

Roman Persecution and Peter's Imprisonment

Peter's first epistle was likely written in 63 A.D., during a time when his audience was facing persecution that was predominantly localized, sporadic, and driven by social and religious friction caused by their pagan neighbors. That letter demonstrated discernment on his part that an even greater persecution was impending that would cause much suffering, including his own. Thus, preparing for suffering was a continual theme of that letter.

His concern became a reality about one year later when, in July of 64 A.D., a massive fire consumed ten of Rome's fourteen districts, leaving thousands homeless. Public fury quickly turned against Emperor Nero, with widespread rumors accusing him of ordering the arson to clear land for his lavish new palace complex, the *Domus Aurea*. Desperate to deflect the blame, Nero targeted the Christian community as a convenient scapegoat. They were a small, distinct minority already intensely disliked by the Roman populace, making them easy targets.

The aftermath of the fire shattered any remaining legal protection for Christians, initiating an era where the Roman state actively authorized deadly violence against them. Nero's initial wave of persecution was localized to the city of Rome but was marked by unimaginable sadism. The Roman historian Tacitus recorded in his *Annals* that vast numbers of Christians were arrested and executed as public entertainment. Some were sewn into the raw skins of wild beasts to be torn apart by hunting dogs; others were nailed to crosses. Most famously, Nero had Christians covered in pitch and set ablaze on stakes to serve as human torches to illuminate his nighttime garden parties.¹

Nero's actions set a dangerous precedent—the criminalization of believing in Yeshua spread throughout the empire. According to accounts preserved by historians, Christians were no longer tried for specific crimes like arson, but for *odium generis humani* (“hatred of the human race”)—a vague charge reflecting their refusal to participate in the civic and religious life of Rome.²

For the first time, merely bearing the name “Christian” became a liability that could lead to arrest. Pliny the Younger, Roman Governor of Bithynia-Pontus (modern-day Turkey)—who ruled the precise region of the audience of Peter's epistles—established a “loyalty test” that was administered to believers in Yeshua that was adopted throughout the empire. If someone was accused of being a Christian, and denied the charge, their sincerity was tested by being forced to recite a prayer to the pagan Roman gods, pour wine and burn incense before a statue of Emperor Trajan, and verbally curse Yeshua. Pliny believed that anyone who was truly a Christian could never be forced to perform these acts. Those who complied and “passed the test” were set free. Those who refused and persisted in their faith were executed for stubbornness.³

At some point during this terrible period, Peter was arrested by Roman authorities, where he was likely confined at the Mamertine Prison, overlooking the Forum in Rome. It was not used for long-term incarceration as modern prisons are. Instead, it was a prison complex designed for political prisoners, foreign kings captured in war, and conspirators who posed a direct threat to the Roman state.

Peter would have initially been placed in what was called the Carcer, which was a room on the upper level that was accessible from the street, and had openings that allowed daylight to enter. Prisoners awaiting trial or sentencing were held here, and they could interact with guards and visitors.

While being held in this part of the prison, prior to Nero's death in 68 A.D., it is likely that

¹ Tacitus, *Annals*, Book 15, Chapter 44.

² *Ibid.*

³ Pliny, “Letter to Trajan about Christians,” *Epistulae* 10.96.

Peter composed his second epistle. In the ancient Roman penal system, prisons were not funded to sustain human life; the state provided no food, bedding, or clothing. Consequently, a thriving economy of bribery arose between prisoners' families and poorly paid guards. That would enabled other believers in Rome to bring whatever Peter needed for his letter, although it is possible that he employed another unnamed *amanuensis* (scribe). If that is the case, his writing style was much less eloquent than that of Silvanus who helped write the first epistle.

Also, during the time in the Carcer portion of the prison, based on the methods of the Roman judicial system, an accused believer like Peter was given multiple opportunities to recant his faith, curse Yeshua, and burn incense to the Emperor to save his own life. To be a martyr, literally meaning "one who bears witness," that meant when Peter stood before Roman rulers, he refused to back down. Instead, while on trial, Peter used it as an opportunity to declare the gospel boldly, knowing the immediate consequence would be a death sentence. That reality is reflected by Peter in this second epistle in chapter one, verse 14.

Once a verdict of death was ruled, a prisoner would be lowered through a hole in the floor of the Carcer into a pit called the Tullianum. The Roman historian Sallust described the Tullianum as a terrifying place, writing that its appearance was "filthy, dark, and stench-filled," capturing the psychological horror intended for Rome's enemies.⁴ This pit was reserved for the final hours or days preceding an execution.

The fourth century church historian, Eusebius of Caesarea, preserves an earlier commentary written by the theologian Origen, which describes Peter's execution this way: "Peter appears to have preached in Pontus, Galatia, Bithynia, Cappadocia, and Asia to the Jews of the dispersion. And at last, having come to Rome, he was crucified head-downwards; for he had requested that he might suffer in this way."⁵

As a result, Yeshua's prophecy in John 21:18 was fulfilled – "Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go." The stretching of his hands is a clear allusion to crucifixion. Thus, John writes in the next verse: "Now, this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God."

According to Clement, who was described by early church fathers to be a direct disciple of Peter and became bishop of Rome at the end of the first century A.D.,⁶ Peter suffered "not one or two, but many hardships until at last being martyred."⁷ When Clement goes on to write that upon Peter's martyrdom, "he went to the place of glory that was due unto him," that means an individual's testimony was validated by their ultimate sacrifice. In the ancient mind, a person might lie to preserve their life, but no one would willingly choose a horrific execution—such as Peter's crucifixion or Paul's beheading—for a narrative they knew to be false. By sealing their verbal testimony with their physical blood, the apostles like Peter provided what the early believers viewed as the ultimate, unshakeable proof of the life, death and resurrection of Yeshua.

⁴ Sallust, *Catiline's War* 55.

⁵ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 3, Chapter 1.2–3.

⁶ Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics* 32; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3:3.

⁷ 1 Clement 3:12.