

81. THE STRUGGLE IN FRANCE

The bells are ringing all over Paris. Look, a large procession is approaching. Some Roman Catholic clergymen lead the way. The king of France, his three sons, and other government officials are part of the procession.

The king and his three sons walk with uncovered heads and a wax candle in their hands. Solemn and formal, the procession advances through the main streets of Paris. They walk from one city square to another to check what is happening there.

It is terrible!

In the city square, they have erected a stake. Above that stake, on a strappado, hangs a person! However, the noose is not around his neck, so the victim dies quickly.

No, the rope is wrapped around his waist with this man so he won't choke. As the procession moves through the square, they light the stake. The martyr hangs above it, still alive. The fire singes his hair and scorches his clothes. Every time his clothes catch fire, he is pulled up out of the flames

and smoke to stop the fire from burning the martyr too quickly. A moment later, they drop the martyr into the fire again. They repeat this process over and over. That's why they call that torturing device 'The Strappado' (literally: to pull).

When finally, the martyr is half roasted, the hangman cuts the rope, and the body falls into the flames and is soon entirely consumed.

I would have preferred not to describe this story in so much detail. But in this case, it had to be done; otherwise, you would not understand what these martyrs went through.

During that procession through Paris, they lit at least six of those stakes. The lighting of the stakes was to enhance the drama of the procession. Who was being so horribly tortured?

According to Rome, they were 'only' protestants, 'cursed heretics'. The king approved. He had given the command for this to be done.

KING FRANCIS I

The name of that king was Francis I. From this sad story, it is clear that persecution also raged in France. Francis I, known as the 'most Christian' king of France, ascended the throne in 1515. He was the great opponent and enemy of Charles V, the emperor of Germany.

Francis I would have liked to have been emperor of Germany, but the Germans chose the nineteen-year-old Charles V instead. Francis I waged war against Germany for most of his life. He was a wicked, godless king who lived a sinful life.

The Reformation had also spread to France, and the writings of Luther were eagerly read. Francis I persecuted those 'Lutheran schismatics' because he wanted a strong Roman Catholic Church for France and tried to prevent disunity in church



The Strappado

<https://www.facebook.com/MedievalTortureMuseum>



King Francis I 1494-1547
Wikipedia

matters. He failed because the Reformation spread irresistibly throughout France, and also here, we see the 'blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church'.

Francis I did not hate the Protestants, but because he considered it necessary for the benefit of France, he ordered their persecution.

In Germany, he *supported* the Protestants in their struggle against Charles V, but he did this because the German emperor was his enemy. Division and confusion in Germany were beneficial for his political aspirations. The more the better, because that would weaken the country, but rest and peace must reign in France because then France would become strong and powerful.

That's why Francis did not tolerate the Protestants in France. During his reign, even Calvin had to flee Paris, disguised as a vinedresser. Remember?

Persecution raged during the entire reign of Francis I, at times more violent than other times. We will tell one more story.

In 1546, in one of the market squares of Paris, the Roman Catholic soldiers built fourteen stakes in a circle and burnt fourteen protestants at the same time. According to some historians, these poor martyrs had their tongues cut out of their mouths, but they still praised God and could comfort each other despite their pain. That's how they entered eternal glory.

The French king could not destroy the work of God. He could kill their body, but their soul ascended to God. Despite the many martyrs and the severe oppression, God's Church in France grew, like Israel in Egypt.

PERSECUTION OF THE WALDENSIANS

Do you know who else was persecuted during the reign of Francis I? The ten thousand Waldensians who still lived in the Western Alps. They lived a peaceful life and did not bother anyone. They had built a few prosperous cities and numerous villages. But those Waldensians were a thorn in the eyes of Rome.

Francis I was stirred up by his confessor, and at his urging, persecutions erupted in full force. The

soldiers murdered more than four thousand Waldensians. They sent more than six hundred to the French galleys, where they died a miserable death.

Those galleys!

Believers suffered so much misery in them.

Galleys were warships powered by many rowers.

The rowers were prisoners and criminals, but during the persecutions, many Protestants and Waldensians also had to row.

The soldiers chained them to the benches.

They lived on those benches.

They slept on those benches in the most uncomfortable positions.

In winter, they suffered freezing temperatures because the icy wind could whistle freely through the oar-holes on both sides of the ship.

Unprotected and poorly clothed, they sat there, sometimes drenched in sweat because of the heavy work, other times numbed by the cold. In summer, they lived there in the fierce heat.

There was no pity, no compassion for them.

They were defenceless, at the mercy of the cruel overseers, who, armed with long whips, mercilessly lashed the naked backs of the poor galley slaves, when, according to them, they rowed too slowly.

They did not care about sickness, fever, weakness, or pain.

They had to *row*.

They stayed there till death delivered them from their sufferings.

No doctors would attend to them.

Understandably, the death rate was high among the galley slaves. When a galley slave died, the overseer would unlock the chain and throw the corpse overboard.



Persecution of the Waldensians
<http://metalonmetalblog.blogspot>.

Another slave would take his place.
France had plenty of them!
Only the strong ones could hold out for some years. Others succumbed quite quickly.

If a galley got severely damaged during a battle so that it would sink, the sailors and soldiers would try to save themselves. But no one thought of the chained galley slaves. No one even bothered about trying to set them free. When the ship sank, all those galley slaves perished miserably. They cried out in fear till the rushing waters extinguished their voices.

And now Francis I sent more than six hundred Waldensians to those galleys! It is not surprising that many Waldensians decided to leave their comfortable homes and flee! More than four thousand Waldensians travelled over the inhospitable Alps and fled to Switzerland. Due to icy cold temperatures and despair, many perished on that journey. The cruel persecutors took a devilish delight in driving the poor fugitives, who had lost everything, ever higher into the Alps.

The flourishing, prosperous villages of the Waldensians became smoking heaps of rubble.

What senseless destruction!
And why?
Because they wanted to serve God according to His Word.
They disagreed with the false doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church.
That was their only crime.
One day the Judge of heaven and earth will avenge all those innocent lives. He will demand justice from Rome, who instigated all this.

In 1547 Francis I died and was summoned before God's throne and had to give an account of his sinful deeds.

The death of this king didn't give the French protestants any rest.

On the contrary, the persecution intensified. The new king, Henry II, hated the protestants. And yet, despite all this, the Church of the Lord in France continued to grow, and Calvinism spread. Calvin wrote letters to many prominent people.

His writings were printed and distributed by the thousands. He also visited France numerous times.

THE HUGUENOTS

It was during this period that the French protestants received the name HUGUENOTS. The Lord directed it in such a way that various powerful and prominent people in France chose the side of the Huguenots. We will mention some of them. Two of the king's cousins joined the Huguenots: the Prince of Conde and Anthony of Bourbon, as well as Dandelot, the army's commander-in-chief, and Gaspard de Coligny, who was an admiral in the French army. During a war, he had been imprisoned and spent two years in a cell at Sluis (South-West of The Netherlands). The Lord converted De Coligny while he was in prison. When he was released, he immediately sided with the Huguenots. With these men in prominent positions, the party of the Huguenots became a strong force in France.



Prince of Conde
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>



Gaspard de Coligny.
Wikipedia



Anthony of Bourbon
[https://upload.wiki](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wiki/)
media.

But the Roman Catholic party was powerful too. The royal court favoured the Roman Catholic party. Two dukes in particular: Francis de Guise, a capable commander, and Charles de Guise, a cardinal, were very influential. True, persecution raged, yet the king had to be careful because the Huguenots were a force to be reckoned with. So in 1559, he made a pact with Philip II, Spain's notorious and dreaded king.

Its purpose?

To exterminate the 'heretics'!



Francis de Guise
Wikipedia



Charles de Guise
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/>

Now the Spanish troops would assist the French king in case the Huguenots took up arms, for that was a real possibility.

From Dutch history, we know that at that time, Prince William of Orange was a hostage in France. The French king Henry II shared the information about the pact with Spain with the Dutch Prince. The Prince never shared that information with anyone! We'll hear more about that later.

While the Roman Catholic party plotted to destroy the Huguenots, the Huguenots

held a large synod in Paris.

Despite the danger, many ministers and elders attended the synod.

They adopted a new confession and discussed matters related to church governance. They decided that one congregation was not allowed to lord it over another. Each congregation, whether large or small, was independent. They would deal with any issues at the provincial synod, and a general synod would meet every few years when office-bearers from the entire country would come together. These decisions show the Huguenots were Reformed in their thinking.

How different this church order was from the hierarchal system of the Roman Catholic Church, where the pope rules supreme!

The Lutheran Church was different again in that the churches were not independent but ruled by the State; the electors were the highest authority in the Lutheran churches. The Lutheran church became a State Church.

As said before: it is not right to have a state church. Church and State must stand next to and support each other but not stand above each other.

Indeed, the ministers and elders needed lots of courage to attend that synod in Paris. Yet that

synod was essential to manage the affairs of more than 2000 Reformed congregations in France. That's why they braved great dangers. Meanwhile, King Henry II prepared to destroy the Huguenots with one crushing blow! And then ... the French king suddenly dies.

King Henry II receives a fatal wound at a jousting tournament for knights. He could no longer harm anyone. God said, "So far and no further!" All his horrible and carefully prepared plans came to nothing! God showed that *He* ruled!

MASSACRE IN VASSY

A quiet Sunday morning.

Huguenots have assembled in a barn in the little town of Vassy, east of Paris. Men, women and children are listening attentively to the minister's sermon. Nothing disturbs the peace.

Meanwhile, a detachment of horsemen quickly approaches the village.

An armoured knight heads the group.

He is the commander.

He is the powerful Duke Francis de Guise, known for his hatred of the Huguenots. They ride into the peaceful village. A stern expression appears on the face of the commander when he hears that the Huguenots have a church service in a barn.

How did he hear?

Did they sing a psalm?

Did someone betray them?

We don't know.

Suddenly a sharp command!

The group of horsemen turns toward the barn where the unsuspecting Huguenots are listening to the sermon.

Suddenly the church service is cruelly disturbed! The heavily armed soldiers attack the defenceless Huguenots. Loud cries of distress and fear break the peace and quiet that Sunday morning. The cruel soldiers strike down men and women, but also innocent children. Their swords drip with blood. In a short time, sixty Huguenots are dead or dying on the ground, and many more are wounded.

Then the horsemen continue their trip to Paris as if nothing had happened.

The commander laughs an evil laugh.



Engraving of the Massacre at Vassy. <https://www.meisterdrucke.ie/fine-art-prints/French-School>

Exterminate those heretics!
Don't show *them* any pardon!
There is no room for them on earth!

But in Vassy, weeping mothers wring their hands and bend over the corpses of their cruelly murdered children. Men, pale as death, stand by the mutilated bodies of their beloved wives. Mourning and sorrow reign for a long time in Vassy. This shameful act is known as '*The Massacre of Vassy*' and happened on Sunday, March 10, 1562.

It took place when it seemed the Huguenots would enjoy a little more peace. They were permitted, at least outside of the large cities, to go to church. The agreement was that Huguenots were not to be molested. It seemed as if the persecutions would stop and now *this* suddenly happens!

In those days, the king of France was only twelve years old! Still a child! His name was Charles IX. Of

course, that boy could not rule yet. His mother, Catherine De Medici, reigned for him. She was the regent.

CATHERINE DE' MEDICI

This wicked queen was the widow of King Henry II, who had made a pact with Philip II of Spain to exterminate all the Huguenots in France and The Netherlands. Catherine was born in the Italian city of Florence. The royal house of de' Medici had already ruled there for many years. They were evil.



Catherine de' Medici.
<https://en.wikipedia.org>

Catherine became an orphan while still young and was raised in a convent. Through her marriage to Henry II, she became the queen of France. She was a crafty, wicked queen. What Jezebel had

been for Israel and Athaliah for Judah, Catherine De' Medici was for France.

After the sudden death of her husband, her eldest son, Francis II became king. He was only fifteen years old at his coronation and already married. That happened more in those days, often for political motives. Francis II's wife's name was Mary Stuart. She was the queen of Scotland, and we hope to tell you much more about her later.



King Francis II
<https://en.wikipedia.org>

Francis II was king for only one year. His mother, Catherine de' Medici was his regent. She was an ardent Roman Catholic who persecuted the Huguenots horribly that year. Then Francis II suddenly dies, only 16 years old. No one expected that! His death frustrated Catherine's plans to join both royal

houses and unite France and Scotland.

Again we see that man proposes, but God disposes!

The unexpected death of Francis II created such confusion in the palace that they forgot to bury him. Francis II's body was lying in state in another room! To the great horror of the royal family, they discovered the unburied corpse of the young king a while later. That night, some courtiers secretly buried the king. His young wife, Mary Stuart, returned to Scotland.



King Charles IX,
12 yrs old. He
succeeded his
brother Francis II
Wikipedia

KING CHARLES IX

Meanwhile, the second son of Catherine De' Medici, Charles IX, was crowned king at the age of ten. Two years later, in 1562, the Huguenots in the village of Vassy were murdered by Francis de Guise, about which we told you earlier. That massacre of Vassy soon became known throughout France.

The Roman Catholics rejoiced.
That's what they liked to see!
Exterminate those cursed heretics!
No gentle treatment for them!

The Huguenots were indignant!
That was a shameful breach of the promise to allow them to have their church services in freedom again.
And now this massacre!
No, that went too far!
They could no longer accept that.
The Huguenots took up arms everywhere, and a bloody civil war broke out in France.
Roman Catholics against Huguenots.

It was a war of incredible cruelty and bitterness. Streams of blood flowed. Sometimes the Huguenots were winning; other times, the Roman Catholics. Prominent leaders of the Huguenots, as well as of the Roman Catholics, died or got murdered.

So much misery everywhere!
They trampled down and destroyed the harvests in the fields.
They stole cattle.
Years passed, but the war continued to rage.

Eventually, the most influential leaders of the Huguenots were Gaspard de Coligny and Henry of Navarre. Of those two, de Coligny, as admiral of France, was the most important. He was the driving force of the Huguenot resistance. The Roman Catholics hated that honourable man.

Oh, if they could only kill him!

In 1569, they nailed his picture to a gallows, and the Roman Catholics offered a reward of 90 000 francs to the person who killed him. The murderer would be instantly wealthy. Rome did *everything* to get rid of de Coligny.

Then, the Huguenots and Roman Catholics suddenly made a peace treaty.
No one had expected that!
That was The Peace of St. Germain in 1570.

An end had finally come to the atrocious bloodshed.
The Huguenots could assemble freely, except in Paris and a few other large cities. Catherine de'



The Waldensians persecuted. <https://www.learnreligions.com/waldensians-history>

Medici invited de Coligny to come to the palace. The teenage king, Charles IX, and de Coligny became best friends. What a change!

First, they offered a large reward of 90 000 francs for his death, and a few months later, he was a friend of the king!

It was almost unbelievable!
The Huguenots were happy.
Their struggle had not been in vain.
At last, at *last*, rest after all!
Finally, peace!
How blessed!
Really?

QUESTIONS

1. Describe the instrument of torture called the strappado.
2. Identify Francis I.
3. Why did Francis I oppose the Protestants in France but support them in Germany?
4. Why did Francis I persecute the Waldensians?
5. Describe the life of a galley slave.
6. What groups of people frequently became galley slaves?
7. Identify Henry II.
8. How did Calvin influence the people of France?

9. List the leaders of the Huguenot and Roman Catholic parties.
10. Why was a Huguenot synod held in Paris?
11. List the main decisions of this synod.
12. How did the Lutheran churches organise their church government?
13. How did the Roman Catholic churches organise their church government?
14. How did the Massacre of Vassy occur?
15. Identify the following:
 - a. Charles IX
 - b. Catherine De' Medici
 - c. Francis II
 - d. Mary Stuart

16. What result did the massacre in Vassy have for the nation?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Do you know the name of one prominent Reformer who spent part of his life as a galley slave? Why was he released?
2. Can you think of any possible reasons why sudden peace occurred in 1570?