



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

Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)

Lesson 9 – The Last Great Persecution and the Sudden Change

In the last half of the third century Christians were not severely persecuted by the Roman authorities. They hoped that when Diocletian became emperor in 284 AD this lack of severe persecution would continue, especially since Diocletian's wife and daughter were themselves Christians. But the opposite occurred. Under Diocletian the Christians endured the most severe persecution of all.

Diocletian reorganized the empire so that it was ruled by himself and three others: Maximian, Galerius, and Constantius Chlorus, with two ruling in the East, and two in the West. At this time, Christians were divided on whether Christians should serve in the imperial army. Some military leaders feared that Christians would desert in time of actual warfare. For these reasons, a decree was made that all Christians should be expelled from military service. For similar reasons another edict was enacted that removed all Christians from government positions. Then followed a command calling for the burning of all Christian buildings and books. Those who refused to comply were tortured and even put to death.

When fires broke out in the emperor's palace, the Christians were blamed. Diocletian then gave the order that all Christian leaders were to be arrested and that all Christians must sacrifice to the Roman gods. In order to avoid cruel torture and death, many Christians obeyed the imperial edict. Those who refused were tortured and killed. Others tried to escape. Some tried to save copies of Scripture and other Christian materials by taking them out of the empire altogether.

Here is a report regarding the persecution in Alexandria in Egypt from Eusebius, a church historian who lived during this time (see lesson 11): "The Christ-bearing martyrs endured suffering and torture devices of every kind... Some hit them with clubs, some with rods, others with scourges and straps, and still others with whips... Some, with hands tied behind them, were hung from the gallows and all their limbs were pulled apart by machines. Then, as they lay helplessly, their tormenters were ordered to use the instruments of torture not only on their sides, as with murderers, but also on their bellies, legs, and cheeks. Others were suspended by one hand from a colonnade and hauled up with excruciating pain in their joints and limbs. Others were lashed to pillars, facing them, with their feet off the ground and their body weight pulling the ropes tighter and tighter... Some died under torture... Some recovered... But when they were ordered to choose between touching the abominable sacrifice and gaining an accursed freedom, or not sacrificing and incurring death, without

hesitation they went to their death gladly” (Eusebius: *The Church History* [Paul Maier edition], pp. 299-300).

After Diocletian retired, Galerius became the chief in command, and the persecution continued as severely as before. But in 311 AD Galerius reversed his stand and said: “Moved by our mercy to be benevolent towards all, it has seemed just to us to extend to them (the Christians) our pardon, and allow them to be Christians once again, and once again gather in their assemblies, as long as they do not interfere with public order” (Gonzalez: *The Story of Christianity*, Part 1, p. 106). Galerius died five days after making this proclamation.

Soon thereafter, Constantine, the son of Constantius Chlorus, gained control of the entire Roman Empire by defeating all others who aspired to power. He gave credit for his victories to the Christian God and gave orders to place a Christian symbol on the shields of his soldiers. Constantine met with his partner Licinius at Milan in 313 AD and together they decreed that the persecution of Christians must come to an end. Constantine became known as “Constantine the Great”.

Questions:

1. Why did people hope that Emperor Diocletian would be kind to the Christians?
2. What led Diocletian and his partners to ban Christians from the military?
3. What orders were given concerning Christian books and Christian buildings?
4. Which sin did many tortured Christians refuse to commit?
5. What decrees were made in 311 and 313 that brought an end to persecution?
6. In what way was Constantine the Great the answer to many prayers?
7. What did Jesus say about persecution in Matthew 5:11-12?
8. Should Christians persecute those of other religions? Why or why not?