

## 5. THE STONE WHICH BECAME A GREAT MOUNTAIN

In the previous chapters, we told you about the destruction of Jerusalem and the fall of the Jewish nation. In this chapter, we return to the history of the church.

Many centuries ago, Nebuchadnezzar, that powerful king of Babylon, had a dream, in which he saw a great image. The head was of gold, the breast and arms of silver, the belly and the thighs were of brass, the legs of iron, its feet part iron and part clay.

In his dream, he then saw a stone cut out without hands. That stone rolled down, struck that beautiful image and crushed it to pieces. After that, the stone became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.



*The stone strikes the beautiful image*

Daniel first told Nebuchadnezzar what his dream was and then explained its meaning. That stone was Christ, and with His coming the gospel would triumph. In the dream, the stone was small to begin with, but it grew and became a huge mountain.

That's how Christianity began. The beginning was small, puny and insignificant. It started with only a small group of ordinary fishermen, the disciples of the Lord Jesus. But with the Lord's blessing, it grew. At Pentecost, it was a small group of only 120 people who were together in the temple. The powerful emperor of Rome and the most prominent people of that great world-empire did not even know that the Christian church existed.

But three centuries later, the Christian Church had become a great mountain and had spread over three continents: Asia, Africa and Europe. Three centuries later, the mighty Roman Empire had become a Christian state.

In the beginning, that small, despised group of Christians were ridiculed: "Those fools, they worship a God Who died on a cross". When people said that, they meant the Lord Jesus. However, over time millions and millions have bent their knee before that despised Nazarene.

How did all this happen?

The might of the earth did not receive Christianity with love and respect. On the contrary, first they ridiculed it, then persecuted the Christians terribly.

And yet...? It *grew*!

Nobody could prevent this from happening.

The church of Christ had to struggle against the stubborn Jews. The Jews were the most fanatical enemies. Later, the church had to contend with powerful paganism. No, it was not an easy time for God's church. Yet despite the oppression, yes, even *because of* persecution, Christianity grew. Again, how did that happen? Oh, we know the answer: the Lord did that. God blessed them.

The Lord blessed the means which served the spread of His gospel. I will tell you something about that in this chapter.

### THE STONE STARTS TO GROW

"Preach the Gospel!"

That was the command of the Lord Jesus. The apostles faithfully obeyed that command! Most of the apostles died as martyrs. After their death, others continued their task.

One of the reasons the church grew was because of the faithful preaching of the gospel. When persecution broke out in Jerusalem and disrupted the first congregation in Jerusalem, her members fled far and wide. The result was that new congregations were instituted everywhere.

Because those ordinary people could not keep silent about the Lord Jesus!  
Wherever they came, they spoke about the Lord Jesus, the promised Messiah, Who came to redeem sinners, and God was pleased to bless that simple witness.



*Paul preaching in Athens. 19<sup>th</sup> century painting*

Then, on his missionary journeys, the apostle Paul preached to the pagan world. He preached the gospel of salvation to those heathens. And...? Many came to faith, and churches were instituted in those pagan cultures. The stone grew, despite much hostility and opposition.

Thousands of pagans turned away from their stone idols to embrace the new gospel which Paul preached. They would no longer worship and bend their knees for those idols of wood and stone because they were *not* gods. From now on, they wished to serve the God of heaven and earth and live to His glory.

The Spirit of Pentecost worked powerfully in the hearts of many who once served idols. And still today, God's servants preach the gospel every Sunday. Every Sunday, we also hear the preaching of the Word in the house of the Lord. May the Lord use that preaching to sanctify our hearts. This way, the preaching of the gospel was one of the reasons for the growth of God's church.

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## **RIDICULE**

Ridicule is a dangerous weapon. It hurts when friends ridicule you, and it is felt more acutely than a firm smack. Because of being bullied, many boys and girls have left the right path.

When Christianity spread, the pagan priests and nations became hostile towards the new converts. In helpless rage, they clenched their fists and...? They began to ridicule the Christians. Clever

pagans started writing books. In those books, they ridiculed the LORD Jesus. They also ridiculed the followers of the Lord Jesus, the Christians. They wrote things which weren't even true. The biggest lies were spread around by them. That was slander.

Do you want me to tell you one of those lies?

Just listen.

When the Christians celebrated the Lord's Supper, the minister said these words, "Take, eat, this is My body."

When the minister gave the cup of wine, he said: "This is the New covenant in My blood; drink you all of it."

That still happens in our churches today.

And do you know what the heathens said? They made up this horrible story; they said: "Those Christians are terrible people. They kill little children, catch the blood in a cup, and they all sip some of that warm blood. They also eat the flesh of those little children!"

They had heard something about the celebration of the Lord's Supper and turned what they heard into big, terrible lies!



*'Take eat, this is my body'  
, 'take, drink, this is my blood.'*

Those absurd stories, which got worse as they were passed on, were believed too! Of course! The devil was at work here. He did his utmost to stop the spread of the gospel. People had to develop hatred towards Christians. People had to despise and detest them, for then they would not join the Christians so easily.

But the Lord watched over His church. In response, some educated Christians wrote books in which they defended Christianity. They wrote that these were all lies. Christians do not slaughter children; Christians do not eat human

flesh or drink human blood! At the Lord's supper-table, they use bread and wine as symbols of Christ's body and blood. These Christian writers are called apologists.

### THE APOLOGISTS

The pagans spread all kinds of gossip, saying that Christians did not want to honour and obey the emperor. They accused the Christians of wanting to organise revolts everywhere. They said: "The followers of Jesus of Nazareth are extremely dangerous to the state. They'll endanger the peace of the empire!"

But the apologists responded to that in their books and said:

"That is not true. We do not incite the people to be disobedient to the emperor; on the contrary, we pray for the emperor, and we pray for the government. We pray for peace. Come to our assemblies then you can hear for yourself."

The pagans mocked the Christians. They said: "You people honour and worship a carpenter's son. Jesus, who you worship, is a deceiver. He learned sorcery in Egypt, and He died on the cross because He was a liar. You people worship a God who is dead."

But the apologists wrote in their books: "Jesus is no liar. He is the eternal Son of God. Certainly, He died on the cross to deliver His people from their sins, but Jesus has risen again, and He ascended to heaven. We do not worship a dead God but a living One. And the miracles which He performed were not tricks of magic at all. They were genuine miracles to show that He truly was the Son of God, the Almighty. We are not deceived, but you people are being deceived. You people kneel before wood or stone images, but we kneel before the God of heaven and earth."

Whenever the pagans spread their filthy slander, then the apologists defended Christianity against it.

Many people read the books of these apologists, and God blessed that work. Their writings opened the eyes of many pagans, and they repented so

that they no longer served the idols but the living God, the Creator of heaven and earth.

This work of the apologists was the second reason why Christianity spread so rapidly.

### CHRISTIAN WALK OF LIFE

If a minister steals or robs someone, takes the Lord's name in vain, and deceives the people, would you have any respect for that minister? No, right?

Perhaps we would not even want to listen to him anymore.

If an elder or deacon was a liar or deceiver, if an elder or deacon walked the streets drunk, going along babbling to himself, would we have respect for such an elder or deacon?

No, right?

We would no longer want to listen to such people. If a man or a woman had come to faith, joined the church but went to wicked feasts, visited pubs, drank till he or she was drunk, danced at the disco, visited cinemas, would you have any respect for that so-called converted man or woman?

No, right?

We would say:

"That man or that woman is not truly converted. That man is a liar, a hypocrite. He claims that he serves God, but serves the devil instead, for otherwise, he would not continue living in those wicked sins."

Exactly! Not just the *talk* of the Christians, but their *walk* must fill others with respect and reverence for God.

At that time, the Christians lived godly lives. They did not only glorify God with their lips, but they served God wholeheartedly.

The pagans, on the other hand, lived very sinful lives. Plundering and stealing; cursing and raging; getting drunk and all sorts of other wicked things were the order of the day. Often, their feasts turned into orgies. It was the *pagans* who lived a sinful life, and their priests were happy to join in. They set the example, but it was a bad, a terrible example. Even the decent and honest pagans turned up their nose at those pagan priests! They lost all respect for them.

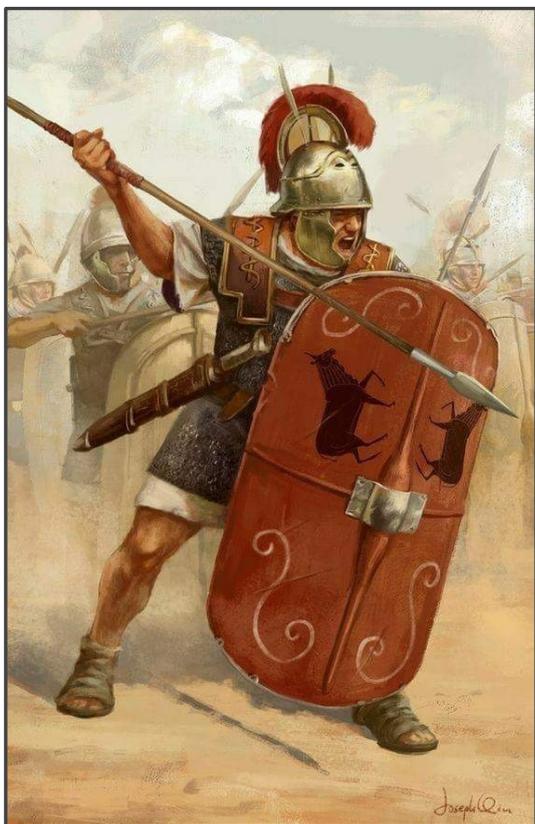
The Christians refused to join in with all that wickedness. They were different. They showed in their life that they truly loved and served God. This prompted many pagans to leave their idol temples, never to go there again.

This godly way of life of the Christians was the third reason why Christianity spread. If only it was still like that now!

### WITNESSING WARRIORS

When Christianity began to grow, the Roman empire ruled the world. It became ever more powerful. The Romans conquered more and more countries and subjected more and more nations. When they marched out to war, the brave Roman soldiers jubilantly left Rome. They loved doing battle. Great, they would subdue new nations and defeat hostile armies! In faraway countries they would plunder to their hearts' content.

And when they returned, they would bring the spoils of war with them. The people of Rome would cheer them as heroes. Then there would be a great feast in the capital of the Roman empire.



Roman soldier

Wagons filled with gold and silver and other valuables would be on show in the procession.

Right at the end of the procession misery and



*The greatest extent of the Roman Empire*

sorrow would follow, for there, securely fettered, the prisoners would come — men, women, boys and girls with their heads bowed. And those prisoners would become their slaves! From now on they would have to work in their houses and on their large estates. They would make them still more prosperous than they already were.

Among those thousands of brave warriors, were also Christian soldiers. Those Christian soldiers did not like war; they pitied those poor prisoners. However, they had no option: as Roman citizens, they had to serve as soldiers in the Roman armies.

But those Christian soldiers did not only fight; no, they also did something else. They brought the gospel into those far foreign countries. They spoke about their newfound faith. They could not keep silent about the Lord Jesus, their Saviour, their Redeemer.

Those Christian soldiers were instrumental in bringing the gospel to strange, distant lands.

Yes, they usually were uneducated people. In all simplicity, they told anyone willing to listen that the idols were no gods but that everyone should bow down before the almighty God Whom they served! That simple witnessing was not in vain; the Lord richly blessed it. Who knows how many people were converted and embraced their Saviour through that witnessing?... Only God knows. One day this will be revealed. The labour

of those simple Christian soldiers in the Roman army was the fourth reason why Christianity expanded.

### ROMAN IDOLATRY

In all the cities of the enormous Roman Empire stood temples for the idols. Some were beautiful buildings; the stones were of marble; gold and silver sparkled everywhere. Daily, thousands of people visited those temples, both men and



*Roman Temple*

women. The pagan priests walked around in their stately garments. One person walks in to bring an offering, over there comes a man who is in trouble and asks for advice. A mother desperately begs for the healing of her critically sick child at home. Conscious of their dignity, the pagan priests walk around, grave and dignified. They take the offerings. They put fire to the incense.

But... when those priests leave the temple and meet each other on the street, they snigger at each other. What, why? ... Well, those priests know that they deceive those poor people. Those temples were often hotbeds of sin. The entire pagan religion was full of lies and deceit. Sadly, ordinary people didn't know any better.

And yet... those people had no respect for the priests.

The rich and prominent of the land did not bother much with any of the idol worship. They only lived for partying and having fun. Oh yes, they occasionally went to the temple, because that was the proper thing to do, but they did not mean it. They no longer had any respect for those pagan priests either because they knew that they deceived the people.

### MARTYR'S BLOOD, SEED OF THE CHURCH.

Then Christianity came, and it spread very quickly. The hostility of the pagan priests erupted. Terrible persecutions followed. We will tell you more about that in the following chapters. The Christians were put to death by hundreds and thousands. They were terribly tortured, gruesome! They were burned at the stake and cast before wild animals who ripped them to pieces. Yes, the Christians were cruelly put to death in all sorts of ways. Men and women, boys and girls, great and small. Age made no difference. Away with them! Wipe them out!

And how did the Christians face death?

Pale and shaking?

Trembling at the prospect of approaching death?

Did they plead to be spared?

Did great drops of the cold sweat of fear break out on their faces?

No, on the contrary! Joyfully, with smiles on their faces, the Christians went to meet death. Often they sang songs of praise to God. Often their singing was heard above the roaring of the wild animals. Others would stand so peacefully, so calmly, with folded hands and their eyes cast towards heaven. In that way, without the least sign of terror or fear, they faced death. They did not scold or fight; they did not cry or scream. Yes, they often prayed for their enemies!

The calm certainty with which the Christians died, made a deep impression on many pagans.

Many thought: "What makes those despised Christians enter death so joyfully without fear and terror?"

They knew *they* would not die so joyfully and peacefully! They were afraid of death. It seemed as if those reviled and despised Christians longed for death. That was an unsolvable riddle for many pagans. They realised those Christians must have something which they did not have, and which they lacked.

Many pagans thought deeply and seriously about those things. They began to investigate why the Christians could so joyfully go to meet those wild, ferocious animals. They wanted to know more

about that. God blessed that searching and questioning to the hearts of many, many pagans.

Precisely because of the persecutions; precisely because of the heroism with which the Christians died, the church grew. Someone once said: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." And that is true. As more Christians were persecuted and killed, even more people came to faith.



*Persecution of Christians*

The devil tried to wipe out the Christians by persecuting them, but he failed. On the contrary! God used the persecutions to bring many pagans. Persecutions were the fifth reason why Christianity spread so quickly. Despite all reviling and slander, despite all the oppression, the number of Christians increased steadily.

Here we see the fulfilment of the dream of king Nebuchadnezzar. The stone became a great mountain. It had such a small, insignificant beginning, but a few centuries later paganism had almost disappeared. After a struggle of three centuries, the Roman empire had become a Christian state. In the beginning, hardly anyone bent their knees for Jesus of Nazareth. Three centuries later, the pagan temples stood abandoned. They were either closed or demolished.

In the terrible struggle between paganism and Christianity, Christianity conquered gloriously. It triumphantly came through that fierce struggle. Whoever would have imagined that? This story shows that not the devil, but God rules. Not the prince of darkness but the Prince of Life shall conquer.

## QUESTIONS

1. What was the meaning of Nebuchadnezzar's dream about the stone that became a mountain?
2. What errors were spread regarding the Lord's Supper?
3. What is an apologist?
4. What attitude did the early Christians have toward the Roman government? How did this attitude compare with that of the Jews before the destruction of Jerusalem?
5. How could the Christians meet death with courage and confidence?
6. What is meant by the expression, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church\*?"
7. List the five reasons why Christianity spread so rapidly.

## FURTHER STUDY

1. Why is it an error to label Jesus as the first martyr?
2. Give possible reasons why Christianity quickly became the 'sect everyone ridiculed'.
3. How did a Christian soldier serve God in his calling?
4. What is a pacifist? How can this view be condemned based on God's Word? What was the early Christian view of war?