

## 16. TWO UNSUCCESSFUL ATTEMPTS TO DESTROY CHRISTIANITY

The road God's church must travel is a way of conflict and trouble, blood and tears, suffering indignity and contempt. If the Lord, the Almighty, had not promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against His Church, then Satan would have blown God's Church from the face of the earth like chaff and destroyed it long ago.

We have previously discussed some of the main problems. On the one hand, terrible persecutions continued to harass the Christian Church. On the other hand, the church had to battle multiple errors that tried to destroy the church from within and lead it away from the pure doctrine.



Lucius Septimius Severus was born in 145 AD and was Roman emperor from 193 to 211AD  
Wikipedia

After the death of Emperor Severus, the persecution stopped for a while. As explained in Chapter 12, Perpetua and Felicitas of Carthage were killed during the persecution, which erupted everywhere during the reign of Severus.

Severus caused Christians to be persecuted and vilified, but that changed. Different emperors reigned and helped and supported the Christians.

They received honour and respect.

Many Christians became involved with civil government. Christianity even entered the imperial palace.

Numerous Christians were among the courtiers and officials at the imperial court.

Thousands of Christian soldiers joined the Roman army; even some officers and commanders were Christians!

It is easy to understand that Christianity spread rapidly in times of peace and prosperity.

Thousands left paganism and the service of the gods and became Christians. The people deserted the busy pagan temples, and the Christian church

buildings were becoming too small. Things were going very well for the church! Excellently well! It finally looked like Christianity would triumph over paganism. That was great! It *seemed* to go so well, but...

### A NEW WAVE OF PERSECUTION

"You are also a Christian! ... Yes, I'm sure! You *are* a Christian! I recognise you!"

"No, no, you are mistaken," replies a nervous, trembling voice, "I have met my obligation of sacrifice. Look, here is my proof."

Two men stand facing each other. One, with glittering eyes, stands there threateningly. The other stands there nervously, flushed-faced, while he hastily unfolds a letter with trembling fingers and hands it over. The first man takes the note with some aversion and suspiciously reads its contents. He looks closely and searchingly at the signature below it. He turns the paper over and over, looks at it from all sides and finally returns it. He turns around, mumbles several angry words, and goes away. The other man nervously followed all his movements. With trembling fingers, he accepts the letter, puts it away carefully, and continues on his way with a sigh of relief. Phew, that ended well!

But what does all that mean?

Why is that man so angry and looking so searchingly at the other? Why is the other man so nervous and timid?

What kind of letter does he have?

Listen carefully.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, persecution against the Christians erupted again. The Christians, whom the people had learnt to honour and respect, who occupied high positions and offices in the government, and who, in their thousands, served in the Roman army, were suddenly treated with profound contempt and humiliated.

## EMPEROR DECIUS



*Gaius Messius Quintus  
Traianus Decius  
201 AD – June 251 AD  
and emperor from 249  
– 251 (Wikipedia)*

A new emperor had ascended the throne. His name was *Decius*.

As soon as this monarch was in power, he issued strict laws against the Christians. He thought: "No way is our ancient worship of the gods allowed to perish. Christianity may not conquer and become dominant. On the contrary, we must restore the service of the gods to all its old glory

and lustre!"

All the inhabitants of the Roman empire under Decius' rule were obliged to sacrifice to the gods. If they refused, the penalty was death. Decius and his government compelled their subjects to render divine honour to the emperor without exception.

These new laws produced much fear and alarm among the Christians. They had not expected that! This persecution was not local; oh, no, the persecution raged throughout the entire Roman empire. They were not safe anywhere! But do you know what was worse? Thousands of Christians renounced their faith. At the beginning of this chapter, I wrote: "Things were going excellently well!" But now it becomes clear that things were not going so well.

## FOUR MISTAKES

True, while there was rest and peace, Christianity had spread enormously. But now, things are becoming difficult with this new wave of persecution; it becomes evident that many have joined Christianity to become rich, prosperous, and honoured. Many were Christians in *name* only. Now there was no honour and advantage in being a Christian. On the contrary, now they

suffered shame, contempt, scorn, and ridicule. And now - watch them all run back to the pagan temples. Hundreds openly denounce Christianity and sacrifice to the gods.

But some did not dare to denounce Christianity openly and sacrifice to the gods again. No, that was wrong. To offer solemnly to the gods was too awful for them, but to burn a little incense... ah, that wouldn't be so bad, would it? Honestly, they would not mean anything by it, but they would only be doing it out of necessity; they were *compelled* to! If they only burned some incense, that wasn't so bad. We need not be *too* strict and fussy! Lots of things were much worse than burning a bit of incense! And so, they went and burned a little incense before the bust of the emperor and saved their life.

Such people were called incense burners. But those people *denied* their profession and renounced Christianity. The Lord Jesus had said: "Whosoever shall be ashamed of Me and My words, of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed."

Then there was still a third group of people. Sacrifice?  
No way.  
They would not do that!  
How about burning incense?  
No, they refused to do that too. *They* were not that wicked! Do you know what these people did? They went to the governor and the authorities and purchased a letter for a large sum of money. That letter stated that they had fulfilled their duty by sacrificing. That was not true because they had



*Pagan burning incense. WordPress.com*



Libellus from the Decian persecution 250 AD certifying that the holder has sacrificed to the Roman gods.  
Wikipedia

not sacrificed at all. They only received a certificate *saying* that they had done it. Every day, those people walked around living a lie, a big lie. Some dishonest governors would sign such a letter for a large sum of money, and ... that solved the problem! If they were stopped and called to give an account, they showed that signed letter and were no longer troubled. The man at the

beginning of this story was also the bearer of such a letter. But these people also renounced Christianity. They were guilty in the sight of holy God!

Finally, there was also a fourth group of people. The imperial command was: "All Christian books and writings must be handed in and burned." There were many so-called Christians who zealously came carrying those Christian books. They threw those books into the flames themselves. Then everyone would think that they had bid farewell to Christianity. Then they would not be suspected. In reality, these people also forsook their faith. They forgot that the Lord is the God of Truth, Who hates lying and deceit, in whatever form it may be! Their actions showed they were ashamed to stand up for Christ and His Church.



Burning of religious books. Wordpress.com

Those were sad days. Thousands and thousands abandoned their faith. One became an offerer, a second became an incense burner, a third became a bearer of a false certificate, and a fourth publicly burnt all his Christian books.

### A REMNANT REMAINS

Maybe you are thinking: "Did *everyone* renounce their faith? Were they *all* Christians in name only? No, thankfully, not everyone abandoned their faith.

The true, upright Christians stood firm.

They did not deny their Saviour!

They *could* not deny their Saviour!

But their persecutors - those in authority - put them to death! The blood of martyrs flowed in streams.

Emperor Decius raged against them with terrible cruelty.

He spared no one.

He showed no mercy!

He beat little children to death. He even killed older people, men, women, boys and girls, yes, even children and babies in the cruellest ways.

Now it became evident who *really* served the Lord and who didn't. The hypocrites fell away. God's people stood firm. Oh no, they were no better than the others, but God kept them faithful by His power. *He* kept them standing and filled them with such a strong faith that, although death stared them in the face, they stood unwavering in the heat and pressure of persecution. However terrible this persecution was, it served as a means in God's hand to purify the Church of the Lord.

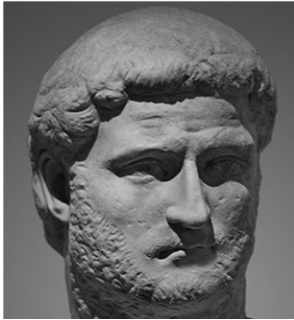
As a huge, violent storm rips limbs off trees and litters the ground with dead twigs and branches, the storm of persecution caused all the pseudo-Christians to renounce their faith and fall away. But the living branches did not break off. The faithful people of God remained standing and sealed their faith with their blood. Rejoicing, they entered eternal glory.

This terrible persecution lasted a year. Then Decius was suddenly murdered while he was fighting against the surrounding nations. The Romans were battling the Goths, and Decius was murdered in that battle. With his death, the Church of God received respite and could breathe



freely again. The attack had been terrible, but Decius's object had failed. He wanted to eradicate Christianity, but that did not happen. Instead, God used this to cleanse His church. That which the devil meant for evil, God turned to good.

### **MORE PERSECUTION UNDER EMPEROR VALERIAN**



*Emperor Valerian lived from 199 – 260 or 264) and was emperor from 253 to spring 260 AD.  
Wikipedia*

However, the peace the Christians received was but short; only a few years later, persecution began again! That persecution happened during the reign of Emperor *Valerian*. At first, this emperor was not unfriendly toward the Christians. But regrettably, that

changed when he saw that paganism was dying out. Some years later, he issued laws against the Christians. He focused his attacks on pastors and teachers. Everywhere, the leaders of Christianity were made prisoners and put to death. Bloody persecutions raged throughout the entire empire. Valerian did not demand that the Christians should deny their profession. He did not demand that they should curse their Christ. They were allowed to remain Christians and continue to visit their churches, but ... at the same time, they had to take part in bringing sacrifices to the gods and the emperor. The Christians refused to do that because they could not serve two masters. They could not serve idols and be a Christian at the same time. That was impossible for them. But their refusal caused the rage against them to become so much greater.

The emperor was so good! He was allowing them to remain Christians! All they had to do was one small thing: take part in the pagan sacrifices! What was wrong with that? Was that so bad? They did not have to turn their backs on God or stop serving Him!

Don't you see, those Christians are impossibly stubborn people! You cannot work with them! When Valerian hears of their refusal to comply, he wants to force the Christians into obeying. Martyrs fell everywhere, especially the bishops and the overseers of the Christian churches. Valerian had them put to death most cruelly. He killed the bishop of the church in Rome and several deacons there.

### **LAURENTIUS**

The emperor's governor of Rome heard that the Christian Church of Rome was very rich. 'Ah', he thinks, 'I can make good use of that money'. He sends a message to Laurentius, one of the remaining deacons in that church. He wants to speak with Laurentius. Laurentius goes to the governor and asks:

"You have sent for me; what do you desire of me?"

The governor gives him a haughty look and answers:

"You must give me the treasures of the church." Laurentius thinks deeply for a moment. Then he says:



*Laurentius before Emperor Valerian. Wikipedia*

"Grant me three days; then I shall show you our treasures."

The governor smirks and says:

"Very well, your request is granted. I shall give you three days."

He thinks that he has already won! Three days later, Laurentius appears before the governor a second time, but he does not come alone this time. During those three days, he calls together the poor of the church and takes them to the governor. Pointing to the poor, the brave deacon says:

"Look, here are the treasures of our church."

The governor becomes white with rage. He thinks that Laurentius is mocking him. Trembling with rage, he commands the death of Laurentius. He does this most cruelly.

He has a gridiron made, something like a barbeque plate.

They tie Laurentius onto it. They light a fire under that gridiron, and Laurentius slowly burns to death. But the Lord shows He is stronger than the fire because the Almighty removes the terrible pain. Here God held back the power of the fire. Just listen.

When Laurentius had been lying on that gridiron for a while, he tells the governor, who is also present:

"Turn me around and put me on the other side, for this side is sufficiently roasted."

Soon the faithful deacon is in eternal glory.

This incident is only one example of thousands of cruel deeds.

This round of persecution did not last long, for Valerian died too.

During a battle against the Persians, the Persians captured him, and soon after, the cruel emperor died.

Again, he could not destroy Christianity.

True, thousands were killed, but the earthly rulers could not exterminate them! The church of the Lord was victorious because their heavenly King watched over them. He used this terrible persecution to purify His church!

## QUESTIONS

1. What is the security of the church? (How do we know that the church will still be there at the end of time?)
2. What occurred during the interval between the reign of Severus and Decius?
3. What changes did Decius bring?
4. Why did many renounce Christianity at this time?
5. Who were the incense-burners? Was this right?
6. Who were the letter-bearers? Was this right?
7. Who were the book-burners? Was this right?
8. How did this persecution purge God's church?
9. How was this persecution more terrible than any previous one?
10. What punishment did God bring upon Decius?
11. What did Valerian command the Christians to do?
12. Why was it impossible for true Christians to follow his command?
13. Identify Laurentius.
14. What did Laurentius mean by the 'treasures of the church'? Why did the governor become so angry?



*Laurentius, the Martyr.*

*Painting by  
Bartholomeus  
Breenbergh.*