

9 Ways Early Christians Survived, Thrived and Brought Hope for Today's Believers

So, you think you've got it rough living as a Christian in these end times, when God is either considered the enemy or isn't considered at all?

Ponder the incredible challenges believers faced in the infant stages of Christianity—especially living under the rule of the Roman Empire, one of the most brutal and unforgiving regimes ever. Yet also consider that, despite the heavy persecution, Christianity grew and spread and brought hope through Christ to future generations.

Being a Christian during the days of the Roman Empire brought many challenges:

They knew great persecution – Especially from some, but not all of the 54 Roman emperors between AD 30 and 311. The emperor Nero especially hated Christians, blaming them for the Great Fire of Rome. That led to many crucifixions, Christians being burned alive and also thrown to the lions. When Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, the persecution ceased.

Today's believers in America and many other countries are not threatened to be thrown to the lions because of their faith. However, Christians in Islamic, Hindu and communist countries are still faced with consequences for their belief in Jesus. These have become some of the world's strongest and most dedicated Christians, and they know Jesus will reward them for their endurance (1 Peter 3:14; James 1:12).

No churches – There were no such things as Christian churches in Roman times, so groups had to gather for worship in each

other's homes; for example, in Romans 16:3-5, the apostle Paul makes references to meetings at the home of Aquilla and Priscilla.

Today, houses of worship can be found everywhere in America and believers can worship without fear of persecution from their governing bodies. Believers in countries like China still continue to worship in house churches.

Outcasts – Not many wanted to have anything to do with believers, so Christians organized themselves into close-knit communities, Jews and Gentiles included. But even Christians felt like second-class citizens to the Jews. Peter gave into pressure to separate himself from the Gentiles, an action Paul condemned. Benevolence was a key character trait for Christians, who dedicated themselves to helping the poor and those in need.

Christianity has become the most benevolent religion in the world, especially in America where churches band together to help those in need in their own communities and around the world. And while some still hate believers, Christians are no longer outcasts (Rom. 5:3-5).

Short life span – In ancient Rome, during the days of persecution, many believers were martyred for their faith. It is believed that the apostle Paul was beheaded, while Peter was crucified upside down. If you were bold for your faith, most likely you didn't live long.

Threats of this type of violence rarely exist in America, although in other countries, such as Pakistan, persecution for faith in Christ can lead to perilous consequences.

Religious arguments – Since Christianity was fairly new, these were plenty. Those who subscribed to "Low Christology" said that Jesus was human but had no sin. Those who defended "High Christology" argued that Jesus was divine, part of the Holy Trinity.

Today, Christians continue to debate theology on many issues, including women preaching in the church. The Bible, however, is the ultimate authority on such issues, and believers must press into the Word of God to find discernment and truth (Prov. 3:5-6).

There were also advantages that helped paved the way for Christians to thrive in today's culture:

Roads – The roads the Romans built actually made it easier for believers to share the good news. These networks of roads allowed early Christian leaders to like the apostle Paul to travel and tell people about Jesus. The road allowed them to reach metropolitan areas with large populations (Acts 9).

Today's Christians have many outlets to share the gospel with the lost, including the church itself, the internet, television and one-on-one conversations.

Relaxed Rules – Jesus was Jewish, but he attracted Gentile followers as well. Since they weren't Jewish, many Gentiles didn't adhere to the traditions of the Jewish people, such as dietary restrictions and circumcision. This didn't sit well with many Jews.

Jews today have relaxed their attitudes about this, and devoted Christians enjoy a New Testament life without criticism from an understanding Jewish people.

Relationship with Jews – Jesus was contentious with the Pharisees of his day, and rightfully so as we know from the Bible. But despite these early tensions, Jews and Christians, for the most part, coexisted peacefully.

Today, Messianic Jews in America thrive. Messianic Judaism is a modernist and syncretic movement of Protestant Christianity that incorporates some elements of Judaism and other Jewish traditions into evangelicalism.

Legalization of Christianity – When Constantine became emperor, this was good news for believers. At that time, however, they did not know how their new “religion” would be organized or what rules they would set down.

Although there are many denominations and “rules,” Christianity is not considered unlawful in America and believers are free to worship anytime and anywhere.

The Common Ground of Eternal Salvation

Early Christians suffered much for their faith in Christ, but were determined to press on and bring the gospel to the world, which led to an explosive growth of Christianity to this day. There is little doubt that today’s culture has become hostile towards God and wants to remove Him from every part of society.

Christians can heed and be encouraged by the words of our Lord and Savior. Like the early Christians, believers must stand strong and not be influenced by the chaos that surrounds them. Satan is doing everything he can to destroy families and individuals, but stick to the Word of God, be obedient and trample the enemy under your feet daily. {eoa}

Shawn A. Akers *is the online editor at Charisma Media.*