



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)

Lesson 2 – The First Conflicts between Christianity and the State

During the time of Jesus and His apostles, the Roman Empire was the ruling power in Europe, northern Africa, and western Asia. God had already foretold through the prophet Daniel that it would be during the days of the Roman Empire that God would establish His kingdom. The Roman Empire was the **“fourth kingdom”** (Daniel 2:40) that followed the three kingdoms of Babylon, Persia, and Macedonia. Daniel told King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon: **“The fourth kingdom shall be as strong as iron, inasmuch as iron breaks in pieces and shatters everything; and like iron that crushes, that kingdom will break in pieces and crush all the others”** (Daniel 2:40). But then Daniel went on: **“In the days of these kings (of the fourth kingdom) the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever”** (Daniel 2:44).

God’s prophecy was fulfilled when Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the reign of the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus. Caesar Augustus (also known as Octavian) was followed on the Roman throne by Tiberius, during whose reign Jesus carried out His ministry and completed His work by dying on the cross for the sins of mankind and rose again victorious over sin and death on the third day. Winfred Schaller says: “Unnoticed by the emperor (Tiberius) a kingdom began within his empire, a kingdom which would never end. Jesus was crucified with the help of Pilate, the governor, who naturally feared the emperor when the Jews told him they would become informers against him. But Jesus rose from the grave and the whole world was declared justified, the most important event in the history of man after his fall” (Winfred Schaller, Sr.: *Schaller’s Ancient History*, Volume 4, p. 7).

When Jesus’ apostles and their fellow-believers began their task of evangelizing the world, their world was under the authority of the Roman emperors Tiberius (14-37 AD), Caligula (37-41 AD), Claudius (41-54 AD), and Nero (54-68 AD). During much of this time the Roman government protected the Christians from those Jewish leaders who wanted to bring them down. The apostle Paul himself was a Roman citizen, and his Roman citizenship helped him escape from those who wanted to kill him.

But as the Christian Gospel traveled throughout the Roman Empire and the Holy Spirit worked through that Gospel to change hearts, the Church of Christ grew in numbers and influence. A great fire destroyed much of the city of Rome in June of the year 64 AD. Emperor Nero himself was suspected of starting the fire. To escape blame for this act, Nero blamed the Christians in Rome for this crime. The Christians became a handy target for the

anger of the Roman people since they did not join in the usual pagan idolatry. Tacitus, a heathen Roman historian, wrote as follows: “Nero blamed the Christians, who are hated for their abominations, and punished them with refined cruelty... Before killing the Christians, Nero used them to amuse the people. Some were dressed in furs, to be killed by dogs. Others were crucified. Still others were set on fire early in the night, so that they might illumine it” (Justo Gonzalez: *The Story of Christianity*, Part 1, p. 35).

Around this same time the apostles Peter and Paul were killed. Peter was crucified, as Jesus had foretold (John 21:18-19). Paul was beheaded, and not crucified, since he was a Roman citizen. When Paul wrote his second letter to Timothy, he expected to be put to death for his testimony.

A few years after this first Roman persecution, another prophecy of Jesus was fulfilled. Many times Jesus had said that the city of Jerusalem would be destroyed along with its temple. For example, just a few days before He was crucified, Jesus spoke the words recorded in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21. When some of His disciples pointed to the beauty of the Jerusalem temple, Jesus said: **“These things which you see – the days will come in which not one stone shall be left upon another that shall not be thrown down”** (Luke 21:6). Jesus also gave His disciples a sign that would let them know when they should flee from Jerusalem to escape the disaster. He said: **“When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those who are in the midst of her depart”** (Luke 21:20-21).

Those who believed Jesus’ words obeyed His instructions and escaped to the city of Pella on the other side of the Jordan River. But those who remained in Jerusalem experienced one disaster after another: starvation, civil war, the assault from the Roman legions surrounding the city, the burning of the temple, the leveling of the city. All of this took place as Jesus had foretold. He said to the weeping women on His way to the cross: **“Do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For indeed the days are coming in which they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, wombs that never bore, and breasts which never nursed!’ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us!’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us!’”** (Luke 23: 28-30). Josephus, a Jewish historian, was a witness of these events and wrote about them in great detail.

The Roman emperors who put down the Jewish rebellion and destroyed Jerusalem were Vespasian (69-79) and Titus (79-81). These emperors took no strong measures to harm Christians. But Emperor Domitian (81-96) persecuted both Jews and Christians (who were often considered a sect of the Jewish religion). Christians were called atheists because they did not worship the Roman gods and because the God they did worship was invisible. Some Christians in Rome were executed because of their confession of Christ.

In the province of Asia (Asia Minor) the apostle John was exiled to the island of Patmos because of his confession of Christ. It was in Patmos that John received the visions from God

that he recorded in the book of Revelation, which was very likely the last book of the New Testament to be written.

Questions:

1. According to God's word to Daniel when would God set up His eternal kingdom?
2. What is the fourth kingdom that Daniel mentions, and how is it described in the Bible?
3. How did God set up His kingdom in the days of Octavian and Tiberius?
4. How did the government help Paul escape from the Jews who hated him?
5. Why did Emperor Nero accuse the Christians of starting the fire in Rome?
6. How were the Christians in Rome persecuted by Emperor Nero?
7. Which apostles lost their lives in Rome because of their faith in Christ?
8. How was Jesus' prophecy concerning Jerusalem fulfilled?
9. Why were Christians sometimes called atheists?
10. What happened to the apostle John on the island of Patmos?