

While the Neronic Persecution Raged (AD 64-66)

By Ed Stevens -- Then and Now Podcast -- April 21, 2013

INTRODUCTION:

- A. Thank you for joining us here on Covenant Key for another look at first century history. In this session, we will be looking at some of the other events that were happening while our first century brothers and sisters were being hunted down and killed in the Neronic persecution.
- B. Before we begin I want to let our new listeners know that there is a Lesson Outline available for each of these Podcasts: Each of them are in PDF format. Most listeners like to have it open in front of them as they listen. If you don't have the PDF, simply email me and request it. If you are planning on being a regular listener, and would like to receive the PDF as soon as it is ready, without having to request it each time, simply email me and ask to be put on the **PDF List**. The PDF contains all my lesson notes and resource references, so that you do not have to write them down while listening. It is free for the asking. My email address is: [<preterist1@preterist.org>](mailto:preterist1@preterist.org)
- C. Let's pray before we begin --
Our Lord, the Most High God, who is lifted up above all who are in the heavens and the earth, the Holy One who is enthroned between the cherubim, we acknowledge your supreme holiness and righteousness, and our utter unworthiness. We praise you for sending your Son to redeem us from our sins. Be with us here in these studies as we look at the way You sovereignly acted within history to build Your Kingdom in the hearts of your people. Help us as we seek your kingdom first in our lives, and live in such a way that we bring much glory to Your Holy Name. It is in the Name of our Redeemer Jesus, that we pray. Amen.
- D. If you have benefited from these podcasts, we would love to hear from you. Email us and tell us how it has helped you. We would also encourage you to become partners with us in this teaching and publishing ministry, to enable us to share it with many others, and so that all the good fruit that comes from it may be credited to your heavenly account. Those who contribute to International Preterist Association will receive some of our latest resources as our gift to you. Simply go to our website and click on the left sidebar button entitled "Make a Donation" where you can make a one-time donation or contribute monthly. Our website address is [<www.preterist.org>](http://www.preterist.org) You can also make donations through PayPal. Our PayPal address, to which you may make your payment is: [<preterist1@preterist.org>](mailto:preterist1@preterist.org)
- E. The last two sessions we replayed a couple of lessons from my seminar in Chicago, dealing with the **NATURE** of fulfillment and the historical documentation for those fulfillments. You will want to keep that documentation handy in coming weeks as we look at those events in their actual historical sequence.
- F. We also talked about **COSMOLOGY** and the importance of understanding how the Bible deals with the relationship between both the **SEEN** and **UNSEEN** realms. Since cosmology is something that very few Bible teachers ever deal with, chances are good that it is new material for all of us listening to these podcasts. If you would

like to get a better handle on Biblical Cosmology, I would encourage you to obtain my Garrettsville seminar lessons which deal with that cosmology. They are available in both video and audio format on our website (<http://preterist.org>).

- G. This time we want to pick back up in our historical narrative at the beginning of the Neronic persecution in the summer of AD 64. We want to look at some of the other events that were happening while the Neronic persecution was going on, especially events in Judea during the two years just before the outbreak of the war with Rome in the summer of AD 66.

From here onwards in our studies **we are in the End Game**, the final stage when the persecution accelerated, and evil proliferated. Jesus and all the prophets referred to it as the **Birth Pangs of the Messiah** and of the World to Come, when the troubles that accompanied the end of the age and the arrival of the age to come became much more **frequent and intense**, just like the labor pains of an expectant mother about to give birth. As the time of birth drew near, the troubles multiplied and intensified. Jesus told the apostles that this greater frequency and intensity of tribulation would be a sign that **the End was drawing near**. This was clearly something that they would have been able to see and experience and recognize as a sign of the End. Christ warned them not to go to sleep and ignore the warning signs, but to be ever vigilant and alert and sober-minded, so that it would not catch them by surprise like a thief in the night. Jesus told them that his coming would not be hidden, secret, or obscure. It would be plainly visible and recognizable, just like the lightning which flashes across the sky. They would not miss it, or be left around afterwards wondering if He came. They would see Him at His return, glorify Him on that day, and marvel at Him in the presence of all who had believed. The angels gathered them into His presence. Their bodies were changed, and they entered into His heavenly presence, where they would remain forever.

The Neronic Persecution was that kind of sign, which told them that the End was definitely getting near. The tribulation instantly became more frequent and intense. They not only saw it happening, but felt and experienced those Birth Pangs personally. Most of those first century saints died in that persecution, or fell away back into paganism or Judaism. Those who deserted Christianity and went back to Judaism thought they were escaping all the tribulation. They did not realize they were setting themselves up to suffer a much worse tribulation, and a long drawn-out slow painful torturous excruciating death at the hands of the Zealots and the Romans in the war with Rome shortly afterwards. They gained nothing by going back to Judaism. Instead, they lost everything, physically and spiritually. The Christians' suffering in the Neronic persecution was indeed intense, but it was quickly over with. They did not have to suffer a long time, in comparison to the starvation and other things the Jews suffered during their protracted war with Rome.

Dead or alive, the Christians came out victorious in that contest. They were the overcomers. The Greek word for **victor** or **overcomer** is **NIKE** or **NIKAO**, from which the NIKE brand of sportswear comes. The Christians were the victors and overcomers in that great tribulation. They took all the spoils of that war. Death of their bodies in the SEEN realm only promoted them to glory and immortality in the UNSEEN spiritual realm. Physical death was a time of victory celebration for those martyred Christians, as well as for the living and remaining saints who received the same reward at the

Parousia. But for the unbelieving and rebellious Jews, it was a time of utter weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Many of our fellow-preterists are missing the boat on all this stuff about the **relief** of those remaining saints, their **rescue** out of the tribulation, and their being **caught up** to the heavenly reward. It was the promise of this kind of reward that drove the apostles and their co-workers to lay it all on the line to get the gospel out to the whole Diaspora. They did not sacrifice everything to the cause, and go through that horrible persecution and tribulation, thinking that the second coming would come and go without them getting any benefits from it, or even knowing that it occurred. They were fully expecting to see it, hear it, and experience it to the max. They wanted that **immortality** and **life** and **glory** that Jesus promised to give them at His return. That is why Apostle Paul says in Romans 8 that he considered the "sufferings of this present time" as not even showing up as a blip on the radar screen in comparison with the **glory** that was about to be revealed to them. Paul implies here that all Christians, dead or alive, would see that glory revealed and share in the benefits of it. That forces us to ask: "Was that glory revealed to them? Did they see it and experience it in any way? Did they know they got it? And if they saw that glory revealed and experienced the benefits of it, and were still alive on earth afterwards, why don't we hear about it? How could they remain silent about that glorious experience? They should be shouting from the rooftops and dancing in the streets about it. Anything but silent -- especially in view of Papias, Polycarp, and Ignatius who were saying that the Parousia was still future. Those saints who experienced the Parousia would have spoken up and set the record straight. And if those saints had not experienced the glorious return of Christ as they were expecting, they would have been sorely disappointed and disillusioned, and would have been complaining about the non-fulfillment -- anything but silent about it. Their silence screams **absence**. They were gone. Christ took his bride with him when he returned.

Have you ever noticed that women, especially single women, love to attend weddings and be involved in helping the bride prepare for her wedding day? Why is that? The beauty and radiance of the bride, along with the chivalry of the groom, marks this occasion as special, exciting, joyful, hopeful, and meaningful. There is a new permanent, everlasting relationship that is being established here. Single women long for the day when their prince charming will ride into town, swoop them up, and take them with him to live happily ever after. That is something they dream about all through their childhood. When the Bridegroom returned for His bride in AD 70, the bride was not expecting to be left behind afterwards. She was expecting to go with him to his prepared place, and live happily with him forever afterwards. She was expecting to experience something at His return, not be left confused afterwards wondering if anything really happened. When the Groom returned for His bride, did he consummate the marriage with His bride back at His Father's house in heaven as He had promised? Did she experience that consummation in heaven? Did she stay there and live happily ever after with Him at her new home in heaven? Or did He leave her behind on earth and not take her to be with him? Was she bitterly disappointed about being left behind? What does it mean when a Groom leaves the bride at the altar and goes on his merry way without her? It means he did not marry her after all, and that the marriage was never consummated. What do we call the period of time between the engagement and the marriage? The espousal. But that is the description of the forty-year transition period

leading up to AD 70. The Parousia was NOT the beginning of the espousal period, it was the return for the bride, and the carrying away of the bride to the Father's house, where the marriage would be consummated, and the new couple would live forever afterwards. If the bride was left on earth after AD 70, there is only one conclusion we can draw from that: either the groom did not return, or the marriage was never consummated. In that case, the bride should be screaming "Jilted" at the top of her lungs! But we do not hear the complaints, nor the joyous shouts from the rooftops. All we hear is silence. Do you catch the power of that?

Well, I will get down off my soapbox now, and continue our study of the espousal period, when the bride was preparing herself for that glorious day when her prince charming would come riding in the sky on his white horse and whisk her away.

We need to look at what was going on in Judea during the two years leading up to their revolt. The revolt did not just pop up all of a sudden and happen without a process of development beforehand. The Jews went from a very warm relationship with Nero in AD 64 to an open break with Rome in AD 66, only two years later. Something must have happened during this two short years which rapidly escalated the tensions between them and provoked the Jews to go to war. It is like the fuel rods in a nuclear reactor heating up toward meltdown. There was a breakdown in the leadership which was normally able to keep things cool and under control. Gessius Florus let the troubles in Judea multiply and intensify to the point that the Jews could no longer tolerate it. There were problems during the previous governors (Festus and Albinus especially), but they quickly deteriorated under Gessius Florus. He became procurator right about the time the Neronian persecution began (summer of 64), and remained procurator until the war began (summer of 66). It was during his governorship that the meltdown occurred, and Josephus blames Florus for provoking the Jews to go to war.

It is at this time that the Christians went silent. It was no longer safe to preach the gospel or even openly meet together as a church. They were running for their lives. And if they worshiped together with any other Christians, it was secretly and in hiding. We know that there were still some Christians around, since Jesus promised that "some of them" would live and remain until the Parousia. The great tribulation would be cut short so that the "elect" could remain alive until the angelic gathering at the Parousia (Matt 24:31). But in order to survive until the Parousia, they had to go underground and disappear off the radar screens of the Jewish and Roman authorities. That is why there are no more books written by them after the outbreak of the Neronian persecution. The NT canon was finished by that time. The gospel had already reached the whole Diaspora. The apostles had finished their assignment, and just in time. The End had now arrived. The saints would undergo judgment first (1 Pet 4:17), and then the wrath would be poured out upon their persecutors.

As we noted in previous lessons, the Christians had been warned to get out of Judea and Jerusalem two years in advance of the Neronian persecution. Eusebius tells us that they were warned by a certain Revelation to leave Jerusalem before the wrath was poured out. We see that prophetic warning reflected in both Paul's letter to the Hebrews and John's Apocalypse. If the Christians in Jerusalem and Judea had obeyed those warnings to flee in late 62 and early 63, they would have been out of harm's way when the Neronian persecution began in the summer of 64. Eusebius tells us that some of the Christians did leave Judea, but we do not know how many, nor exactly when.

We do know that after the Neronic persecution began in the late summer of 64, it would no longer have been safe for Christians to remain anywhere in Judea or Palestine. Any who were still in Jerusalem at the time the persecution began would have been arrested and put to death. There was probably no warning in advance that the Neronic persecution was about to strike. It caught them like a hidden trap. If they had left when the books of Revelation and Hebrews had warned them to, they would have escaped in plenty of time. Evidently most of them stayed until it was too late and were killed in the persecution, since they disappear from history and only a small remnant of Ebionites and Nazarenes show up in Pella later. The vast majority of Christians are gone. The Neronic persecution with its associated great apostasy pretty much removed all the Christians except the Elect ones whom Christ had chosen to live and remain until His coming, at which time they would be changed and caught up to be with Him forever afterwards.

This automatically raises the question about the stories we hear from Eusebius about Christians still being alive in Pella after the war, and some of them supposedly coming back to Judea to restart the church there. A closer look at those traditions reveals the Judaizing character of those supposed "Christians" who were in Pella. They were Ebionites and Nazarenes, both of which were Judaizers, and most of which denied the Deity of Christ. Apostle Paul taught in the book of Galatians (as early as AD 51-52) that those who required circumcision and law-keeping had "severed themselves from Christ." They were no longer true Christians. They were Judaizing apostates. No wonder they were still around after AD 70. They were not true Christians, so they were left out of the rapture like the five foolish virgins in the Parable of the Bridegroom (Matt 25). They had severed themselves from Christ.

There were Gnostics and other heretics and apostates that were left behind as well. They had copies of the NT writings, by which the writings were preserved and distributed again after the war. That may also explain how some of the corruptions of the text happened so early. The Gnostics and Judaizers may have deliberately tampered with the text to reflect their own views, or to correct some of the imminency texts that seemed not to have been fulfilled according to their physical-kingdom-on-earth expectations. There were no first generation Christians still around to guide them and correct them. So they quickly and easily fell further into confusion and error.

We will talk more about this later when we get into the history after AD 70. For now, we need to take a closer look at what was happening in those two years between the beginning of the Neronic persecution and the outbreak of the Jewish war.

Other Events During the Neronic Persecution

Late 64 – When **Albinus** heard that **Florus** was coming to replace him, he emptied the prisons. Josephus says that this filled the country with robbers (*Antiq.* 20.10.5). Albinus was probably still the Roman governor (procurator) of Judea at the time of the Neronic persecution (late Summer or early Fall of 64). However, Gessius Florus evidently came into Palestine about the same time the Neronic persecution broke out (according to VanderKam). So it seems that the change in procuratorship from Albinus to Florus may have occurred about the same time the Neronic persecution broke out in Judea. It may have begun under Albinus, but his successor Florus

finished the job. The Procurator most likely would have allowed the Jews to find the Christians and bring them to him for execution. The Jewish leadership would have taken full advantage of Nero's hostility to wipe out the Christians. That would have been an extremely dangerous time for Christians living anywhere in Palestine. The Christians had to flee the country or go into hiding. This is why the statements of Eusebius make a lot of sense, where he says that the Christians were warned by a revelation to get out of Jerusalem a few years before the war (AD 62-64). They were indeed warned before the Neronic persecution. The book of Revelation contains such a warning ("come out of her my people"), and it was written in late 62 soon after John was exiled to Patmos, almost two years before the Neronic persecution broke out. This would explain how both Paul and Peter seemed to be familiar with the book of Revelation when they wrote their books of Hebrews and 1 Peter in AD 63. Paul also tells the Hebrew Christians to leave the city of Jerusalem (Heb. 13:13-14, written in AD 62-63), since it was not a safe place for Christians any longer.

Late 64 – Agrippa II assembled the Sanhedrin and ordered them to pass a law allowing the Levites to wear linen garments (like the priests), so that they could sing alongside the priests in the temple. [*Antiq.* 20.10.6]

Late 64 – The construction of the outer buildings of the Temple was now finished [*Antiq.* 20.219 (20.9.7)]. Over eighteen thousand workers were now unemployed. The Jews wanted to put them back to work on rebuilding the eastern cloisters, but Agrippa II denied that petition, and instead authorized their paving the streets of Jerusalem with white stone [*Antiq.* 20.222 (20.9.7)]. This was another one of those events which stimulated many disgruntled unemployed workers to join the bands of robbers (and Sicarii) to plunder the Judean countryside. Some of them also became sympathetic to the Zealot cause at this time.

Fall 64 – Agrippa II deprived **Jesus b. Gamaliel** of the High Priesthood and gave it to **Matthias b. Theophilus** [*Antiq.* 20.223 (20.9.7)]. This supposedly occurred at about the same time the Temple was finished and the streets were paved with white stone [*Antiq.* 20.222 (20.9.7)].

Fall 64 – **Gessius Florus became procurator** (replacing Albinus) and "filled Judea with abundance of miseries." We know he ruled for more than a year, since Josephus said the war broke out in his second year of office, which was also the twelfth year of Nero's reign in AD 66 [*Antiq.* 20:257 (20.11.1)]. We also know he had already been governor for a significant time before Passover 65 when a delegation of Jews there at the feast denounced Florus to Cestius Gallus. Florus had been in Judea long enough to make himself hated by the Jews. That implies at least six months, and would place the beginning of his governorship no later than the Fall of 64, while the Neronic persecution was raging. This means that Florus received his governorship from Nero in Rome about the same time the Neronic persecution had begun in the early Fall of 64, and must have taken his boat trip to Judea before the seas became unsafe for travel in early or mid-Fall.

This could mean that Nero sent Florus to Judea to oversee the persecution against the Christians. Florus' wife Cleopatra was a close friend of Nero's wife Poppaea, by whose influence he obtained the procuratorship. Since it is probable that Poppaea was involved in the scheme to blame the Christians for the fire in Rome, Cleopatra would have known about it, and her agreement with it may have influenced Nero to select Florus as the one to oversee the persecution in Judea. It is not surprising, therefore, to see Josephus describe Florus like that: "Gessius did his unjust actions to the harm of the nation after a pompous manner; and **as though he had been sent as an executioner to punish condemned malefactors**, he omitted no sort of rapine, or of vexation" [*Wars* 2:277 (2.14.2)]. Perhaps he had learned how to do that by watching Nero.

It is extremely interesting to see Josephus give us so much background information about the appointment of Florus in Rome like this. The reason he was able to do that, is because Josephus was in Rome at the very time Florus was appointed, and was among the group of Roman Jews who had connections through Poppaea to Nero. This is another of those parts of Josephus which prove that he was in Rome at this time, otherwise he would not have known these details. Evidently he remained in Rome another year or so until the war broke out in Judea.

Florus remained procurator until the war began in AD 66. Florus became partners with the robbers, sharing in their booty in exchange for their immunity from punishment. As a result, many more malcontents joined with the robbers in plundering the Judean countryside. Troubles began to increase dramatically at this time (late-64 to mid-66). This made life in Judea difficult, so it is no wonder that Josephus says that many of the inhabitants of Judea fled out of the country at this time: "entire toparchies were brought to desolation; and **a great many of the people left their own country, and flew into foreign provinces**" [*Wars* 2:277 (2.14.2)].

Like Albinus and Festus before him, he continued to provoke the Zealots, pushing them further and further toward open rebellion [*Wars* 2:282-283 (2.14.3)].

Apostle John Killed by the Jews (Late 64 - Early 65) During the Neronic Persecution

Fall 64 – John's martyrdom. Apostle John was most likely "killed by the Jews" (according to Papias) in the Neronic persecution. Since the island of Patmos was a Roman-controlled exile island, it does not seem likely that John would have been killed by Jews there. It is more likely that he would have been released from Patmos and resettled in nearby Ephesus where the Jews would have had easy access to him. There are traditions which affirm that Patmos was just off the west coast of Asia Minor (Turkey), so news of the Neronic persecution would have reached Patmos about the same time it reached Ephesus and the seven churches, then a few weeks later the news would have reached Judea and Jerusalem. Since the island of Patmos was controlled by the Romans, it seems almost certain that Apostle John, if he was still on Patmos at the time of the outbreak of the Neronic persecution, would have been killed by his Roman captors as soon as they received the word from Nero. John was not a Roman citizen, so he would NOT have been allowed to appeal to Caesar for a trial in Rome, like Paul did. The fire in Rome was July 64. The persecution

began shortly afterwards (Aug 64). News of that persecution would have reached Patmos within a few weeks at the most, and John would have been immediately executed. However, as we have seen previously, there is reason to believe that he had been released from Patmos before the outbreak of the Neronic persecution. In that case, the traditions about his activity and death in Ephesus would make a lot more sense. Whether on Patmos, or in Ephesus, we can be sure that the outbreak of the Neronic persecution in late summer and early fall of AD 64 would have proven fatal for the apostles like Peter, Paul, and John. The Jews would have taken full advantage of this Roman persecution to settle old scores against the Christians. Papias says that it was the Jews who killed Apostle John, just as Jesus had predicted in Matt. 20:23 and Mark 10:39.

Next week we will take a look at the **seven churches of Asia (Turkey)** that are addressed in the book of Revelation. It will give us a much better grasp of what was happening to the Christians during this very traumatic time of the Neronic persecution in the two years just before the Jewish War.

Well, that will wrap it up for this time. If any of our listeners have questions or comments about what we looked at here in this session, do not hesitate to email me. Please send me some feedback, positive or negative. I would love to hear from you. My email address is: **preterist1@preterist.org**

Thanks so much for listening.

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