

17. A TOUGH TRIAL

The emperors who came to the throne after Decius and Valerian did not persecute the Christians, so the church received some rest. The authorities left them in peace for forty years. During those years, their numbers grew steadily. Christians were no longer hated and ridiculed. They received government positions. The emperor even appointed Christian governors.

Some Christians joined the army and advanced to the highest positions. In the imperial palace, some of the courtiers were Christians. The emperor treated them kindly. It was not surprising that thousands and thousands farewellled paganism and became Christians. It looked like Christianity had conquered. They built new Churches everywhere. They made beautiful, magnificent buildings. While the churches began to fill with people from every part of society, rich and poor,

nobles and peasants, the pagan temples were usually empty and forsaken. The pagan priests walked around grumbling because hardly anyone came to bring sacrifices anymore.

The Christians were already assuming that paganism would soon disappear. Every week new members joined the church. But the problem was that not all of them were *true* Christians. Many became Christians because being a Christian was no longer a disgrace.

But those pseudo-Christians did not like attending the plain Christian churches; they were ashamed of that. No, the buildings had to become just as fancy as the pagan temples. And so, Christianity became increasingly focussed on outward pomp and splendour while they gave no priority to loving and serving God the way He required. A lot



Saint Paul's Church. Built on the site where the apostle Paul died the martyr's death. The church was consecrated by Emperor Constantine in 324 AD. througheternity.com

of slackness appeared because they no longer feared danger. Danger? Oh no, the time of persecution was over. Those fearful, anxious times of persecution would never return.

'Peace, peace, and no danger!' they all thought.

But then?

EMPEROR DIOCLETIAN



*Diocletian, 242?-305.
Emperor from 285 to
305. Wikipedia*

In Asia Minor, close to the metropolis of Constantinople, was the large city of Nicomedia. At that time, this city had become the capital of the Roman Empire. The Roman emperor Diocletian did not want to live in Rome, so he built a beautiful palace in Nicomedia. The

inhabitants of Rome, the old capital, did not like that and opposed it. But Diocletian was not worried about that. He wanted to live in Nicomedia, so he would! His word was final!

Directly opposite the imperial palace stood a magnificent church building belonging to the Christians. It was one of the most splendid churches of the whole empire. Diocletian did not persecute the Christians. On the contrary! Many courtiers were Christians. Even the empress and her daughter were secretly Christians and often visited the Christian Church. Diocletian knew this, and he permitted it. He did not want to become a Christian himself, though, because he was and wanted to remain a pagan. He hated all those religious quarrels.

There were two powers in his realm. One was ancient paganism. Its priests tried everything they could to restore it to its former glory. The other was Christianity, which grew and increased in power and seemed unstoppable, emerging victoriously from all previous persecutions.

These two powers opposed each other. Oh, how the emperor hated all that discord!

The best would be *one* realm, *one* people, *one* religion, and *one* emperor!

But how could he make that happen? The powerful nations surrounding Rome attacked its borders constantly. Rome continually had to wage bloody wars to hold back the intruding enemies. Many life and death struggles began at Rome's borders, and the Roman empire was large! It was too large for one emperor.

So, Diocletian appointed three assistant emperors. He was the most powerful, the chief emperor, making all the final decisions in everything, but his co-emperors would assist him. He divided the empire into four parts. Diocletian reigned over one, while a fellow emperor reigned over the other three parts. The name of one of those fellow emperors was *Galerius*. He was married to the daughter of Diocletian, which made him the son-in-law of the chief emperor.

This Galerius hated the Christians with a deadly hatred. He would not rest until he had wiped those hated followers of Jesus of Nazareth from the face of the earth! He began to stir up Emperor Diocletian against the Christians and used every opportunity to place them in an unfavourable light, slandering them whenever he could.

At first, the emperor would not listen to him. He did not dare to oppose the Christians. Christianity had become too powerful. Rome's enemies were already fiercely attacking his empire from the outside; must he now sow confusion and discord inside the realm and weaken it even more? No way, he would not do that; he dare not! Besides, he was already quite old and often sick in bed. But Galerius persisted.

He gathered the pagan courtiers around himself and stirred them up. Once a fire broke out in the imperial palace.

Immediately Galerius blamed the Christians for it. Soon after, a second fire broke out. Galerius blamed the Christians again. He convinced the emperor that the Christians wanted to murder him and were trying to burn him alive, for since the emperor was sick in bed, he would not be able to escape if the palace went up in flames.



*Emperor Galerius
258-311 AD
Wikipedia*

This thought frightened Diocletian. Doubt crept into his heart. Could that be true? Then his life was not safe for a moment! He finally believed the wicked lies of his son-in-law and agreed to attack the Christians.

Galerius grinned, and - Satan smirked.
And then..?

PERSECUTION BEGINS AGAIN

"Let's demolish those pests!"

"Just kick in those doors!"

What a lot of shouting!

And look at that crowd!

What's happening?

Early one morning in February, a large crowd converged on the beautiful church in Nicomedia. They yell and curse; they rant and rave! They clench their fists and cry out curses upon the Christians!

Listen to the blows of a heavy sledgehammer bashing the large doors of the stately church! Those sledgehammer blows cause a dull, thumping echo in the large nave of the beautiful building. The wood starts cracking, and the heavy doors give way with a splintering sound. Howling with rage, the screaming mob force their way into the church building. The gang, blinded by hatred, spares nothing. They plunder everything, thoroughly destroying everything they find. But this does not cool their rage. Those brutes will not be content till they level the whole building to the ground.

They spend the whole day on that mad work of destruction. They destroy the entire building. When the sun sets that evening, nothing is left of the beautiful church in Nicomedia except a heap of rubble.

This destruction was the beginning of the worst persecution that ever took place. The emperor commanded that all the Christian churches had to be demolished. Soldiers levelled hundreds of

church buildings to the ground. The emperor commanded that it was illegal for the Christians to come together, so they could not have church services. The emperor discharged Christians from all offices, which meant no Christian could be in a government position. He dismissed all the Christian courtiers, governors, and judges. The Christian officers and commanders in the army were thrown out of office and expelled. They burned all the Christian books. They aimed to destroy the Bible!

Suddenly, Christians were thrust from the highest honourable positions into the deepest humiliation. They rapidly became the brunt of ridicule, scorn and contempt.

Finally, the emperor commanded everyone to sacrifice to the gods and the emperor. Those who refused would irrevocably receive the death sentence. The empress and her daughter, who secretly belonged to the Christians, were forced to sacrifice.

And? Did they refuse? Alas, no, they did not remain steadfast. They bowed before brute force and sacrificed.

Thousands of people who called themselves Christians fell away. Thousands returned to the pagan temples.



*Christians pleading before Diocletian.
<https://factsanddetails.com/world>*

People burned incense to the gods and the emperor, who had to be honoured as a god by everyone. True, the number of people who fell away was unprecedented, but the sincere, true Christians did *not* sacrifice! They stood firm in the deadly hours of danger. The blood of thousands of martyrs drenched the earth. The Romans invented the most horrible tortures to get true Christians to renounce their faith. What kind of tortures were they?

No, it is better not to describe that because it would probably give you nightmares. The enemies were amazed at the heroism of their victims. God only knows how they had to suffer and what they had to struggle through. But the Lord gave them strength and courage to endure the most horrible and indescribable pains and afflictions, and many joyfully entered death. The Lord again showed that He was stronger than death.

Like a brute beast, Galerius raged on ruthlessly. Entire churches filled with Christians were set on fire, and everybody inside choked in the heavy smoke or was burned alive in the roaring flames.

In Asia Minor, there was a township whose inhabitants were all Christians. The Roman soldiers surrounded the whole town and set it on fire from every side. Everyone, men and women, old and young, lost their lives. Through torture, they horribly crippled thousands and then sent them to the mines, where they dragged out their miserable life with hard labour. There were never so many martyrs as during that persecution. I could tell many more horrific stories for quite a while, but so much happened at that time that no pen could describe it.

Will the prince of darkness prevail?
Will he wipe Christianity from the earth?
No, God rules, and He shall conquer.

Diocletian suddenly died a terrible death. God summoned him before His throne of judgment. Oh, how awful it was for him to fall into the hands of the living God! Then God required all the innocent blood he had shed from his hand.

GALERIUS AND CONSTANTIUS

After Diocletian died, two emperors reigned in his place. Galerius became emperor in the East, and Constantius became emperor in the West.

Constantius was a friend of the Christians. So persecution stopped in the West, but in the East, where Galerius ruled, persecutions

continued to rage for six long, fearful years. The church continued to groan under the cruel hand of this tyrant.

Then God arose and demonstrated His power. Suddenly, the inhuman persecutor, Galerius, became seriously ill. It was not a common disease but a dreadful illness that attacked him. God's avenging hand cast him onto a terrible sickbed.

Day and night, he roared from the horrendous pain. God's holy vengeance pursued him. Galerius was at his wits' end, and he seemed to realise that the God of the Christians was punishing him, for he suddenly ordered the persecutions to stop.

Emperor Galerius commanded that it was no longer permitted to persecute the Christians!

Perhaps he hoped that God would restore him to health again. But his hope was in vain, for he did not recover. On the contrary, his sickness got worse! Moaning, in mortal fear, tossing about in pain on his bed, he asked the Christians if they would pray for him. God's almighty hand humbled him completely.

First, Galerius persecuted them with fire and sword and did everything in his power to destroy them from the earth, and later those self-same despised and scorned Christians had to pray for him!



*Flavius Constantius
"Chlorus" (c. 250 – 25
July 306), also
called **Constantius I**.
Wikipedia*

Fighting against God is not easy!
 Have you ever tried it? I am sure you would have lost that battle! Galerius also had to lose that fight. You may be sure that it must have been quite something for that proud emperor to ask for help from those despised followers of Jesus of Nazareth! But he only did it because he was driven to it by necessity.
 I do not know whether the Christians prayed for him, but God said:
 "This far, and no further."

He breathed his last breath in horrific pain, and after such terrible persecutions, the church of God finally obtained rest again.

Victoriously, Christianity survived the persecution. Thousands of pseudo-Christians had fallen away in the hour of trial. Thousands more had to make bloody sacrifices. Countless true Christians sealed their faith with their blood, yet Christianity had not perished.

Instead, God used all this to purify His church.

God *kept* His church and continues to care for His people until the last day. At times, the waters may



On the feast of the nativity of Christ in the year 302, when about 20.000 Christians had assembled in the Cathedral in Nicomedia, the emperor sent an herald into the church. He told the Christians that soldiers were surrounding the building, and that anyone who wished to leave had to offer sacrifices to the pagan Gods. Anyone who defied the emperor would perish when the soldiers set fire to the church. All those present refused to worship the idols. All 20.000 of those praying died in the fire. Wikipedia

threaten to drown us, but they will never destroy us.

But when we think of Galerius, we may say:

"Surely, there is a God Who lives.
 Who on this earth His judgement gives!"

QUESTIONS

1. What significant changes occurred in Christianity after the reign of Valerian?
2. What dangers or temptations did the young church face?
3. What is a 'pseudo-Christian'?
4. What changes came in the building of churches?
5. List the two opposing powers in the Roman empire during Diocletian's reign.
6. Why did he select co-emperors?
7. Identify Galerius.
8. List the various laws made against Christianity.
9. What laws did the emperor make to promote heathenism?
10. Did the Christians remain firm in their beliefs?
11. How did God punish Diocletian?
12. How did God punish Galerius?
13. Why did Galerius turn to the Christians for help on his deathbed?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. May a faithful Christian hold an office in government? Explain your answer.
2. Read Revelations 3. What does the Holy Spirit write about pseudo-Christians?
3. What danger lay in the building of magnificent church buildings?
4. Is a building necessary for worship services? Explain.
5. Read Hebrews 11. How were the persecuted described?
6. Explain the text: "Vengeance is mine. I will repay, says the Lord," in light of this chapter.