

## 6. NERO, THE CRUEL PERSECUTOR OF THE CHRISTIANS

In the previous chapter, we explained how Christianity spread despite fierce opposition. It was not an easy time for the church. The powers of hell did their utmost to wipe out the Church of God. Not only were the *Jews* fierce enemies of Christianity, but also pagans and the Roman emperors tried everything to purge the earth of those hated and despised followers of Jesus of Nazareth. They were persecuted and hunted like wild animals, and there was no safe hiding place for them anywhere. There was nowhere they could call home.

In the following chapters we hope to tell you a few things about these persecutions. One of the first emperors who tried to banish the Christians from this world was ... Nero!

### NERO

Nero! I'll tell you a few things about him. Unfortunately, I cannot share anything nice about him, because Nero was an evil, godless and

wicked emperor. He was ruthless. He knew no pity. He murdered many people in cold blood. Even his close relatives were not safe from him.

One day a great feast was organised in the palace. At this banquet, a

servant offered a cup of wine to Nero's brother. Without suspecting anything, this man drank the cup of wine, and it cost him his life because the cruel Nero had added some strong poison to the wine!

His brother had barely emptied that cup of wine when he began to writhe in terrible pain and agony. A horrid pallor covered his face. He collapsed with a groan. Suddenly he realised that

someone had put poison in his wine, but it was too late, and a few moments later, he died. Nero had become the murderer of his brother!

This was not the only murder Nero committed. Nero was married to a noblewoman named Octavia. However, the cruel Nero didn't like her and decided to kill her so he could marry another woman. Horrible, isn't it?

Even his mother was not safe from him. He was worried that she would dethrone him. So, he had her killed as well.

One writer tells us that one day she went out on a pleasure cruise on the Mediterranean Sea. Suddenly several sailors took hold of her and threw her overboard into the sea. This is what Nero had commanded them to do before they left the harbour. The poor woman grabbed hold of the side of the boat, fearing for her life! The sailors beat her to death with clubs. The vessel returned without the woman, and Nero grinned wickedly. His wish was fulfilled. She could no longer harm him.

When Nero was still a boy, he was taught by the wise and learned teacher Seneca. When Nero became emperor, he had his teacher murdered! What pupil would do that? Together, these stories show that Nero was a monster of wickedness and godlessness: the murderer of his brother, his wife, his mother and teacher. What could be worse? ...

This man, who committed the most atrocious sins, was the ruler of the vast Roman empire. The noble Romans cried shame on it. It is no wonder that people trembled before that cruel man. If one of the courtiers did something wrong or it did not please the emperor, that would cost him his life. If one of his friends made him angry, the death sentence was immediately pronounced on him. Nobody was safe from him. Nobody was sure of his life even for a moment. To Nero, human life had no value.



NERO *Born:* 15 December 37 AD,  
*Died:* 9 June 68 AD,

Now we know a little of what Nero was like. Although the Romans feared him, they did not like him. How could they?

## ROME ON FIRE

“Fire! ... Fire!...”

Listen, that horrific scream echoes through the streets of Rome. Fearing for their lives, the people run out of their houses into the streets. In those days a fire was something terrible. Most of the houses were made of timber, and therefore, it was very difficult to extinguish a fire.

This fire in Rome could not be extinguished. Listen to those flames roar. Listen to the terrifying crackling of the timber housing. Everyone flees from the destructive blaze. Desperate people push their way through the narrow streets. Mothers lose their children in that mad crush. Urgent cries for help are heard everywhere. Whoever accidentally stumbles and falls ... is lost! Those unfortunate ones are fatally trampled on by the stampeding crowd. Many are also caught by flames surrounding them and are burned alive: sick ones who cannot flee, become prey to the fire. Feeble ones, old ones and children all find death in the blazing sea of fire. Such misery cannot be described. All of Rome plunges into mourning and grief. Wealthy merchants watch their valuable possessions turn into ash in a moment. Treasures are lost. It is impossible to extinguish the fire. Day and night, the fire continues to rage in all its fury. The biggest part of Rome is soon a smoking heap of rubble. At night especially, it is a terrifying sight. Then the red blaze is visible for miles around.

‘And,’ so the story goes, ‘while the fire rages most furiously, while thousands of desperate people flee through the streets in an indescribable panic,

emperor Nero climbs onto the roof of his palace and enjoys the wonderful sight of the flames. He thought it was beautiful. He had never seen anything like it before.’

## WHO IS GUILTY?

‘Who started that fire?’”

That question is asked everywhere. Who is guilty of this terrible disaster? They ask and investigate.

Soon the rumour passes from one to the next: “Nero, the emperor, has purposely set Rome on fire.”

Was that true?... I do not know. But what did the people of Rome whisper?

“One who dares to murder his wife, his brother, his own mother and his teacher, also dares to set fire to Rome.”

The people did not trust Nero, and when those rumours did the rounds, they believed them. They said, “It is quite possible.” Many clenched their

fists and cursed their emperor.

Nero hears that such things are being said about him. He hears that they suspect him of having set fire to Rome. He is conscious of the hate and bitterness, with which he is surrounded. That frightens him. No! No! That's not allowed to happen! He fears that the

angry people will revolt and murder him. He quickly commands that every effort must be made, using all available means, to extinguish the fire.

But it is too late. It is impossible to quench the fire. That sea of fire spreads ever further. Overwhelming! Devastating! Everything is destroyed!

Nero brings sacrifices to the gods so that they may look on him in favour, and the fire may be brought



*Rome burns for 5 days. 18 July 64 AD – 23 July 64 AD.*

*Nero watches the fires*

under control. He provides for the poor victims. He commands that food and clothing are distributed to them. Oh, he does his utmost to get rid of those rumours about him. The people of Rome may not think that *he* is guilty of all that misery! But whatever Nero does, however hard he tries to prove the rumours wrong; it is no use. The inhabitants of Rome do not trust him. They believe him capable of doing this.

“Oh yes”, they scoff, “the emperor may be nice and pleasant *now*, but it is all his fault. He purposely set fire to the city, and now, he just wants to make things right again.”

That terrible fire lasts for nine long days. When finally the flames have run out of fuel and burn themselves out, Rome is gutted.

“Oh, that is not so bad,” says emperor Nero, “we’ll just rebuild the city. Rome shall arise from the ashes again and emerge a more beautiful and splendid city.”

Indeed, Nero gives the command for the work to begin, and the people make every effort to get it done quickly. A new city arises where the old one used to be. The new streets are made wide and broad. The modern Rome becomes much larger and more beautiful than the old Rome.

But... everything Nero does is in vain. The people continue to believe that he is the firebug who willfully set fire to the city. They continue to blame him.

### **NERO BLAMES THE CHRISTIANS.**

And then?

Then Nero plays a very mean trick. He finally blames the Christians. He says:

“Not I, but the Christians are the ones who started the fire!”

That is a big lie! The Christians are not the ones who lit the fire. Nero's accusation is malicious and nasty!

However, the worst is that this slander is believed by many. The pagan priests spread this lie further. In this they see an excellent opportunity to vent their hatred on the innocent Christians and break

their growing influence. Terrible persecution starts to rage in Rome.

As you know, Rome had a flourishing Christian church. But now the hatred of the people turns against them. Thousands of Christians are brutally murdered. Nero himself is the most brutal of all. He thinks up the most horrible tortures. Many Christians are crucified. Just think of the Apostle Peter who was crucified upside down. Others are thrown before the wild animals and are torn to pieces. Nero grins wickedly!

“Christians are the enemies of the human race,” he says, “because they no longer sacrifice to the gods, the gods have become angry and are taking revenge, and bringing all these calamities over us. Their vengeance will continue to rest on us if we do not entirely exterminate these Christians.”

The people believe it. Yes, that could be true!

At Nero's command, some Christians are skinned alive and then tied those unfortunate people to trees. To add to their suffering, thousands of wasps are let loose on them. Those little insects land on the Christians and sting them all over their bodies. Their cries ascend to God in heaven.

This story is only one example. I could give many more examples, but this is bad enough. However, I wish to share one more story.

### **NERO ORGANISES A FEAST**

There is a feast in Rome. Most people love parties. Rome had been reduced to ashes but has been rebuilt. Through this disaster, many wealthy Romans were made destitute. In many homes, they still mourned the numerous victims who perished in that tragedy. Yet thousands hurry to the emperor's garden where the feast will be held.

Nero wants his people to party and celebrate to help them forget the horror and misery somewhat. They need some distraction. A large crowd listens intently to the beautiful music floating through the lovely imperial gardens.

Night falls. The feast continues in full swing. No one thinks of going home.

But you can't party in the dark, can you? You can't see in the dark, can you?

That is true, but Nero has seen to it that his extensive gardens are brilliantly lit. Just look! He has had wooden poles placed all along the pathways through the gardens, with a Christian tied to each pole. Those Christians wear white robes, but their robes are painted with pitch and tar. When the sun sets, and night falls, Nero's servants set fire to the Christians. They become living torches by which the imperial gardens are lit!



*Nero's servants set fire to the Christians. They become living torches by which the imperial gardens are lit.*

Isn't that terrible? ...

When all the human torches are burning brightly, Nero goes for a ride along those paths, standing in his chariot, with burning Christians on either side. The people cheer him on loudly.

Finally, the Christian martyrs are burned. The flames die down. The guests hasten home

through the dark night. They are content. Nero also returns to his palace. But God, the Almighty, Who is just, shall avenge all that innocent blood. Soon Nero shall be summoned before God's judgment seat to give an account of all his horrible deeds, and then the smoke of his torment shall go up for all eternity.

## **NERO'S END**

Listen! Lots of shouting.

A big uproar!

Screams from all directions!

What's happening?

Look, people fill the streets of Rome. They are all heading for the imperial palace.

Angry voices echo through the many alleyways! The people of Rome are finally revolting against their emperor.

Nero's reign is coming to an end following the horrific murder of those Christians. The people of Rome refuse to acknowledge him as their emperor anymore. They are disgusted with his godless life.

They want to kill him.

They have had enough of him!

Everywhere the cry is heard:

"Away with that brute! Kill him!"

The crowd heads for the palace. Nero flees! In mortal fear, he escapes from the enraged people. All his former friends have abandoned him except one man, a liberated slave. That once-powerful emperor tries to save his life in a hasty flight. But to no avail. His enemies pursue and gain on him. He hears their furious cries calling for revenge. Oh, if they catch him, they will tear him to pieces! Nero trembles!

He breaks out in a cold sweat.

Where can he hide?

There is nowhere to go!

His pursuers are right behind him!

He bursts into tears and cries like a baby. He refuses to surrender to the raging people.

Desperately he takes his dagger and presses the sharp point against his bare chest. He will kill himself! He tries to drive the blade into his chest, but recoils. He lacks the courage to do it.

He, who jeered at the torture of the Christians, he, who mocked at their fear, he, who never



showed compassion for others, but enjoyed their suffering, he lacks the courage to kill himself.

Twice he put the point of that dagger to his chest, and twice he lowers that deadly weapon. Indeed, he is a coward. He has caused hundreds of innocent people to be put to death, but now that death stares *him* in the face, he shudders and flinches back from it.

Look, for the third time, he puts the dagger to his chest with a trembling hand. Suddenly, the slave who remained with him gives the handle of the dagger a massive blow. The sharp weapon pierces Nero's heart. Dying, he crumples to the ground. A slave murders the cruel persecutor of the Christians. Soon after, his pursuers find the body of Nero, their former ruler.



*Emperor Nero killed by a slave.*

That was the end of that cruel, godless Nero. He died a shameful death.

To the Romans, committing suicide was an act of bravery, but Nero's death was shameful because he lacked the courage to pierce his heart with a fatal weapon. A *slave* had to do it! In the eyes of the Romans, he didn't die as a hero, but he died the death of a coward.

Then he was summoned before God's judgment seat. God is righteous. The full weight of God's wrath shall burn his soul for all eternity. Despite their suffering and misery, the Christians whom he led like sheep to the slaughter, are infinitely happier. The mighty ruler of the Romans was cast into eternal perdition while they entered eternal glory.

Surely, there is a God Who lives and judges all the earth.

Nero experienced that.

That same God still lives today. The hour of our death will also come, who knows how soon, and then ... ??? Let's think about this carefully.

### QUESTIONS

1. What type of person was Nero?
2. How did Nero treat those around him? List four examples of his cruelty.
3. List the ways Nero devised to torture Christians.
4. Why did the people suspect Nero of purposely setting Rome on fire?
5. How did the Romans regard suicide?
6. How did the Romans view Nero's death?

### FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. What does God's Word tell us about suicide? (Suggestion: Read Acts 16; Acts 1; 1 Samuel 28 & 31)
2. Can a child of God ever commit suicide? Explain.