

The Great Persecution

HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

Timeline - Persecution Leading Up

Persecution and suffering have been a hallmark of Christianity since its inception. The Bible warns us, "In this world, you will have tribulation. But be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33 NKJV). The rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire was met with intense persecution, as foretold by Jesus Himself. This persecution intensified as the religion gained popularity.

The persecution of Christians began during the reign of Nero, the Roman emperor who ruled from 54 to 68 AD. Nero's persecution was limited to the city of Rome and was sparked by the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD. He blamed the fire on Christians, using it as an excuse to initiate a brutal persecution of the early Christian community. According to Tacitus, many Christians were arrested, tortured, and executed, and some were even used as human torches to illuminate Nero's garden parties: "Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired." (The Annals, Book XV, Chapter 44, by Cornelius Tacitus)

In the early 200s, persecution of Christians increased significantly. In 202 AD, Emperor Septimius Severus issued an edict against Christians, forbidding them from converting others or meeting for worship. This edict led to the martyrdom of many Christians, including Origen's father, St. Leonides of Alexandria, who was beheaded in 202 AD. As time went on, this persecution began to affect the entire empire. The next emperor to persecute Christians was Decius, who reigned from 249 to 251 AD. During his reign, many Christians were martyred, including St. Philopateer, "Abu-Seifen," Mercerius, and St. Cyprian, who was forced into hiding. Origen was also put in prison during this time.

The persecution of Christians reached its peak during the reign of Valerian, who ruled from 253 to 260 AD. Valerian was a determined and ruthless persecutor of Christians. He issued several edicts against them, ordering their arrest, imprisonment, torture, and execution. Many Christians were martyred during Valerian's reign, including St. Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, who was beheaded in 258 AD. Valerian himself was then captured by the Persians and never seen again. His son, Gallienus,

who became emperor in 260 AD, formally declared that Christians could worship freely, own property, and hold political office. He did so because he felt that his father's fate was a result of God's judgment.

The Calm Before the Storm

During the reign of Gallienus, the Roman Empire experienced a significant transformation. Christianity gradually gained prominence, as evidenced by the construction of numerous church buildings, cathedrals, and basilicas. Christians began to rise through the ranks of the military and government, playing increasingly influential roles.

However, the empire faced significant political instability during this period. A rapid succession of emperors marked this era, with as many as twenty-five different emperors ruling and dying within just a span of fifty years. Many of these emperors met their end through violent means, often assassinated by their own soldiers.

The vastness of the empire also posed challenges. The Persian Empire and various barbarian tribes from the outskirts slowly encroached upon Roman territory, leading to territorial losses and a decline in the economy. As the empire expanded, governing and defending its far-flung provinces became increasingly difficult.

The combination of political turmoil, military threats, and economic decline contributed to a period known as the Crisis of the Third Century. This crisis deeply affected the Roman Empire and paved the way for significant changes, including the eventual rise of Christianity and the division of the empire into eastern and western halves.

Growth of the Church

Despite the turmoil and instability that plagued the Roman Empire during the latter half of the 3rd century AD, the Christian community within its borders experienced remarkable growth and vitality. In 260 AD, there were approximately 1 million Christians scattered throughout the empire and by 300 AD this number had increased exponentially, reaching an estimated 6 million adherents. This rapid growth represented a significant proportion of the empire's population, accounting for approximately 10-15% of the entire empire.

The expansion of Christianity during this period was not limited to the lower classes or marginalized groups. Many prominent families embraced the Christian faith, and by the end of the 3rd century, there were Christian royals in the palace. Furthermore, the influence of Christianity extended beyond the palace walls and permeated every profession and social strata within the empire.

Christians could be found serving as government officials, merchants, artisans, farmers, and even soldiers.

The flourishing of Christianity during this time is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of the early Christian communities. Despite facing persecution and discrimination, they persevered and spread their message throughout the empire, transforming hearts and minds and laying the foundation for the eventual triumph of Christianity in the centuries to come.

Growing Enemies

Although Christians held many prominent places in the empire, hate for them was still growing among certain groups. Pagan intelligentsia found them ignorant, ridiculous, and appalling. Anybody with financial interests in pagan worship, such as priests, priestesses, augurs, diviners, fortune-tellers, and statue-makers, loathed them. Many in the army and government suspected them to be disloyal, for refusing to participate in Empire celebrations where offerings were given to the idols.

The Rise of Diocletian

The year 284 AD marked a pivotal moment in the history of the Roman Empire. Amidst the turmoil surrounding the economy and public safety, Diocletian emerged as the new emperor, ushering in a period of profound transformation. He implemented the Four Emperor System. At the core of the Four Emperor System was the division of the empire into four distinct regions: east and west, further subdivided into north and south. Each region would be governed by a senior emperor, titled "Augustus," and a junior emperor assistant, titled "Caesar." This arrangement allowed for more efficient administration and quicker decision-making, as each emperor could focus on a smaller portion of the empire.

The Caesars were responsible for reporting to their respective Augusti, who in turn maintained regular communication with each other to formulate common policies. This collaborative approach helped preserve the security and unity of the empire. Furthermore, Diocletian established four capitals near the frontiers of the empire, strategically positioning them to facilitate rapid response to potential attacks. During that time, it was unprecedented that an emperor would share power with anybody else, let alone three other emperors. In addition to the Four Emperor System, he also reformed the tax code, reorganized the army, creating smaller, more mobile units that could respond effectively to threats.

Diocletian's reign marked a period of relative stability and prosperity for the Roman Empire. The Four Emperor System, in particular, proved to be a successful model of governance, providing a framework for effective administration and military defense. Despite its eventual demise, the Four Emperor System left a lasting legacy on the Roman Empire. It paved the way for future imperial structures and influenced the development of political systems throughout history.

Unintended Byproducts

With the empire now divided, cultural and linguistic diversity flourished. In the days before the split, all constituents were united by a shared understanding of Greek and Latin, facilitating open communication throughout the empire. However, as the East and West became distinct entities, the use of Latin in the East and Greek in the West began to decline. This linguistic divide further emphasized the growing cultural differences between the two halves of the empire.

Moreover, the division of the empire resulted in the establishment of four emperors, each with their own unique perspectives and agendas. Diocletian, the driving force behind the division, aspired to preserve the empire's prosperity and ensure the well-being of all citizens, regardless of religious beliefs. He extended tolerance to both Christians and Pagans, seeking to create a harmonious society.

In contrast, Diocletian's Caesar, Galerius, harbored a deep-seated animosity towards Christians. His disdain stemmed from several factors, including his belief that the Christian faith undermined traditional Roman values, his perception of Christians as a threat to the empire's unity, and his personal resentment towards the growing influence of Christianity. Galerius's anti-Christian sentiments would later manifest in the form of widespread persecution, culminating in the Diocletianic Persecution, a dark chapter in the history of early Christianity.

The Seeds of Dissent

Galerius, a fervent believer in the Roman gods, harbored intense animosity towards the Christians within the army and imperial court. He perceived their distinct beliefs and practices as a threat to the traditional Roman values and traditions. Driven by his desire to restore the glory of the Roman Empire, Diocletian sought to appease the gods and ensure their favor, believing that this would bring prosperity and success to the empire. However, the Christians refused to partake in the religious rituals and sacrifices honoring the Roman deities.

The tension between Galerius and the Christians escalated, and eventually, Diocletian yielded to Galerius's persistent demands. Galerius was granted free rein over the army, and he wasted no time

in implementing his plan to eliminate the Christian presence within its ranks. Galerius devised a ruthless ultimatum for the Christian soldiers, forcing them to choose between sacrificing to the Roman gods or resigning from the military. This ultimatum carried grave consequences, as resigning from the army meant forfeiting the generous benefits and privileges they had earned through their service, including their pensions, government-gifted parcels of land, and lifetime incomes.

Despite the severe repercussions, many Christian soldiers chose to resign rather than compromise their faith. They were unwilling to renounce their beliefs and participate in rituals that they considered to be idolatrous. This mass resignation of Christian soldiers left Galerius incensed, but it also revealed the depth of their conviction and the strength of their faith.

The Climax

In 299 AD, Diocletian defeated the Persians in a decisive battle. To commemorate this triumph, he organized an elaborate celebration in the city of Antioch, where he planned to hold sacrifices and perform divinations to honor the Roman gods and seek their blessings. The festivities began with a grand procession of priests, augurs (responsible for reading omens from the gods) and other religious officials, who carried sacred objects and offerings to the temples. They meticulously examined the entrails of sacrificed animals, seeking signs of divine favor or warning. No matter how many times they tried, they could not decipher the entrails, leaving them unable to provide the emperor with the guidance he sought. This was an embarrassing disruption of what was supposed to be a huge celebration.

Diocletian demanded an explanation from the augurs, who told him they noticed Christians from the emperor's own court making the sign of the cross during the ceremony. According to the augurs, this act of Christian devotion had blocked their ability to communicate with the gods. Diocletian was furious and demanded punishment for the Christians in the palace. The first blood was shed, and Galerius, Diocletian's ambitious co-ruler, seized the opportunity to convince the emperor to extend this persecution Empire-wide.

Diocletian, however, was hesitant to plunge the empire into turmoil once again. He had witnessed the devastating effects of previous persecutions and was wary of causing further unrest. Nevertheless, pressured by Galerius and his own desire to assert his authority, he compromised. He sent a delegation to consult the oracle of Apollo at Miletus, seeking divine guidance on how to proceed. The oracle's response, which would shape the fate of countless Christians in the years to come, was yet to be revealed.

Famous Words

In the ancient world, pagan priestesses held a significant role in religious practices. They were revered as intermediaries between the divine and mortal realms, capable of channeling messages from the gods and goddesses. One such priestess, known for her profound connection to the divine, once posed a question to the gods. The response she received was both enigmatic and fateful: "the 'just on earth' have silenced the oracles." The priestess and her fellow pagans were puzzled by this cryptic message. They pondered its meaning, seeking to understand who these "just on earth" were and why they would want to silence the oracles. Some interpreted the message as a warning that a new force was emerging, one that would challenge the traditional pagan beliefs and practices.

Word of the priestess's prophecy spread throughout the Roman Empire, reaching the ears of the emperor, Diocletian. His advisors, eager to maintain the supremacy of the Roman gods, interpreted the message as a reference to the Christians. They believed that the Christians, with their monotheistic faith and rejection of pagan idols, posed a threat to the established religious order. Diocletian, influenced by his advisors, embarked upon one of the most severe persecutions in the history of the church, known as "The Great Persecution." This persecution was particularly intense in Egypt, a region that fell directly under Diocletian's allotted territory. For the Egyptians, this persecution lasted from 299-311 AD, first under Diocletian, then Galerius, and finally Maximianus.

During this time, Christians in Egypt faced unimaginable horrors. They were hunted down, arrested, tortured, and martyred. Their churches were destroyed, and their sacred texts were burned. The persecution was so severe that it threatened to wipe out Christianity in Egypt entirely. Despite the relentless persecution, the Christians in Egypt refused to renounce their faith. They clung to their beliefs with unwavering determination, inspired by the example of their martyred brothers and sisters. Their resilience and steadfastness in the face of adversity would eventually prove to be a turning point in the history of Christianity in Egypt.

The Four Edicts

The Roman Empire's edicts against Christians marked a dramatic shift in their treatment across its vast territories. Governors and mayors were granted the authority to handle Christians as they saw fit, leading to varying levels of persecution. A series of edicts, known as the First, Second, Third, and Fourth Edicts, were issued, each building upon the previous one in terms of severity and marking a progressive escalation in the persecution of Christians.

The edicts against Christians had profound and far-reaching consequences. They resulted in widespread suffering, with countless believers enduring torture, imprisonment, and death. Christian communities were decimated, and their places of worship destroyed.

1st Edict: February 23, 303 AD, all Christian buildings in the empire were to be destroyed. The Christian basilica across from the imperial palace was destroyed. Sacred Scriptures and liturgical vessels were seized and meetings were forbidden. All Christians holding office in the military or government, were either sacrificed to the gods or were imprisoned, persecuted, and killed. Christian freedmen would revert back to essentially being slaves.

2nd Edict: all Christian clergy, regardless of rank, were to be imprisoned. They say there were so many bishops, priests, deacons, subdeacons, lectors, and exorcists in prison, there was no room for common criminals. Due to the influx, Diocletian gave them the option of sacrificing to the idols, or being tortured and killed. This edict was ignored by the Caesar of the West, Constantius, who ruled over Gaul and Britain. All the other emperors acted on these edicts with vehemence. However, there were so many to be dealt with, sometimes they were given certificates anyway just to lessen the load on the prisons and executioners. These certificates falsely attested that the clergy had complied with the edict, allowing them to escape punishment.

3rd Edict: Diocletian, in an attempt to quell the growing Christian population within the Roman Empire, issued the Third Edict. This edict offered pardon to any Christian who renounced their faith and performed sacrifices to the Roman gods. However, very few Christians took up this offer, as most remained steadfast in their beliefs.

4th Edict: Seeing that the Third Edict had failed to achieve its desired effect, Diocletian issued the Fourth Edict, which was far more severe. This edict demanded that all inhabitants of the Roman Empire, regardless of their religious beliefs, were to offer sacrifices to the Roman gods or face severe consequences. Those who refused would be subjected to torture and, ultimately, death. This edict marked the beginning of a systematic persecution of Christians throughout the Roman Empire, resulting in the deaths of countless believers.

The edict issued by the Roman Empire marked a turning point in the treatment of Christians throughout its vast territories. Governors and mayors were granted the authority to deal with Christians as they deemed fit, resulting in varying degrees of persecution across the empire. The eastern regions experienced the most severe oppression. We hear of many stories of famous martyrs who were once soldiers in the Roman Empire. Their proximity to the emperors and the widespread circulation of their stories ensured that their martyrdom resonated across the empire. St. George, St.

Mina, St. Theodore are just a few examples of these courageous soldiers. So many people became Christians as they witnessed others giving up their lives, that it enraged the emperors, who, in turn, intensified their persecutions. This is the reason we call the blood of the martyrs the “Seed of Faith,” as their sacrifices contributed to the growth and strengthening of the Christian church. Unfortunately, entire cities such as Akhmim in Egypt and Phrygia in modern-day Turkey were martyred.

The Fall of Diocletian

In 304 AD, the Roman Emperor Diocletian's reign was marked by a severe persecution of Christians. His hatred for them was so intense that he vowed to continue the persecutions until the blood of the martyrs reached his horse's knees. The persecution began in 303 AD and was particularly brutal during the first two years. It is estimated that nearly one million Coptic Christians alone were martyred in 303 and 304 AD. Christians were subjected to various forms of torture and execution, including beheading, crucifixion, and burning at the stake.

According to tradition, Diocletian's downfall was brought about by divine intervention. While riding his horse on a campaign against the Christians, he was suddenly struck with illness. Both he and the horse fell to the ground, and as they did, the horse's knees touched a pool of blood from recently martyred Christians. This fulfilled Diocletian's wish, but it also marked the beginning of his downfall. The illness caused Diocletian to lose his sight and sanity. He became increasingly paranoid and cruel, and his rule became even more oppressive. In 304 AD, he was forced to retire due to his deteriorating health. He died a year later in 305 AD, leaving behind a legacy of tyranny and persecution.

The story of Diocletian's downfall serves as a powerful reminder of the consequences of religious intolerance and the ultimate triumph of good over evil. His persecution of Christians failed to extinguish the faith, and the Church continued to grow and flourish in spite of his efforts. Diocletian's reign ended in disgrace, and his name became synonymous with cruelty and oppression.

The Rise of Christianity

The rise of King Constantine to power stands as a pivotal moment that forever altered the course of Christianity. The year 306 AD marked a turning point as Constantine ascended to the throne of the Western Roman Empire upon the death of his father, Constantius. Notably, Constantine's Christian half-sister, Anastasia, played a crucial role in his tolerant stance toward Christians. Through his declarations, Constantine granted religious freedom throughout his territories, setting a precedent that would have lasting implications.

Meanwhile, in the Eastern Roman Empire, Maxentius ruled as co-emperor. Recognizing the popularity of Christianity in the west, Maxentius sought to maintain his power by imitating Constantine's policy of religious tolerance. However, ambition consumed Maxentius, and he harbored dreams of expanding his empire by declaring war on Constantine. The stage was set for a clash of titans, with Maxentius boasting a formidable army of 100,000 troops, while Constantine commanded a comparatively smaller force of 40,000.

On the eve of the decisive battle, Constantine had a profound dream. In the depths of slumber, he received divine instruction to adopt the sign of the Cross (represented by the Greek symbols P and X) as his battle standard. The angel of the Lord appeared to him in a vision, uttering the prophetic words: "Make a sign for yourself like that sign which you had seen, and with it you shall conquer your enemies." In contrast, Maxentius, misled by his reliance on pagan idols, received erroneous advice that led him and his army to a false sense of security. Constantine, emboldened by the divine revelation, launched a surprise attack while Maxentius and his forces slumbered. The result was a resounding victory for Constantine, who emerged as the undisputed ruler of half the Roman Empire.

Constantine's triumph over Maxentius marked a watershed moment for Christianity. His embrace of the faith, coupled with his military prowess, paved the way for the eventual legalization of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire under the Edict of Milan in 313 AD. Constantine's conversion had a profound impact on the development of Christianity, transforming it from a persecuted sect to a recognized and influential religion.

The Edict of Milan, issued jointly by Constantine and Licinius, was a landmark document that granted freedom of religion to all citizens of the Roman Empire, including Christians. The edict declared that Christians should be allowed to practice their faith without fear of persecution, and it also restored property that had been confiscated from Christians during previous persecutions. The Edict of Milan was a major turning point in the history of Christianity, and it marked the beginning of a new era of tolerance and understanding between Christians and pagans.

The edict was issued at a time when Christianity was still a relatively small religion, but it was rapidly growing in popularity. Constantine's conversion and the Edict of Milan helped to accelerate the growth of Christianity, and within a few centuries, it would become the dominant religion in the Roman Empire.

Founded on the blood of the martyrs

In recognition of the profound impact of persecution of Christians throughout history, the church created a unique calendar that stands as a testament to its enduring faith and resilience. The Coptic calendar's starting point is deliberately set to the year 284 AD, coinciding with the reign of the Roman Emperor Diocletian. "But most wonderful of all is the fact that we who have consecrated ourselves to Him, honor Him not only with our voices and with the sound of words, but also with complete elevation of soul, so that we choose to give testimony unto Him rather than to preserve our own lives." (Eusebius of Caesarea)



Review Questions

1. Christians lived peacefully in the Roman Empire under Diocletian.
 - a. True
 - b. False**
2. Galerius spent his whole life persecuting Christians.
 - a. True
 - b. False**
3. Galerius and Diocletian both fell sick.
 - a. True**
 - b. False
4. How many edicts were there?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 4**
5. Which Caesar was more lenient on Christians?
 - a. Diocletian
 - b. Constantius**
 - c. Galerius
 - d. Nero Caesar
6. Who was the first to persecute Christians in Rome?
 - a. Nero**
 - b. Diocletian
 - c. Claudius
 - d. Domitian
7. What year does the new Coptic calendar start?
 - a. 284 AD**
 - b. 285 AD
 - c. 286 AD
 - d. 287 AD
8. What led to Diocletian's hatred of Christians?

- a. Their refusal to worship the Roman gods
 - b. Their support of his political rivals
 - c. They were making the sign of the cross and blocked divinations to their gods**
 - d. Their refusal to pay taxes
9. What was Constantine's dream about?
- a. Meeting Christ
 - b. Talking to an angel
 - c. Taking the sign of the cross to battle**
 - d. All of the above
10. What did the oracle of Apollo say?
- a. "Know thyself."
 - b. "Nothing in excess."
 - c. "The unexamined life is not worth living."
 - d. "The 'just on earth' have silenced the oracles."**

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