”

“A breach of protocol,” Julius declared. “But I suppose there is nothing I can do about it now.”

“I don’t think it matters,” said Symeon. “Paul is about to die. No one survives the bite of that viper.”

“His arm isn’t swelling,” Luke said. “I think he’s going to be fine.”

Around the circle, the men eyed him in silence. Nothing happened.

“Perhaps he is a sorcerer,” murmured the natives. “It is a miracle he is not dead yet!”

“Paul has been involved in lots of miracles,” said Aristarchus. “Tell them, Luke.”

“It’s true. Paul healed a crippled man in Lystra.”

“And was almost stoned to death as his reward!” prompted Aristarchus.

Luke squatted next to Paul. “He cast a demon out of a slave girl in Philippi. Her master had him thrown in jail. Then an earthquake opened the prison gates, and Paul kept the jailer from committing suicide.”

“And in Troas,” added Aristarchus, “Paul preached someone to death! He had been preaching for hours and Eutychus fell asleep in a third-story window and fell to his death. Paul brought him back from the dead.”

“He withstands the viper’s bite and performs miracles!” exclaimed Symeon, wide-eyed. “Paul is a god!”

“No, no!” Paul insisted quickly. “I’m not a god, but a servant of the true God. It is because of his power that I performed those miracles.”

“It’s because of your god that you were arrested!” shouted one of the prisoners.

Symeon ignored the chuckling that followed that statement and cocked his head at Paul. “Why did your god have you arrested?”

Paul shifted into a more comfortable position on the rocky ground. “About thirty years ago, a Jew named Jesus was executed in Jerusalem for claiming to be God, blasphemy in the Jewish religion. He called himself the Way, the Truth, and the Life. After his death, Jesus’ followers began to spread this religion of the Way. The Jewish religious leaders who had crucified Jesus went after his disciples.”

“You were one of his disciples?”

Paul shook his head. “No, I was one of the religious leaders who opposed them. I worked tirelessly to round up everyone in Jerusalem

who followed the Way and put them in jail. When I heard that these teachings had spread north into Damascus, I got permission to go arrest the heretics there, too, and bring them back to Jerusalem. But instead of wiping out the Way in Damascus, something unexpected happened.”

“What happened? Please, Paul, it is still raining and night has fallen. We have time for your story.”

The men had stretched out across the cavern floor, the soldiers keeping a casual eye on the prisoners. Paul leaned forward and spread his hands out over the fire. The flickering shadows exaggerated his hooked nose and ran his eyebrows into a solid furrow. “That was back when I went by my Hebrew name Saul,” he explained. “It’s a long story.”

“Yes, and I think you should rest right now,” interrupted Luke. He turned to Symeon. “Paul will talk until this cave runs out of air. Perhaps I should tell the story.”

Paul sat back and chuckled. “Luke is a better storyteller than I am anyway. He remembers every important detail.”

“Well,” Luke began, “as Paul said, it is a long story, and it takes place far from here . . .”

They had followed the road along the Sea of Galilee, crossing over the Jordan River north of the sea. Approaching a ridge about 12 miles south of Damascus, the city came into view below them. In the hot sun, the pale walls shimmered on the horizon. It was a welcome sight for the dirty, weary travelers.

“By nightfall, we’ll be inside those gates,” said one. “I can’t wait to wash my tired feet!”

They were starting their descent when there was a sudden flash of light. It was white-hot, like the brightest bolt of lightning, and the travelers dropped to the ground in terror.

Ears ringing, the leader lay face down in the dust, arms over his head. He felt the earth vibrate with a deep growl that started far below him and gathered strength as it rushed toward the trembling surface.

“Saul! Saul!” boomed a terrible voice. In the desert he had once heard a wounded lion make a sound like that.

“Saul! Why do you persecute me?”

Squeezing his eyes shut, he fought back the panic. He tried to speak, but he had no voice.

“Saul!”

“Wh--who are you?” Pressing his face into the gravel, he cut his lip and tasted blood.

“I am Jesus, who you are persecuting.”

He wasn't sure that his heart was still beating. He'd lost the feeling in his arms. His eyes still shut, he became aware of a presence. It seemed he was looking straight into someone's eyes, deep, powerful, full of love.

“What do you want me to do, Lord?” he cried.

“Stand up on your feet!”

He struggled to rise, afraid to open his eyes, afraid to look away from the beautiful and terrible face before him.

“I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you a servant and a witness to the things you have seen. I have delivered you from your people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you to open their eyes. They will turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to the power of God. They will receive forgiveness for sin and a place among those I have set apart.”

“Yes, Lord!”

“Go into the city, and you will be told what to do.”

The vision faded. Bright spots of color danced in the darkness. He couldn't open his eyes. Clawing at his face, he felt a ridge over his eyelids like the skin had melted. He stumbled and fell to his knees. “Help me,” he whispered to his companions. “Help me!”

“What was that?” they demanded. “Was it an earthquake? What's wrong with your eyes?”

“Take me to Damascus,” was all he could say.

They left him at an inn on Straight Street. Sitting in the rented room alone with his blindness, he cried out to God. How could he have been so wrong? “Lord Jesus, forgive me! Show me what to do.”

For three days he didn’t eat or drink, though the innkeeper shoved food at him twice a day. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m waiting for someone,” he muttered.

On the third day of his blindness, he heard a strange voice at the inn door. Two sets of footsteps came toward his room. Kneeling on the floor, he turned his face toward the visitor as he entered.

“Brother Saul,” said the voice, close to his face.

He smelled cabbage on the visitor’s breath.

“I’m Ananias. Jesus who you saw on the road sent me here.”

“You know Jesus?” Saul whispered.

“Give me your face.” Cold, damp hands covered his eyes. “Now you will see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

His eyelids began to twitch, and he blinked, dropping scales in his lap. He was suddenly looking into the kind face of an old man.

“I can see,” he said. “I can see! Thank you, sir. What do I do now?”

“You must be baptized,” said Ananias, “but first—.” He called for the innkeeper. “Get this man something to eat.”

Symeon let out a deep breath. He hadn’t realized he had been holding it. “That is amazing,” he whispered. “What happened next?”

Luke shifted and glanced at the bite on Paul’s arm. It still wasn’t swollen.

“I did exactly what Jesus told me to do,” Paul said. “Starting in Damascus, and then in Jerusalem, I declared that all should repent and turn to God. I preached all over the empire, making several extended journeys, and starting churches in every city. As I traveled, I wrote letters back to these churches to encourage them and correct their beliefs. That is why the Jews seized me in the temple in Jerusalem and tried to kill me.”

“You changed sides.”

“Yes, once I knew the truth. Since then I have been in constant danger, and even now, I’m on my way to defend my case before the emperor. But God has preserved me, and so I am still alive today to tell you that what Moses and the prophets spoke about has come true. Jesus suffered and died and then rose again from the dead to proclaim truth to both Jews and Gentiles.”

Symeon looked at him with shining eyes. “Paul, you must come into the village and meet Governor Publius. His father is very sick. You must heal him!”

“We’ll go at first light.”

Julius cleared his throat. “If you don’t mind, I think I’ll go along,” he said sarcastically.

“Oh, yes.” Symeon turned to the centurion. “Publius will want to dine with the man in charge.”

Luke rolled over and chuckled into his cloak.

The cavern grew quiet as they settled in for a few hours’ rest. Outside, the rain stopped. A sliver of moon rose over the tranquil sea. There was nothing left of the storm but fragments of the ship scattered across the beach.

Paul healed the governor’s father and introduced many of the people to Jesus. He and his companions spent three months on Malta. After the storm season was over, they boarded another ship and finished their journey to Rome. Paul remained under house arrest there for over 2 years, preaching and writing letters to the churches. In 67, he was beheaded by the mad Emperor Nero. After his death, his letters were circulated all over the empire. Soon Christians everywhere considered his writings the Word of God, with the same authority as the Old Testament.

