

103. THE FRENCH REVOLUTION - 1789

France!

That's where Rome ruled! And whoever did not agree with the Roman Catholic Church? Oh, that's easy: return to the Roman Catholic Church or ... death! Streams of blood have already flowed in France. Just think of how the Waldensians and the Huguenots suffered terrible persecution. Remember St. Bartholomew's night? And how king Louis XIV had raged against them? They were hunted like wild animals. Anything was allowed if it served to wipe out the Huguenots.

But Rome ignored the fact that God, Who dwells in heaven, saw all those atrocities and would one day take vengeance on the innocent blood of His people. In their foolishness, they even thought they were doing God a favour! What a fatal mistake!

The hour of God's vengeance was fast approaching.

Voltaire, Rousseau, and others had sown the seed of revolution. Dissatisfaction grew in the hearts of the poor, exhausted people who had no influence in government circles. The only thing they were allowed to do was pay taxes and... pay some more taxes! Far too many taxes! The king, his court, and the church officials knew how to spend that money on themselves.

The dissatisfaction grew into *hatred*. But it seemed as if the king, his court, and the Roman Catholic clergy were blind to that.

That could not continue much longer, and it didn't! The outburst soon came! The long pent-up rage of the people released itself in the shedding of the blood of tens of thousands of guilty and innocent people.

THE REVOLUTION BEGINS

The upheaval began in the year 1789.

Paris and all of France became restless. The storm gathered, and resistance grew into dangerous opposition!

For a while, it seemed as if the king, Louis XVI, woke up, realised what was happening, and tried to do something about the sad situation. He called parliament together, and they decided that from now on, the ordinary people would also have some say in government. The king would no longer have absolute authority; instead, he would have to abide by a new constitution allowing the people some input. That pleased the ordinary people. They thought: 'This is heading in the right direction; this will end our misery and oppression.'



King Louis XVI.

If only the king had kept his promise, much could have changed for the better. But when the time came to act, the king and the French nobility had no idea how to go about it. They had enjoyed absolute power for so long and hesitated to share it with the people.

When the people noticed that the given promises were not kept, they became furious. What? Is nothing going to change? Isn't the king going to keep any of his promises? No way!

They held a meeting and swore an oath that they would not disband until France had a constitution. In the meantime, a revolt erupted in Paris. where the large prison called 'The Bastille' stood. How much misery had people already suffered in that building? How many prisoners had groaned in those dark, musty cells of that terrible prison only to perish miserably?



Prison 'Le Bastille' attacked and destroyed.

The people of Paris stormed that prison in a mad rage.

"Away with that building", they yelled, and... they levelled that gloomy prison to the ground.

The farmers in the countryside also revolted. They banded together and headed for the monasteries and castles and destroyed them. At night, the fires lit the sky with a red glow.

But didn't the king do anything to stop that? Couldn't he send the army to crack down on those rebellious farmers?

The army?

The king could no longer trust them. Many soldiers deserted to side with the embittered farmers. Instead of fighting and defeating those murdering farmers, they helped them. Worse, the civilians raised their own army. That army was called 'The National Guard.' So then there were two armies in France! What confusion! Thousands of wealthy and prominent French people no longer dared to stay in France. They fled to other countries because they were afraid that the people's fury would soon turn against *them*. This situation lasted for some years.

Due to good harvests and mild winters, the farmers didn't organise any further revolts.

In 1791, the promised constitution was ready. One article is of particular importance. Over the years the Roman Catholic Church had become very wealthy. Many monasteries owned vast estates. They kept many treasures of gold and other valuables in the Roman Catholic churches.

This article of the new constitution stated that all these properties and possessions must be confiscated and become state property. This happened!! What an awful blow to the Roman Catholic Church! The government closed the monasteries, and the priests became public servants. They had to swear on the constitution, which meant they had to promise to switch loyalty from the pope to the government and obey the new constitution.

When the pope heard that, he forbade the priests to take that oath. This put the priests in a difficult position. They either faced censure from the present government or the possibility of being excommunicated by the pope!

Only one-third of the priests took the oath required by the government, but two-thirds refused to take that oath.

It had been reasonably calm for several years, but now the unrest began all over again. The common people, who originally had no say in government matters, now ruled the roost. It made things worse. They forced the king to sign new laws, giving the common people more power and influence. Unfortunately, king Louis XVI was weak and hesitant; he lacked leadership skills. He could have avoided much trouble if he had known what to do and had led with a firm hand. He often hesitated when a decision had to be made. He would often refuse to listen to their demands but would give in when they threatened to revolt. The common people abused his weakness and became increasingly bold. This caused the conditions in France to become more confused and dangerous. Eventually, the situation was so bad that the king no longer knew what to do, so he decided to flee. He, his wife Marie Antoinette, and their family secretly left Paris. Marie Antoinette was an Austrian princess. But they were caught outside Paris and were forced to return.

The people became increasingly rebellious. Their revolutionary government stormed the royal palace and imprisoned the king

Life was not easy for Louis XVI; what his predecessors had spoiled, he was supposed to set in order again, but he lacked the wisdom.

THE GUILLOTINE

The common people did not only rage against the royal family but also attacked the Roman Catholic Church. Revolts broke out throughout the entire country.

They murdered thousands of priests. They destroyed more than two thousand churches and levelled them to the ground. They killed thousands of nobles and other prominent people. Streams of blood flowed. They invented a murderous new instrument in France: *the guillotine*. That was a sharp, weighted



Thousands of people were killed with the guillotine

blade. That heavy blade was pulled up and suddenly let go. The weight would make that blade whiz down quickly and behead the wretched victims with one cut. Wagons full of condemned people were taken to the scaffold. Especially the priests and pastors were targeted. The people mockingly called this guillotine 'The Black Beast!'

They set up courts throughout the entire country. More than forty thousand of those revolutionary tribunals appeared. Anyone who disagreed with the Revolution was dragged before those courts, and the sentence always was: 'Death'! Day and night, the guillotine whizzed down. Nobody was sure of his life for a moment. Envy, hatred, and jealousy reigned supreme.

No one could be trusted.

Neighbours who had lived peacefully next to each other for years and years now betrayed each other. All hell had literally broken loose in France. Almost a million people were murdered. How many of them would have been innocent? Do we see the avenging hand of the Lord in this?

Moreover, the men of the Revolution even murdered each other! Whoever was in charge one day and ordered the death of hundreds of victims was himself beheaded by the guillotine the *next* day! Everyone wanted to be in charge. What an incredible misery. Horrifying!

In 1793, the king and his wife, Marie Antoinette, were beheaded by the guillotine. Priests, monks, and nobles, with their wives and children, were all beheaded.

The slogan of the Revolution was *Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity*.

Why should one person be rich and the other poor?

Not anymore! That belonged to the past! That's why the rich had to be exterminated and murdered.

Why should one live in a beautiful castle and the other in a shack?

Not anymore!

Destroy those castles! They were razed to the ground.

Why should church steeples reach high above the houses?

Not anymore! Down with the steeples!

They made coins from the gold and silver stolen from the church and nobility.

They made cannons from the church bells to crush anyone who disagreed with the Revolution's principles with cannonballs.

They made bullets from tin with which they could kill enemies of the Republic!

This terrible period is known in history as the *Reign of Terror*. Yes, exactly: '*REIGN OF TERROR!*' Nobody's life was safe.

But didn't they realise that God saw all this? Didn't they worry that God will punish all this?

"GOD?... He does not exist!"

They laughed at that in France.
God was an invention of the priests.
There is but one God ... *the people!*
The Christian religion?
Get rid of it!
They outlawed the Christian Religion!
The Christian calendar?
Get rid of it!
No Christian calendar existed. They started again
with year one! That was the year of the French
Revolution, the year of liberty.
Sunday, the Christian day of rest?
Get rid of it!
They introduced 36 feast days per year, one every
ten days.
Church buildings which had not yet been
destroyed were closed.
The people had been deceived long enough; they
no longer believed in God! Not only that, but they
also began to *ridicule* everything that they used to
consider sacred.

PROCESSIONS

Let's see what's going on in Paris...Crowds of
people are waiting along the streets. There is
excited chatter and laughing. Suddenly, it gets a
bit quieter, and everybody looks in the same
direction. The procession they have been waiting
for, is approaching. Men and women, seated on
donkeys, ride ceremoniously through the streets.

Ceremoniously?
Just look at them.

They are dressed in priestly garments that they
have stolen from the churches.
They are holding a communion cup in one hand
and a chalice in the other containing the wafer!
(According to the Roman Catholic doctrine, the
wafer changes into the real body of Christ when
blessed by the priest).

Some men and women are drunk and can only
stay on their donkeys with considerable
difficulty—hundreds of spectators cheer and
shout. Occasionally, a rider falls off his donkey,
causing outbursts of laughter. Not surprisingly,
many are drunk because that strange procession
stops at every tavern. There, the communion cups
are filled and gulped down, one after another.

Then the parade continues to the next tavern
where they repeat the same show, to the great
amusement of the spectators.

These 'donkey processions' were nothing but the
grossest mockery! What a disgraceful spectacle.
Similar processions could be seen daily in the
streets of the French capital. France had no God
and no religion anymore. But nothing at all is very
meaningless. The people had to have *something*
to believe in, didn't they?

THE GODDESS OF REASON

So, they organise something. One day we see
another procession in the streets of Paris. Another
'donkey procession'?
No, not this time!

"Here she comes!"

Cheering echoes from the walls of the houses. The
people skip and dance and shout for joy.
Everywhere we hear the cry:
"Here she comes! Here she comes!"

Who is coming?



The goddess of Reason. Book of history. 1897.

France's new goddess! The goddess of REASON! A singer and actress, a certain Madame Candeille, sits on a decorated float. A beautiful royal blue cloak covers her shoulders. A crown of oak leaves adorns her head. A spear, as a token of dignity, is in her hand. She is triumphantly carried through the streets and cheered by the crowd. The procession approaches the French Parliament House. A beautiful litter stands ready. Solemnly, she goes to sit in it, and a few strong young men carry her inside.

All members of parliament rise. It becomes quiet.

They place her next to the chairman, who makes a speech to bid the new goddess a hearty welcome. On behalf of the people, he gives her a welcome kiss. The people are ecstatic! They shout and cheer and skip and dance.

Then Madame Candeille, litter and all is lifted and carried out of the room. The procession continues. Paris is the home of the large and beautiful Roman Catholic Cathedral, the *Notre Dame*. The procession heads for this cathedral. Many members of parliament join the procession. The young men carry this goddess into the building and place her 'throne' where the altar used to stand. The people prostrate themselves before her in worship. What a loathsome spectacle! The people seem to have gone mad. That is what happens when God allows man to follow his sinful desires!

It doesn't take long before France produces lots of those 'goddesses'. Many cities follow Paris' bad example and choose a goddess as well. In some churches, long tables are set up with food and wine for people to help themselves. At times it even happens that children stagger away drunk to the loud laughter of those present.

But enough about this foolishness!
That madness did not last long.

ROBESPIERRE

One of the most fanatic leaders of the Revolution was the lawyer and statesman Robespierre. He was a monster who sent thousands of his fellowmen to their deaths. Yet this Robespierre

abolished the 'Religion of Reason'! He commanded that the French people must again believe in a 'Supreme Being' and the 'immortality of the soul'. But the shedding of blood continued. In the end, Robespierre himself had to climb the scaffold, and the guillotine also beheaded him. The 'Reign of Terror' ended when he died.



Robespierre
1758 – 1794 (aged 36).

NAPOLEON

Then Napoleon began to rule — Napoleon, the tyrant — the man who sacrificed millions of people to his unbridled thirst for power. Now the French people experienced the same as Israel did in the time of Nebuchadnezzar and the prophet Jeremiah.

Israel kept revolting against Nebuchadnezzar, the powerful king of Babylon. At God's command, Jeremiah had to carry a wooden yoke on his shoulders through the streets of Jerusalem as a visible sign of subjection, a message to the people not to revolt but to subject themselves to Nebuchadnezzar. The false prophet Hananiah snatched the wooden yoke from Jeremiah's shoulders and broke it. He refused to accept that message. But then the Word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, 'Make yourself an *iron* yoke!'



Napoleon Bonaparte 1769 – 1821.

They did not want to carry that wooden yoke, so they got an iron one instead. A much harder yoke to bear! This happened to the foolish French people as well. They had beheaded their lawful king with the guillotine, but they received a Napoleon in his place!

Napoleon was a very gifted man. The Lord had given him an amazingly bright and clever mind. However, he *misused* his gifts; he did not live to God's honour but his *own*! He led the French armies from one victory to the next. His soldiers cheered him on. . . but the hundreds of thousands of murdered people could not cheer him. They were buried in mass graves.

He conquered one country after another. Almost all of Europe groaned under the iron fist of this oppressor. It seemed as if Napoleon was invincible.

God used Napoleon as a scourge to punish the nations of Europe. However, Napoleon was unaware that he was only an *instrument* in the hand of the Lord. His pride knew no bounds. He even tried to get the Roman Catholic Church on his side and do his bidding!

Most French people were still members of the Roman Catholic Church.

"Well," said Napoleon, "the Roman Catholic religion must again become *the* religion of the French people."

But... in the Roman Catholic Church, the pope reigned supreme.

"Okay," says Napoleon, "I am happy for the pope



Pope Pius VI.
1717-1799

to remain the head of the Roman Catholic Church as long as he does what I tell him and approves my laws." The pope always had to help and support him. He only wanted to use the pope to increase his *own* honour and glory.

He proposed to the pope that he move from Rome and make his headquarters in Paris.

He, Napoleon, and the pope must work together.

He, Napoleon, would make sure that the whole world would become Roman Catholic.

He, Napoleon, would give the pope a magnificent guard of honour.

He, Napoleon, would double the pope's revenue.

He, Napoleon, and the pope would honestly share all the honour and glory.

But no matter how much Napoleon tried to entice him, the pope refused to be bribed and become Napoleon's servant. Instead, the pope even chose the side of France's enemies. Napoleon became furious when he saw all his attempts fail. He arrested Pope Pius VI and had him taken to France. Pius VI died there in captivity.

Napoleon allied with the new pope, Pius VII.

NAPOLEON CROWNED

In 1804, this pope travelled to Paris to crown Napoleon as emperor. The large Notre Dame cathedral was overflowing with members of the government and army officials. Solemnly, the pope anoints Napoleon as emperor, and then he takes the priceless imperial crown and is about to place it on Napoleon's head.

It is dead silent in the vast cathedral.

All present watch breathlessly.

It is an unforgettable moment.

But, suddenly, Napoleon grabs the crown from the hands of the pope and crowns himself! The dumbfounded pope looks bewildered. He did not expect *that* to happen!

The message is clear: Napoleon does not want to be the servant of the pope! The pope must be *his* servant and must do what *he* says.

Finally, it came to a clash between Napoleon and the pope. So he had Pope Pius VII made prisoner and locked him up near Paris.

There is much more to tell, but this is enough to show you that God remains in control through all man's sinfulness. God uses men, wicked men, to fulfil His plan. When Napoleon had served God's



Pope Pius VII. 1742-1823
<https://www.papalartifacts>.

purpose, God completely humiliated him. His pride was crushed in the Russian snowfields when his army suffered a total defeat.

No, Napoleon did not die at the height of his

power and fame. Had that happened, he would have died a hero. That honour was not given him. The mighty hand of God humbled him completely. Here, too, Scripture is fulfilled: 'God resists the proud.'

Exiled, broken in body and spirit, after much pain and suffering, Napoleon died on the small island of St. Helena somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean.

What awaits him on judgement day? The thought makes us shudder.

After his death, the disastrous Revolution ended, and the royal house was restored. A grandson of Louis XVI became king. Europe could breathe again and could slowly recover from the long and bloody wars.

But the spirit of revolution did not die with Napoleon. Unfortunately, that spirit never dies.

QUESTIONS

1. List the seeds of revolution sown by Voltaire, Rousseau, and others.
2. What initial steps did King Louis XVI take to appease the common people?
3. What oath did the common people swear?
4. Mention three ways the people revolted during the early period of the Revolution.
5. How did the oath the government demanded, make things difficult for the priests?
6. How did the common people obtain more power and influence?
7. Why were the common people so successful in their attempt to gain power?



The coronation of Napoleon, 2 Dec 1804. Painting by Jacques-Louis David.

8. Explain:
 - a. Marie Antoinette
 - b. Guillotine
 - c. 'The Black Beast'
 - d. Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity.
 - e. Reign of Terror
 - f. Donkey procession
9. Why does the author state that the 'Reign of Terror' represents the avenging hand of the Lord?
10. Explain the attitude of the leaders of the Reign of Terror regarding the following:
 - a. God
 - b. The Christian era
 - c. Sunday
 - d. Churches
11. Why did the people worship the goddess of Reason?
12. When was the 'Religion of Reason' abolished?
13. Explain the meaning behind the author's example of Israel's refusal to wear the wooden yoke which meant that she had to receive an iron yoke.
14. Why might Napoleon be called an instrument in the Lord's hands?
15. How did Napoleon attempt to assert his authority over the pope?
16. How did God humble Napoleon?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. The French tried to erase the difference between the rich and the poor. Everyone should be equal, according to their view. What does God's Word say about such attempts?
2. Mention two other historical attempts to equalise wealth. How successful were they?
3. Mention one problem that usually occurs in communities that have tried to equalise wealth.
4. Read Romans 13. Answer the following:
 - a) How should citizens view their rulers?
 - b) Do you believe this chapter applies to evil as well as good rulers? Support your answer.
 - c) How should we regard the methods used by the revolutionaries in France?
 - d) If people are treated unfairly by a government, how should they correct the situation?
5. Write a 200-word essay about Napoleon's invasion of Russia.



Napoleon amassed an army of 615,000, the largest army Europe had ever seen. Then, in June 1812, Napoleon invaded Russia, aiming to deal a decisive blow and force Alexander I into peace talks. It was a catastrophic defeat for Napoleon and one of history's deadliest military operations, causing approximately 1,000,000 deaths. Painted by Adolphe Yon.