

## 39. CHARLES THE GREAT 748-814 AD: HIS WARS.

Since the fall into sin, there has been war between Christ and Satan. At the time, God said:

"I will put enmity....."

This conflict has been ongoing ever since and will continue until the last day. The devil knows that he has already lost that struggle. He had to flee in defeat when the Lord Jesus cried out on Golgotha: "It is finished"!

### THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

But the devil refuses to surrender. He is unrelenting in his attacks on the church of God. He wants to wipe her off the face of the earth. Yet, God will continue to take care of His church.

Satan is mighty but not *almighty*. Whatever he may devise, whether deceit or brute force, it is destined to fail. Yet, stubbornly, he'll persevere till Christ returns and flings him into the lake of fire.

The devil uses people for his terrible work — wicked men who never stop fighting against God and His church. These evil people who pretend to be Christians are either consciously or unconsciously instruments in the hands of Satan. They are wolves in sheep's clothing. They cause much damage; through them, Satan wins many battles, though he has lost the war.

At the same time, the Lord also uses people as tools in His hands to *protect* his church. The Lord is always ahead of the devil. God's plans never fail. Satan cannot break the golden thread of God's providence. If he could, God would no longer be God.

I purposely wrote this part because...

The previous chapters showed how the gospel came to Western Europe. That did not happen by chance. God wanted to establish His church in those countries. The devil desperately tried to prevent that. The struggle

between paganism and Christianity raged there for many centuries. Streams of blood flowed, but through it all, God *did* establish His church there. God's Word is victorious.

Why?

Because it was God's will.

And who can withstand God's will?

The Lord sent His servants, the missionaries. We told you about the Irish missionaries, great heroes from Ireland, the Frankish missionaries who had to overcome a twofold enmity, as well as Willibrord and Boniface. There have been many more, all instruments in God's hand to build His church.

But the devil was also busy and used the pagan Saxons and the savage Frisians to stop, if possible, the work of God. At times it seemed as if Satan was successful in destroying the Church. But despite that fierce opposition, God's tender plant slowly grew.

In 754, a howling mob of pagans killed Boniface and his 53 helpers at Dokkum. It was with great difficulty and much bloodshed that the church remained standing against the repeated attacks of the pagan nations. Then the moment came when the Lord said: "That is enough!"



*Painting by Friedrich Kaulbach of Charlemagne's The painting depicts the crowning of Charlemagne (742-814 CE) as Holy **Roman Emperor** by Pope **Leo III** ( 795-816 CE) on 25 December 800 CE.*

In 768, fourteen years after the horrible murder of Boniface, a new king ascended the Frankish throne. The Lord would use that king to make that tender plant of God's church into a vigorous tree. By this, I mean that *that* king would break the power of paganism. Those pagan people will also learn to bend their knees to the Christ of the Scriptures!

## EMPEROR CHARLEMAGNE

The new king's name was Charlemagne, also known as Charles the Great. He ruled for more than forty years. God used him to protect His people and spread the gospel. The story of Charlemagne is the focus of this chapter.

An army marches through the land of the Frisians, murdering and plundering as they go. Churches go up in flames, and only smoking heaps of rubble are left. Sparing nothing, the hostile soldiers force their way into the monasteries, killing the monks brutally and pitilessly and stealing whatever they want. When they go, they set fire to the buildings. The army advances deeper into the Frisian country, leaving a trail of destruction behind them. Blood flows in streams!

Poor Christians!  
Who will help them?

But look, a mighty army is already rushing to help them. Its commander is a powerful man, taller than most of his soldiers. His broad shoulders and solid build bear the mark of authority. Courageously, he and his brave soldiers attack the murdering and plundering intruders. A fierce and terrible fight erupts. The sound of shouting and the clash of weapons fill the air. Finally, the pagan army is forced to withdraw in chaos, leaving many dead on the battlefield.

The Christians who have escaped the massacre can now start the

enormous task of rebuilding their churches and monasteries.

Who are those pagan intruders?  
They are the Saxons who live in the east of the Netherlands and Germany. Their king and commander is King Wittekind.

When the two Anglo-Saxon missionaries, Willibrord and Boniface, preached in the Netherlands, the Frisians under King Radbod were the greatest enemies of the gospel. But after Boniface's violent death, the Frisians gradually accepted the gospel, so the Frisians were no longer a threat to Christians. Now, the Saxon King Wittekind is the greatest enemy. Wittekind wants to persecute and destroy Christianity with whatever it takes.

That's why he raids the land of the Frisians, sparing nothing.

That's why blood flows in streams.

Wittekind has only one purpose: to totally destroy anything to do with the gospel!

Providentially, a Frankish king can now drive back the plundering Saxon army. That king is Charlemagne. He is the powerful protector of the ruthlessly persecuted Christians. With his army, he comes to help the church.

Charlemagne had become king just in time. In 768 AD, he ascended the Frankish throne, and within four years, his wars with the Saxons began. Charlemagne had just defeated King Wittekind,



*Map of Europe at the end of Charlemagne's reign. He was king of the Frankish Empire. (Wikipedia)*

but they could return with stronger armies anytime! Those Saxons remained a threat, and Charlemagne knew it. That's why he was not content with sending them out of the Frisian country but marched to invade the land of the Saxons! They had to be made harmless!

*"Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord Almighty."*

**Zechariah 4:6**

"Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord Almighty." (Zechariah 4:6)

Sure, Charlemagne had good intentions, but how he went about it was completely wrong. As a result, the Saxons became Christians outwardly, but in their hearts, they remained pagans.

They fought one battle after another till Charlemagne defeated the Saxon army, and they had to submit themselves. However, Wittekind, their king, refused to submit! He fled to the extreme north, to the land of the Danes. The Saxons then promised Charlemagne to obey him and leave the Christians alone.

Till this point, Charlemagne had done right. He *had* to wield the sword to protect God's Church. That is one of the tasks of the government. But after that, Charlemagne did something wrong.

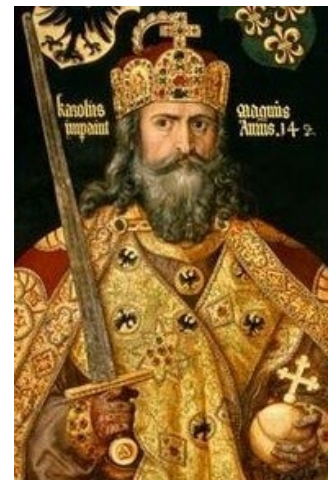
Instead of sending missionaries to the Saxons, he tried to *force* them to accept the gospel. Charlemagne used the sword to *enforce* the spread of the gospel. That was wrong! Only God's *Spirit* can convert people; the sword cannot do that! The Lord says in the Bible:



*Statue of Wittekind ? – 807. Wikipedia*

## CHARLEMAGNE AND WITTEKIND

After conquering the Saxons, Charlemagne organised their lives according to his rules. Then he and his soldiers marched south to Italy, where the Lombards lived. The pope had come into conflict with them, and now they were threatening him. In his distress, the pope called on Charlemagne to help him.



*Charlemagne 742-814*

So Charlemagne marched south as soon as he could.

It did not take long for the news of Charlemagne's departure to reach King Wittekind, who was still hiding. He made good use of that opportunity. Hurrying back to his own country, he called the Saxons to arms again. They came!

The Saxons broke their promise and revolted against the Franks. Persecution broke out again in all its violence. But they did not know Charlemagne yet! As soon as he heard about their rebellion, he promptly turned and marched north! In an unbelievably short time, he was back and battling the Saxons, defeating them again! King Wittekind fled to the Danes again. By his speedy return, Charlemagne foiled Wittekind's plans a second time. Again, the Saxons promised to submit to the mighty king of the Franks.



To prevent further uprisings, Charlemagne issued several laws that made rebellion punishable by death. These laws also served to protect Christianity. First, he forbade human sacrifices. Second, the Saxons were no longer allowed to burn their dead in the ceremonial pagan way but had to bury them.

Third, looting and destroying churches and monasteries received the death sentence. Finally, he also forced all the Saxons to be baptised!

With all these rules in place, Charlemagne thought:

"That's it. Now the Saxons won't dare rebel again!"

Satisfied, he marched back to Italy.

But he was mistaken!

As soon as Charlemagne and his army departed, Wittekind returned and called up his army *again*! They rebelled *again*!

When Charlemagne heard that, he quickly left Italy and fought the rebellious Saxons *again*! Charlemagne forced the Saxons into submission for the third time and made them promise loyalty. He then left with his victorious army and marched to Spain. He fought against the Muslim Moors who were causing chaos and destruction there.

But the Moors managed to defeat a part of his army.

As soon as the Saxons heard that, they broke their promise for the third time! They began destroying churches and monasteries *again*. Streams of blood flowed *again*. Charlemagne was furious when he heard that!

Now his patience had run out!

He decided to punish the Saxons severely for repeatedly breaking their word.

This time, he will teach them to obey!

He must stop them once and for all!

The Saxons fought desperately, but their heroism was not enough; Charlemagne gained a magnificent victory.

Then Charlemagne took terrible revenge!

Near the little town of Verden, situated close to the present city of Bremen, he had forty-five hundred rebellious Saxons beheaded in one day! That was cruel! It shows that both the Saxons and the Franks were fierce and brutal!

When news of this terrible massacre spread, the anger of all Saxons knew no bounds. A terrible rebellion broke out. All who could took up arms and fought to the death. But the Saxon armies

were repulsed with much bloodshed and forced into submission *again*! Yet that *still* did not finish the war!

The Saxons *still* did not want to submit! Even after being defeated so often, they would rebel whenever they saw an opportunity.

Charlemagne realised the struggle would never stop if he did not change tack. So he uprooted ten thousand Saxon families and sent them into the Frankish kingdom, where he dispersed them among his people. At the same time, many Frankish

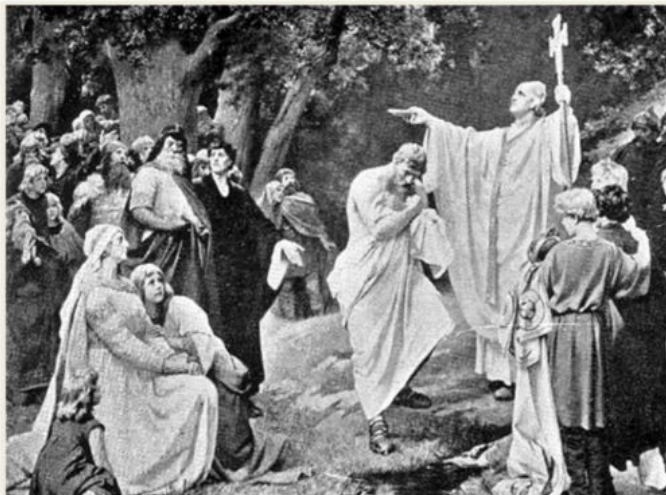


Charlemagne (742–814) receiving the submission from Wittekind at Paderborn in 785, (Painting by Ary Scheffer (1795–1858). Versailles.)

families shifted to Saxon territory.

And yes, this policy effectively ended all the wars and rebellions.

King Wittekind, realising he couldn't win anymore, also gave up. He was even baptised in the year 785. And so, Charlemagne was finally successful in restoring peace!



*King Wittekind baptised in the year 785.  
Pg. 295 Kerk Geschiedenis, Joh Vreugdenhil'.*

## OTHER WARS

The gospel quickly spread with Saxons now living in the Frankish territory and vice versa. With Charlemagne's support, the people rebuilt churches and monasteries throughout Saxony. Many Saxons followed the example of their king and were also baptised. God ultimately triumphed; paganism *had to* give way. So for a while, there was rest in this area of Europe.

Christianity was not only threatened by the Saxons; oh no, the enemy lay in wait on all sides. Charlemagne and his army had to travel from north to south to east and fight everywhere. During his long reign, Charlemagne undertook a total of 53 military campaigns!

It is not possible to tell you about all those campaigns. However, we'll have a quick look at two of them.

## CHARLEMAGNE AND THE LOMBARDS.

The Lombards lived in Italy. They were also fierce enemies of Charlemagne. That was Charlemagne's own fault. He deserved it.

Do you know why?

Charlemagne had married the daughter of king Desiderius, king of the Lombards. Through this marriage, Desiderius became Charlemagne's father-in-law. However, no children were born to Charlemagne and his Lombard wife. This was a great disappointment to Charlemagne. He desperately wanted a son to succeed him. He could not endure the thought of a 'stranger' on his throne! So... he sent his wife away! He told her: "You must go back to your father."

Soon after that, he married another woman.

Charlemagne's actions were sinful and wicked. He was not allowed to send his wife away for that reason. To divorce your wife is forbidden in God's Word. So, when his daughter returned home in disgrace, Desiderius was very angry with Charlemagne. That was understandable! Charlemagne had insulted his daughter, and Desiderius was *not* happy!

In revenge, he invaded the territory of the pope - The Papal States in Italy.

The pope was both a spiritual leader and a worldly prince who owned many landholdings. He even had his own army. But the pope's army was much weaker than the army of the Lombards, and it did not take long before the papal troops had to yield to the superior Lombard forces.

Plundering as he went, Desiderius and his soldiers marched through the papal country. Even Rome, the capital, came under serious threat. Finally, in desperation, the pope sent an urgent message to Charlemagne.

"Please, help me", he begged. Immediately, Charlemagne and his mighty army marched into Italy. Desiderius was no match for Charlemagne; he was soon defeated and made prisoner. Charlemagne shut Desiderius up in a monastery and



*Pope Adrian I  
Pope from 772-795  
Wikipedia*



drove the Lombards from the papal territory. The pope would have been very pleased and thankful to Charlemagne!

But this history is a black page in the life of Charlemagne. His sinful action of divorcing his wife was the *cause* of all that misery!

### CHARLEMAGNE AND THE MUSLIMS

In chapter 34, we told you that the Muslims had crossed over the Strait of Gibraltar from Africa into Spain. First, the Muslims conquered all of Spain. Then they marched over the Pyrenees and invaded France, conquering city after city. They seemed unstoppable! They were already close to Paris. It looked like France would be overtaken by the Muslims! In that chapter, you learnt that Charles Martel repulsed the Muslims in the Battle of Tours. However, those Muslims, also called Moors, tried to re-enter France time and again. They remained a threat to the church in Europe, and Charlemagne repeatedly had to fight fierce and bloody battles against the invading Moors. Sometimes, Charlemagne's troops suffered defeat, and he had to send in his main army to obtain the victory.



*The Frankish king Charlemagne was a devout Catholic and maintained a close relationship with the papacy throughout his life. In 772, when Pope Adrian I was threatened by invaders, the king rushed to Rome to help. Shown here, the pope asks Charlemagne for help at a meeting near Rome. (Wikipedia)*

Eventually, however, he was successful in repulsing the Muslims. He even managed to push them back beyond the Ebro River, which flows through the north of Spain.

And so we see that Charlemagne had to protect Christendom time and again against the advancing Moors in the south. They would have destroyed God's church in Western Europe if they had achieved their goal of furthering the Muslim faith.

Charlemagne did not have an easy life. It was a life full of trouble and strife. But God, in His providence, used him to preserve His church from destruction. Charlemagne was an instrument in God's hand!

### QUESTIONS

1. When in the history of the world did the strife between the Lord Jesus and Satan begin? When will it end?
2. When and where did Jesus gain the victory?
3. How did God use Charlemagne?
4. Identify Wittekind. Where did the Saxons live?
5. What was Wittekind's purpose in attacking the Frisians?
6. Identify Charlemagne.
7. How did Charlemagne 'wield the sword to protect God's church'?
8. What error did Charlemagne make concerning the spreading of the gospel? How did his plan fail?
9. List the five laws issued to the Saxons after their first rebellion.
10. How did Charlemagne punish the Saxons for their continued rebellion?
11. What final punishment was meted out to the Saxons? What did this punishment accomplish?
12. How did Charlemagne offend the Lombards?
13. What is meant by the "Papal States"?
14. Why is the history of the Lombards a black page in the life of Charlemagne?
15. How did God use Charlemagne to fight off the Moors?

### FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Why doesn't the devil give up the struggle since he knows Christ is the Victor?
2. Does the devil know that an end of his power will come and that he will receive his final condemnation? Prove your answer from God's Word.
3. The author writes, "Sometimes these evil people who pretend to be Christians are either conscious or unconscious instruments in the hands of Satan," Explain this statement.
4. Why was it wrong to compel the Saxons to be baptised?
5. What other steps might Charlemagne have taken to lead the Saxons (under the guidance of God) to Christianity?
6. What country in Old Testament history made the dispersion of the nations its usual method for governing? Did Israel or Judah experience dispersion?



*In the year 772, Charlemagne's forces crossed the borders into Saxony and attacked and destroyed the most sacred place for the heathens in Saxony, the shrine where the wooden pillar known as Irminsul stood. <https://skjalden.com/>*

The man (Charlemagne) who did such extraordinary deeds was, described by his contemporaries as a Herculean type of man. He was tall in stature, with very regular features, and conserved something of a young man in his appearance until his old age. On the other hand, when he was young he had something of the maturity of an old man. Thus, from the time he was young, he inspired respect as if he were an elder; and when he became old he aroused enthusiasm as if he were in the prime of life.

He was so amiable that legend says that when he smiled, flowers in his white beard blossomed. But in combat he was so terrible that his mere presence instilled such great fear that his enemies considered the battle already half lost.

Thus, some were so charmed by him that they would imagine flowers in his beard; others were so fearful of him that his mere presence would make them run from the battlefield. These contrasts give us an idea of the richness of his personality.