

## 7. DOMITIAN 51-96 AD

**A**fter the death of Nero, the Christians enjoyed a few years of peace.

You remember that while Vespasian's army besieged Jerusalem, his soldiers proclaimed him emperor. But at the same time, someone else ascended the imperial throne in Rome. Vespasian then quickly returned to Rome and soon defeated his rival. This gave Jerusalem another one and a half years to repent.



*Domitianus 51 -96 AD*

As emperor, Vespasian did not allow the Christians to be persecuted. He even held some of them in high esteem. When Vespasian died, and his son Titus, the conqueror of Jerusalem, became emperor, the Christians continued to live in peace and quiet. Unfortunately, Titus did not reign for long, only a few years. Death put an end to his peaceful reign.

During the time of Vespasian and Titus, Christianity grew significantly. Christians even served in the palace of the emperor.

At the death of Titus, his brother Domitian ascended the throne. Domitian was also a son of Vespasian, but sadly, the noble spirit of his father was not in him.

### **MORE PERSECUTION**

A difficult time began for the Christians because brutal and relentless persecutions started again. Domitian was a thoroughly wicked brute. He did not trust anyone and always lived in fear that somebody would murder him and always worried that the people might revolt.

For example, he had his court investigate whether there were still descendants of king David's family.

What?

Why?

Well, he had heard that one day a great king would arise out of David's descendants. That thought worried him. What if that were true? Suppose that king was born during his reign, then that would be the end of his rule! That's why he ordered an investigation into David's genealogy. And sure enough, a few Jews were found who were descendants of that old, famous royal family.

Immediately, he summons them to the palace. How those ordinary people must have trembled. They stand before the mighty emperor. No, they are not wealthy or influential. One would not think that they were descendants of that noble royal house. Their hands show callouses from working hard. Those people tremble in fear, unaware that their visible poverty saves their lives. Domitian closely observes them. He sees those worn workman's hands and understands that he need not fear anything from these people. He sends them away, and his heart is at ease.

I told you this story on purpose to show you how scared Domitian was. The emperor of Rome was not a happy man. He had thousands of innocent people put to death. The Christians especially were cruelly persecuted by him. To him, those Christians were dangerous. At least, that's what he thought! That's why he was scared. But really, why...? What sort of dangerous things had those Christians done?

It is well-known that the Roman emperors wished to be revered as gods. All the Roman subjects had to worship the statue of the emperor and sacrifice to it. But the Christians refused to do that. They only bent their knees before the God of heaven and earth, Who lives forever. Domitian thought and said: "See, those Christians cannot be trusted. They refuse to obey me. They refuse to obey the laws and commands which I give to my subjects. Away with them!"

And so he raged furiously against the Christians in the city of Rome. Hundreds were banished. Their properties were confiscated, which means that their possessions, their gold and silver, became the property of the government. So, he stole those things. He could make good use of that money for his godless feasts. Parties always cost money. With the Christians' money, he paid for everything he needed for his banquets. He had his own cousin, who was a Christian, put to death. Not only in Rome but also in other parts of the Roman empire, bloody persecutions took place. During his reign, the apostle John was banished to the small island of Patmos. Oh, who can count the number of Christians who were killed during his reign? Only God knows.

Do you know who else died a martyr's death at this time?

Timothy, who is well known to us from the Bible. He was Paul's companion on his second missionary journey. According to various writers, Timothy had worked at Ephesus, the city where the great temple of Diana, the goddess of the Ephesians stood. When Paul preached there, there was almost an uproar because the silversmiths who made souvenir temples of Diana and magic coins were out of work and not earning anything because a result of the apostle Paul's preaching was that people no longer believed in those things.

Years later, when Timothy preached the Gospel at Ephesus, the silversmiths caused another turmoil. During that uproar, they imprisoned and then



*Timothy is stoned*

stoned Timothy. That is how this faithful minister entered into eternal glory.

## AMPHITHEATERS

Many large cities in our country have stadiums. thousands and thousands of people go there to watch sport. Twenty-two players run after a ball trying to score a goal. When they succeed, they get a thundering applause. Then the audience goes wild with joy. Thousands of people dishonour the Lord's Day to watch a game of sport. Extra trains are scheduled to transport the fans. Is that not very, very sad...?



*The Pula Arena is the name of the amphitheatre in Pula, Croatia. It was constructed in 27 BC – 68 AD and is among the world's six largest surviving Roman arenas.*

Centuries ago, those stadiums already existed. Such stadiums were built in all the large cities of the immense Roman empire. In those days, these structures were not called 'stadiums' but 'amphitheatres. The open area in the centre was called 'the arena '.

The Romans were very fond of sport and games as well. The people flocked to the amphitheatre by the thousands to watch those games in the arena.

Sadly, those amphitheatres were also used to throw Christians to wild animals as a sport to entertain the people. Thousands and thousands of Romans went to watch the violent death of the Christians. They thought that was great! They relished it!

Below the front seats of the arena, cages had been built where wild animals were locked up.

Those cages were separated from the arena by massive iron sliding gates. When they raised such a gate, the wild animals entered the arena where the Christians were waiting.

## GLABORI

One day, thousands of people, men, and women, are seated in Rome's colossal amphitheatre. Everyone is watching the arena. It is deathly quiet. Suspense is in the air. They are all waiting breathlessly for the things that are about to happen.

In the centre of the vast arena a man stands all by himself. He stands there calmly, with his arms folded across his chest and a smile on his lips. The eyes of thousands of spectators are fixed on him, but it does not seem to disturb him.

Who is that man, and why is he standing there? That man is a Christian, and he stands there waiting to be torn to pieces by a lion. His name is Glabori. He used to be the governor of Rome. But he had forsaken the pagan religion and converted to Christianity. Therefore, the cruel Domitian had him arrested. Now he will be torn to pieces by a lion as entertainment for the people.

The lion had purposely not been fed for a few days, and now the animal is ravenously hungry. Listen, you can hear the muted roar of that hungry lion break the suspenseful silence. The long benches of the large amphitheatre are packed. The spectators shudder when the fearsome roars echo through the arena, ripping through the deathly quiet. They tremble! The emperor also came to watch Glabori's death. At his signal, some servants raise the heavy gate. A few moments later, a huge lion enters the arena.



For a moment, the animal blinks at the glaring sun. Then he sees that lonely man and stealthily he approaches Glabori. When the lion comes close, that beautiful animal crouches. His tail twitches. Everyone holds their breath. One second, and then ... suddenly ... that fierce animal takes a tremendous leap. With

one blow of his razor-sharp claws, he will strike Glabori and kill him.

But oh, just look!

At the last moment, Glabori jumps aside; the attack of the brute fails, and it misses its prey. And then ...? Before the lion can prepare itself for his next attack, the brave Christian hurls himself onto the back of the lion. In vain, the lion tries to shake Glabori off. He clings tightly onto the wild animal. With Glabori on his back, the roaring lion runs around the arena. But Glabori holds on tight with his arms and legs and manages to inflict various wounds to the lion. This terrible struggle lasts half an hour. The thousands of spectators hold their breath. How will that end? ... Who will be victorious? ... The lion is so much stronger!

But God gives strength and endurance to the brave Glabori. Half an hour later, Glabori stands up, and the lion lies dead on the ground. No one had expected that! God has saved Glabori!

According to the laws at that time, he is now a free man. The masses who first craved his blood now applaud the hero enthusiastically. Glabori leaves the arena as the victor. The spectators hurry home, busily discussing what had just happened.

Emperor Domitian also returns to his palace. He is *not* happy. He had not expected this to happen, and he has no intention of giving Glabori his liberty. He soon has the former governor of Rome arrested again and this time, at his command, Glabori is beheaded. That's how this martyr entered eternal glory.

He is one of the many martyrs who have been put to death by Domitian. But here God showed that He is mightier than the wild animals. True, Glabori was killed, yet God received His honour! Because all over Rome people talked about the God of Glabori, the God of the Christians and the brave Glabori.

## DOMITIAN'S DEATH

Domitian has killed many Christians in different ways. The Lord allowed this so His Name would be glorified through them. I could tell you a lot more, but that would make the story too long. Eventually, Domitian was murdered in his own

palace. Some writers tell us that his own wife had him killed and that it happened in this way:

I already mentioned that Domitian didn't trust anyone. Only a little child could play in his presence. One day this little boy found a note. He skipped off with it to his mother, the wife of Domitian. She read the letter and got a terrible fright because ...that note was a list of names of people who had to be put to death. They would be the next victims of Domitian. At the top of the list, she read ... her *own* name! Domitian was planning to have his own wife killed! Is it surprising that the empress got a terrible fright when she noticed that her own name was at the top? So, she could not be sure of her life for a moment. Her life was on a knife's edge.

She took instant action and immediately warned her friends and acquaintances. That same evening Domitian was murdered in his room. He did not get a magnificent funeral. On the contrary! Some servants quietly buried him. That was the terrible end of the cruel Domitian.

After his death, the persecution of the Christians ceased. After his death, the Apostle John also returned from Patmos to join his congregation at Ephesus.

For a while, Christ's church received some peace again, but that did not last long, because ...

### QUESTIONS

7. Identify Glabiori. How did God receive the honour in his deliverance and death?

### FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Why are professional sport players idolised today?
2. What dangers or temptations face the skilled sportsman as he performs in front of a multitude of spectators?
3. What dangers or temptations face the eager spectators as they view the game?

1. How did the Christians fare during the reigns of Vespasian and Titus?

2. Why did Domitian try to trace the royal house of David?

3. Why did he persecute the Christians?

4. During which persecution was the apostle John banished? Why was this a blessing for the Church of God?

5. Who met a martyr's death under the persecution of Domitian? How did this occur?

6. Why were the events in the amphitheatres so appealing to the Romans?