



*The Spreading Influence of Christianity*

—— AD 450 ——

## CHAPTER II



# The Roman Empire Opposes Christ and Falls (AD 70—AD 476)

*“And in the days of these kings 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)*

**O**n June 26, AD 363, the Roman Caesar, Julian the Apostate, breathed his last words on the Samarra battle field (in modern-day Iraq): “Oh Galilean, thou hast conquered!”

These words summarized the previous 300 years of Western history. For a short two years, the Emperor Julian had attempted to restore pagan culture into the Roman world. The Emperor Constantine had ended public animal and human sacrifice in the empire some thirty years earlier after receiving the Christian faith. He banned the practice of married men consorting with concubines. He legislated against the killing of infants by exposure and parricide (the killing of one’s own family, including the elderly). By the fourth century, it was obvious that the world would never be the same after the coming of the Son of God.

The clash between Christ and Caesar was palpable in these early centuries. Prior to the rise of Constantine, the Roman Emperors would brook no rivals to their claim of absolute rule. They allowed for the worship of many gods across their dominions, so long as Caesar was acknowledged as the final and ultimate sovereign. Augustus Caesar and his successors viewed themselves as the “savior” of the world. However, the Apostles and Christian believers rejected this prideful, empty notion, as Peter preached it, “Nor is there salvation in any other [than Jesus Christ], for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

The Empire proceeded to fight against Jesus Christ by persecuting His people, and Rome lost. Throughout the Empire’s far-flung provinces, this Church kept growing and Jesus’ people continued to disciple the world in line with His Great Commission. During the terrible persecutions that attended, the Church became more firmly established, and the Christians grew more committed to the true faith. And, Spirit-filled, bold missionaries took the Gospel to the far reaches of the Empire. It was a marvelous time for the Church.

#### ❖ ISSUES IN FOCUS ❖

### Christ’s Exclusivity vs. Religious Cult or Emperor Worship

Polycarp, a personal disciple of the Apostle John and the pastor of the church of Smyrna, was a mighty man of God who accepted martyrdom rather than acknowledge Caesar’s deity and lordship. The police captain who escorted him to the stake, wishing to spare the aging man, appealed to Polycarp, “Why, what harm is there in saying ‘Caesar is Lord’ and offering incense and saving yourself?” Polycarp refused to comply. In the arena, the Proconsul of Asia urged him also, “Have respect for your old age, swear by the fortune of Caesar. Repent! Swear, and I will set thee at liberty, reproach Christ!” To which Polycarp bravely replied, “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury; how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?”

## The Debauched and Dimming ‘Grandeur’ of Rome

Rome struggled for many years to maintain its former glory. Corrupt emperors like Nero (AD 54-68), Hadrian (AD 117- 138), Elagabalus (AD 218-222), and Carus (AD 282 -283) were known for their immoral lifestyles. They were not content to marry a woman and be faithful to her in the marriage. Instead, these powerful emperors broke God’s Seventh Commandment, “You shall not commit adultery” (Ex. 20:12), in the most egregious ways. As with most pagan rulers, it was common for the Caesars to murder their own family members. Tiberius killed his stepson, Agrippa; and Nero murdered his own mother and his wife, for example.

## The Games

The gladiatorial “games” were a big part of Roman life—another example of what the world looks like without the influence of Jesus. Words cannot express the horrible degradation of human life that went on in these terrible games. The blood of thousands of poor victims soaked the sands of the arena. And, it wasn’t just the Colosseum in Rome that conducted the games. At least 230 amphitheaters have been discovered in ancient cities around the old Roman world.



Gladiator Mosaic

Up to 3,000 men would fight mock battles, floating in boats in an arena filled with water, to the blood-lust excitement of the spectators. One staged battle in a nearby lake in Rome involved 19,000 combatants.

The first gladiatorial competition where men fought each other to the death before a live crowd took place in 264 BC. To commemorate the death of his father, Julius Caesar held a competition involving 640 gladiators. Animals were killed by the thousands, and animals killed their thousands. The Roman orator, Cicero, reports that one lion killed at least 200 men in the arena. Life was cheap in Rome.







*The Christian Martyrs' Last Prayer*, by Jean-Léon Gérôme



❖ ISSUES IN FOCUS ❖

## Christians Made Scapegoats for All Ills

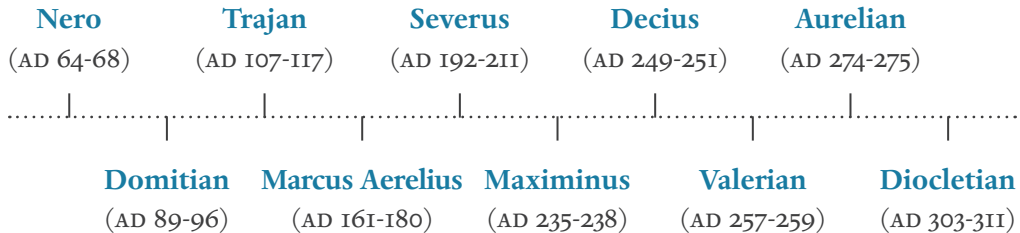
The early church father, Tertullian (c. 155-244 AD), complained of the persecutions that fell upon the Christians. He wrote, “The term ‘conspiracy’ should not be applied to us but rather to those who plot to foment hatred against decent and worthy people, those who shout for the blood of the innocent and plead forsooth in justification of their hatred the foolish excuse that the Christians are to blame for every public disaster and every misfortune that befalls the people. If the Tiber rises to the walls, if the Nile fails to rise and flood the fields, if the sky withholds its rain, if there is earthquake or famine or plague, straightway the cry arises: ‘The Christians to the lions!’”

Thousands of Christians died in these public arenas, killed by men and beasts. In the end, however, the life of Jesus prevailed. As the story goes, a Christian monk named Telemachus was sickened by the killings and leaped into action. He climbed into the amphitheater in the middle of the games and began to preach against the idolatry and the pagan games. He was stoned to death. But Emperor Honorius was so impressed with the man’s faith that he put a final end to the games on January 1, AD 404.

## The Persecutions that Followed Expansion

One of the patterns seen throughout history as the kingdom of God expands around the world, is the rise of Christian persecution. Wherever the church is growing, and wherever the seeds are planted and germinating, persecution becomes the fertilizer to nurture added growth. This is the experience of the church in Korea and China in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The same thing is happening in the Middle East today. And such was the case during the early years of Christianity. As the early Church exploded on the scene in the first-century Roman world, intense persecution followed for several hundred years. By the sheer percentages of those believers who were martyred, the most severe persecutions in the history of the Christian church came in the Roman Empire between AD 64 and AD 313.

Over 100,000 Christians are estimated to have been killed during these ten major persecutions:



The first great persecution occurred in the wake of the Great Fire of Rome in AD 64. Roman historians report that the Emperor Nero ordered the blaze and then blamed the Christians for it. The historian Tacitus records:

*“ . . . to get rid of this rumor, Nero set up as the culprits and punished with the utmost refinement of cruelty a class hated for their abominations, who are commonly called Christians. . . . Besides being put to death they were made to serve as objects of amusement; they were clad in the hides of beasts and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified, others set on fire to serve to illuminate the night when daylight failed. Nero had thrown open his grounds for the display, and was putting on a show in the circus, where he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or drove about in his chariot. All this gave rise to a feeling of pity, even toward men whose guilt merited the most exemplary punishment; for it was felt that they were being destroyed not for the public good but to gratify the cruelty of an individual.”*

The last great attempt by Rome to purge the Church—known to history as the “Great Persecution” (AD 303-311)—occurred during Emperor Diocletian’s reign, just prior to Constantine’s ascent to power. Not only were many believers brutally murdered, but Christian books (including the Scriptures) and church buildings were burned on a large scale.



✠ ISSUES IN FOCUS ✠

## An Early Official Approval of Persecution

In AD 112, Pliny the Younger, the Roman governor over Bithynia, wrote to Emperor Trajan, complaining about the Christians who “were wont, on a stated day, to meet together before it was light, and to sing a hymn to Christ, as to a god, alternately. . . in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished.” Pliny was seeking official approval for his executions of these Christians. Emperor Trajan’s response is telling: “You have followed the correct procedure in deciding the cases of those who have been charged with being Christians. . . If they be accused and convicted, they are to be punished; but with this caution, that he who denies himself to be a Christian, and makes it plain that he is not so by supplicating to our gods, although he had been so formerly, may be allowed pardon, upon his repentance.”

Try as they might, the Roman authorities could not stamp out Christianity. Each persecution added to the faith, the missionary zeal, and the numbers of disciples among the Christian churches throughout the Empire.

The Apostles and their successors had appointed “elders in every city” (Titus 1:5; Acts 14:23), and these churches continued to gain strength and numbers as the wrath of Rome came down. Many of the Church leaders of these early centuries gave their life as martyrs, including Ignatius of Antioch (c. AD 108), Polycarp of Smyrna (AD 156), and Cyprian of Carthage (AD 258).

With these leaders came the Christian apologists who courageously appealed to the Roman authorities, in an attempt to vindicate the virtues of the Christian faith. Justin Martyr (AD 100-165) addressed his First Apology (the Greek word for “defense”) directly to Roman Emperor Antoninus and his Second Apology to the Roman Senate. He and six of his students were later tried by the Roman prefect,

Junius Rusticus, and executed.

Another great apologist of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century was Tertullian of Carthage (c. 155-240), who penned a detailed defense of Christianity to the Roman magistrates in AD 197. After defending Christians against a host of unjust charges, he wrote these memorable words to Rome's civil powers regarding the Church's massive growth in the face of persecution:

*"...the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church. . . . We are of yesterday, and yet we have filled all your places; your cities, islands, villages, townships, assemblies, your very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum; we leave you only your temples. We can count your armies; the Christians of one province are more numerous."*

✠ ISSUES IN FOCUS ✠

### Christ's Wisdom vs. the Philosophy of the Greeks

A number of the early church fathers expressed strong opposition to the ideas of heathen philosophers (that governed the thinking and the politics of the Romans and the Greeks). Tertullian, for example asked the question, "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?"

## What Was Going on in the Rest of the World?

Between AD 220 and AD 589, the Chinese Empire largely disintegrated into warring factions. Most empires do not last very long, because God brings them down for their arrogance and wickedness (Isa. 40:17-24; Jer. 13:9-11; 48:42). Just as the Lord brought the Tower of Babel to an end and scattered the tribes, He does the same thing to these giant empires throughout history that vaunt their power and refuse to serve the true and living God.

During this time, one of the most devastating wars in all of human history occurred. It was called the "Three Kingdoms War" in which as many as 40 million people lost their lives. These fatalities accounted for as much as 70% of the Chinese



*The Tower of Babel, by Pieter Bruegel the Elder*

population.<sup>1</sup> For comparison's sake, World War II was the most devastating war in the last 200 years. The nations involved in that great war lost about 80 million people, or 3.5% of their population, due to casualties in combat, along with war-related diseases and famine.<sup>2</sup>

Let us remember that God is in total control over nations that enter into these devastating wars. Consider the words of Psalm 46:

*“Come, behold the works of the Lord, Who has made desolations in the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariot in the fire.” (Psalm 46:8-9)*

## India and the Rise of Buddhism

A Nepalese man named Siddhartha Gautama was born in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC and became a teacher of a new religion called “Buddhism.” The religion did not take hold right away in India. However, a King named Asoka gained control over most

of India around 260 BC, and turned to Buddhism to salve his conscience for all the killing he had done. He became an enthusiastic advocate of the new religion, spreading it as far as Greece and Sri Lanka. During the Shunga Dynasty (between c. 185 and 73 BC), political leaders rejected the Buddhist religion and hundreds of monasteries were destroyed or fell into disrepair. Between AD 320 and 550, Buddhism once again developed a stronghold in India under the Gupta Dynasty. It was during these years that India developed engineering, science, art, literature, and mathematics. Tremendous works of architecture and sculpture were created during this period.

The Mahayana Buddhist writings were translated into Chinese between AD 178 and 189. Buddhist monks took the religion into Korea around AD 372, and then off to Japan in the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

The Buddhist religion is centered around the idea of suffering. Regrettably, Buddhism does not admit the cause of suffering to be sin against God. Instead, this religion teaches that desiring things is the cause of suffering. They try to fix man's problems by just meditating or thinking and by good moral conduct.



Statue of Buddha



Buddhism is a sad example of how the world thinks. Satan creates diversions by getting us to focus on the wrong things. Buddhists ignore sin and guilt by pointing at suffering as the problem. After all their meditation and good moral living, they never solve the problem of suffering and death. Only Jesus Christ, the Son of God, can treat these woes. Jesus fixes the ultimate problem with us, and that is our sin and our broken relationship with God.

## What Christ Was Doing to Build His Church

While empires were rising and falling and false religions were failing to solve man's problems, the Lord Jesus Christ set out to build His Church. His missionaries went far and wide, taking the Gospel to the outermost bounds of the Roman Empire, beginning in pagan Gaul.

Julius Caesar fought the Gallic Wars between 58 BC and 50 BC, winning a decisive battle at Alesia in which the Romans gained control of Gaul. This territory included all of modern day France, Belgium, and parts of Switzerland. An estimated one million people were killed in the conflict, another million were enslaved, leaving an estimated three million of the Gallic population. In common with most pagan tribes, the Gauls were animists, worshiping animals (especially the boar); and they were headhunters, nailing the heads of their conquered enemies to their walls. Their Druid priests were known for making animal and human sacrifices to the gods.

To this tribe came the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Church tradition sources point to Polycarp (pastor of Smyrna), as the first to gain a vision for mission work in Gaul. Somewhere around AD 130-140, he commissioned a man named Benigno to the mission work. Teaming up with two elders and a deacon, they boarded a ship near Smyrna, and sailed around the southern tip of Italy, shipwrecking off the island of Corsica. By God's good providence, they survived, and caught another ship to Marseilles in Southern Gaul (France). Benigno traveled about Gaul, performing miracles and preaching the Gospel. The son of a Roman Senator named Symphorianus was converted under his preaching. In AD 178, Symphorianus was martyred for his faith in the city of Autun (in central Gaul). Benigno himself was taken by the Roman authorities in the city of Epagny (about 20 miles south of Geneva, Switzerland). Upon his utter refusal to make sacrifice to the Caesar (or worship the state), he was beat to death with iron bars—another martyr to seed the church of Jesus Christ.

Pothinus was the first recognized pastor to the churches up the Rhone River in Gaul. Some time during the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century, Pothinus planted the first churches in Lyon and Vienne. As the church grew, the resistance intensified, because the devil does not like to see his house robbed. Christians were shut out of businesses and homes, and they endured every sort of indignity and personal injury. Finally, the authorities arrested forty-eight members of the church, including Pastor Pothinus in AD 177 AD. The 90-year-old missionary was asked by the tribunal in the most contemptuous way, “Who is the God of the Christians?” To which the old man said, “If you are worthy to hear it, you will know.” This angered the court, and the pagans in the courtroom started throwing heavy objects at the aged pastor. He died in prison within two days after this severe beating.

## The First Churches in Paris

A missionary named Denis planted churches in Paris around AD 250, with great success. So much so, that the Roman authorities became very concerned and arrested Denis and his two close friends, Rusticus and Eleutherius. They were sentenced to death and executed by beheading on the highest hill in Paris. This Montmartre where he was killed was known as a holy place for the pagan Druid priests. According to the legends, Denis continued to preach to his executioners until he died.

## The First Missionary to Switzerland

Narcissus is considered the first missionary to Switzerland. He traveled with a deacon named Felix. According to one account, while traveling up into Germany near Augsburg, Narcissus met a prostitute named Afra. The woman had a reputation of being very immoral, but she was converted and baptized. Shortly thereafter, she was arrested by the Roman authorities. They wanted her to swear allegiance to the Emperor. Powerful kings and governments consider themselves to be a god, and they require that everybody agree to this. That is what King Nebuchadnezzar required of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel 3. True to her faith, Afra would not confess the Emperor to be a god. As a result, she was taken out to an island in the River Lech and burned at the stake. Later, the Romans also executed Afra’s mother and several of her maids on the deserted island.

Both Felix and Narcissus were later martyred in Girona, Spain around AD 307.



An ancient Armenian church

## The Church in Armenia

Jesus commissioned His disciples to turn entire nations into His followers. “Disciple the nations!” He told them in Matthew 28. This doesn’t happen automatically, of course. Nations are going to be resistant to new ideas, and they will not quickly leave the dominion of the devil to follow Christ.

The power of the risen Christ was remarkably evident in the nation of Armenia. For at least five hundred years, this kingdom was controlled by pagan idolatry under the goddess Anahit. Each year, the kings of Armenia would travel to the pagan temple at Erez to offer sacrifices to this pagan deity. Young men and women from the prominent families in Armenia were required to serve as priests and priestesses at this temple.

Due to a scandal that cost his father’s life, an Armenian noble named Gregory was whisked to Cappadocia as an infant where eventually he became a disciple of Jesus Christ. On his return to Armenia around AD 270, he was pressed to offer wreaths at the temple of the goddess Anahit by King Tiridates III, and he refused.



Consequently, the king ordered that Gregory be tortured and put to death, but the young man survived the ordeal and languished in prison for more than ten years. In time, however, God worked on the heart of King Tiridates. The king recalled Gregory from jail and he was baptized into the Christian church in AD 302, along with other members of the royal family. This development illustrates a broader pattern that has been true throughout history: When a father is converted in a family, most of the family often comes into the faith as well. This pattern is repeated among many of the pagan kingdoms with the coming of the Gospel. When the king was converted, many of the people followed suit.

King Tiridates destroyed the temple of Anahit in the capital city of Artaxatar, against the protests of the pagan priests, and declared Armenia to be a Christian nation, distinguishing this land as the first country of any size to become an officially Christian realm. The king also began to actively work with Gregory to spread the Gospel throughout Armenia. Gregory preached from one end of the nation to the other in the Armenian language, and it was not long before nearly the whole nation was converted to Jesus Christ.



There are still many Armenian churches standing from early centuries of the Christian church.



Another vital and defining event in the country's history occurred a century later when the Bible was translated into Armenian. A scholar named Mesrob developed a new alphabet for the Armenian language around AD 405 and he produced the first translation of the New Testament in AD 410. By 436, Mesrob and his associates finished the translation of the Old Testament into Armenian.

It is important to note that having access to the Bible is critical for the long-term discipleship of nations. Significantly, of all the nations in the world, Armenia has held on to the Christian faith with more tenacity through thick and thin. Even when faced with severe persecution at the hands of the Muslims after AD 650 these people would not vacillate in their commitment to the One True God.

As we continue to study the history of Christ's Church, we will learn that almost every church was formed out of much trial, persecution, and faith on the part of the missionaries who came with the hope of the Gospel. It requires a great deal of faith to stand against earthly kings, and insist on the crown rights of the King of kings and Lord of lords—as Gregory did before King Tiridates—but many more bold witnesses braved similar odds as the truth went forth throughout the world.

## The Church in Spain

We do not know if the Apostle Paul ever made it to Spain. But we do know that one of the first men to lead the Christian church in Spain was named Hosius. He became the pastor in Cordova in AD 295, and very narrowly escaped martyrdom at the hands of the Emperor Maximian. He may have been the key person to organize the Council of Nicaea from which we have received the doctrine of the Trinity. Hosius actually was the moderator of this church council. Later, he was persecuted by Emperor Constantius II, because he stood by the doctrine of the Trinity. Throughout the latter



The Emperor Constantine  
at the Council of Nicaea

half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the Roman Emperors would take the wrong side on this doctrinal issue (and persecute those of the true faith).

## Two Young Boys: Missionaries to Ethiopia

The story of the early Church in Ethiopia is quite interesting. Two young men, Frumentius and his brother, were sailing with their uncle on a merchant trip across the Red Sea around AD 316 when they were attacked by Ethiopians. Everyone was killed except for the two young boys who were captured and taken back to Ethiopia. There they were made slaves in the royal court of King Ezana, whose favor they gained. With the king's approval, the young men founded several churches in Ethiopia, and Frumentius himself became the first Pastor/Bishop of the Ethiopian church.

The kingdoms of men are often formed when an Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar rides into the cities on a white horse. They conquer with bloodshed and military might. Jesus, however, routinely takes a different approach. His kingdom is sometimes formed by slave boys brought into the nation through a back door. It is often through weakness and suffering that His kingdom comes.



The ruins of an obelisk from the time of King Ezana

## Constantine and an Empire Transformed

Finally, in God's good providence, the persecutions came to an end as He raised up the Emperor Constantine, a ruler sympathetic to the Christian cause. In AD 313, Constantine issued an executive order called "The Edict of Milan." The sum of the order was that Christians were to pray for the Empire, and the Empire would return properties to Christians that had been wrongly taken from them. Constantine also promised to rebuild churches that had been destroyed during the Diocletian persecutions.

Constantine is a complex and controversial character in history. When pagan kings come to faith, the transformation will not always be complete and without flaws. Nonetheless, Constantine publicly confessed Jesus Christ as "our Savior" and acknowledged the divine inspiration of Scripture, a huge shift in the mind of the Caesars who had considered themselves to be the Savior from the days of Augustus.

Some believe that Constantine took on the faith for political purposes, but it is hard to believe that to be the case, given that an estimated 90% of the population was still aligned with paganism. Nonetheless, Constantine's active support of Christianity was a strong indication that the faith was no longer some obscure cult



Bust of the Emperor Constantine



led by an obscure “Nazarene”. When Tacitus wrote his annals of Roman history in AD 116, references to Christians and to Christ amounted to one small paragraph. Hardly anybody had heard of what Tacitus called “a most mischievous superstition.”

Two hundred years later, all that had dramatically changed.

## Constantine the Great

By the latter part of the 300s, the powerful rule of Jesus Christ was felt in the Roman world. The killing of Christians, the slaughter of women and children at the hands of the Caesars, and the widespread killing of babies through abortion and infanticide came to an end. Basil of Caesarea (d. 379) encouraged Christian women to care for those who might be tempted to abort their children; he also arranged protests against abortion, and inspired Emperor Valentinian to ban abortion in the empire, which happened in AD 374.<sup>3</sup>

While the pagans were characterized by their cheap view of human life, Christians became well known for their care for orphans. At first, families would adopt the orphans and care for them in their homes. By the middle of the fourth century, the first orphanages were constructed under the leadership of Basil of Caesarea and Chrysostom of Constantinople.

Christians also brought hospitals into the world in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. In AD 325, presbyters and bishops from churches all over the Roman Empire gathered in Nicaea (located in Northwestern Turkey) to address the question of the deity of Christ and other matters. Here, also, the leaders of the Church decided they should build a “hospice” in every city. These hospices were meant to provide lodging for the poor and for wayfaring travelers. The first hospital was introduced to the city of Cappadocia by the same Basil in AD 369.

Slavery was also common among the pagan nations, including Rome. Once again, it was Christians who did their best to set the slaves free. A well-known document from the early Syrian church (dated around AD 375), known as the *Apostolic Constitutions*, instructed the Christians to collect money for the “redemption of the saints, the deliverance of slaves, and of captives, and of prisoners, and of those that have been abused, and of those that have been condemned by tyrants to single combat and death on account of the name of Christ.” In one of his letters, a well-known pastor named Augustine from Hippo in North Africa tells of buying freedom for a shipload of slaves bound for Galatia.<sup>4</sup>





Emperor Trajan (AD 53-117)

## The Further Impact of Jesus Christ on the Roman World

The bloodthirsty screams of the crowds in the great Roman Colosseum cannot be heard any more. No more do people congregate into large arenas to watch real people kill other real people in broad daylight.

Instead, people watch actors pretend to kill people in modern films. Movies and stories such as told in *The Hunger Games* try to reenact the Roman Games, but it is all faked. Occasionally, boxers and other fighters will turn somebody's face bloody, and that might get the crowd a little excited. Yet there is more compassion today, even with unbelievers, than there was in the pre-Christian Roman days. This is because of the impact that the Lord Jesus Christ has made on world history. Christians stopped the bloody games. Christians created hospitals and adopted the orphans—instead of killing them. Christians encouraged laws that would protect life, instead of destroying it. Even abortion was discouraged throughout the entire Christian world for almost 2,000 years (although, this has changed for the worse over the last forty years).<sup>5</sup> By the year AD 750, there were thousands of hospitals throughout Europe, and by the mid-1500s, there were 37,000 monasteries that took it upon themselves to care for sick people.

Thus played out the work of the Great Commission in the Roman Empire, as faithful missionaries and pastors taught millions of men, women, and children the things that Jesus had commanded.

The kingdom of Jesus comes when men and women give up their own lives to bring the Gospel to other nations. This is what we have seen in the first three centuries of the Christian Church.

*“Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.” (Matt. 16:24-25)*



Tertullian of Carthage

## Fourth Century Discipleship of the Nations in Gaul

Sometime around AD 330, a baby boy was born to a Roman officer occupying a fort in Pannonia, Hungary. His parents named him Martin, and he was himself inducted into the Roman army as a lad of fifteen years of age. Not long afterwards, he came to be a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. Several years later, Martin quit the military service and testified to his desire to be a “soldier of Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

He was discipled by a pastor in Poitiers, France by the name of Hilary (ca. 300-368), but his training was cut short due to the persecutions leveled against true Christians on account of the Arian heresy that controlled the Empire at that time. Martin wandered about Europe, and returned to Hungary where he shared the Gospel with his mother who received the faith. During these early ministry years, he also established a discipleship center for young men on an island off Italy called Gallinara, and another near Poitiers. Around AD 372, he was installed as a pastor of the church in Tours, replacing the previous pastor, Lidorius who had passed away of late.

Throughout the remainder of his life (AD 372 - AD 397), Martin canvassed the pagan villages about North-central France preaching the Gospel and destroying heathen temples. His biographer, Severus (who had made personal acquaintance with Martin), describes one such exploit of this courageous missionary: “But in a village which was named Leprosum, when he too wished to overthrow a temple which had acquired great wealth through the superstitious ideas entertained of its sanctity, a multitude of the heathen resisted him to such a degree that he was driven back not without bodily injury. He, therefore, withdrew to a place in the vicinity, and there for three days, clothed in sackcloth and ashes fasting and praying the whole time, he besought the Lord, that, as he had not been able to overthrow that temple by human effort, Divine power might be exerted to destroy it. Then two angels, with spears and shields after the manner of heavenly warriors, suddenly presented themselves to him, saying that they were sent by the Lord to put to flight the rustic multitude, and to furnish protection to Martin, lest, while the temple was being destroyed, any one should offer resistance. They told him therefore to return, and complete the blessed work which he had begun. Accordingly Martin returned to the village; and while the crowds of heathen looked on in perfect quiet as he razed the pagan temple even to the foundations, he also reduced all the altars

and images to dust. At this sight the rustics, when they perceived that they had been so astounded and terrified by an intervention of the Divine will, that they might not be found fighting against the bishop, almost all believed in the Lord Jesus. They then began to cry out openly and to confess that the God of Martin ought to be worshiped, and that the idols should be despised, which were not able to help them.”<sup>7</sup>

Martin’s work during these years was attended by supernatural interventions, not unlike what we find later in the life of John G. Paton on the heathen island of Tanna (in the 1870s). In one village, he was surrounded by an angry mob of natives, and his biographer describes the attack: “When one of them, bolder than the rest, made an attack upon him with a drawn sword, Martin, throwing back his cloak, offered his bare neck to the assassin. Nor did the heathen delay to strike, but in the very act of lifting up his right arm, he fell to the ground on his back, and being overwhelmed by the fear of God, he entreated for pardon. Not unlike this was that other event which happened to Martin, that when a certain man had resolved to wound him with a knife as he was destroying some idols, at the very moment of fetching the blow, the weapon was struck out of his hands and disappeared.”<sup>8</sup>

Martin’s preaching also had a powerful effect upon the villagers as Christ’s Gospel found roots in modern-day France. Severus records that, “His holy discourse that, the light of truth having been revealed to them, they themselves overthrew their own temples.”<sup>9</sup>

When accosted by a highwayman intent on beating his brains out with a hammer, Martin simply preached the Word to him. We read from Severus, “Entering on a discourse concerning Evangelical truth, he preached the word of God to the robber. Why should I delay stating the result? The robber believed; and, after expressing his respect for Martin, he restored him to the way, entreating him to pray the Lord for him. That same robber was afterwards seen leading a religious life; so that, in fact, the narrative I have given above is based upon an account furnished by himself.”<sup>10</sup>

Evidently, these were times when God in His all wise providence determined to bless with miracles, and several are recorded by Severus, writing on the life of Martin. While preaching in a certain village, a woman entered the crowd brought her dead son to the evangelist and asked him to restore her “only son” to her. We read, “When, in the sight of all, he had fallen on his knees, and then arose,



after his prayer was finished, he restored to its mother the child brought back to life. Then, truly, the whole multitude, raising a shout to heaven, acknowledged Christ as God, and fairly began to rush in crowds to the knees of this blessed man, sincerely imploring that he would make them Christians.”<sup>11</sup>

Martin lacked the formal education received by most of the pastors of the day. He dressed in rough clothing, refused wine and fancy foods, and treated missionary work as a military man might accept hardship in the field. Yet, this was the sort of man it took to take the Gospel into the hinterlands of Gaul in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Martin ministered to the districts of Vienne, Bordeaux, Trier, and Chartres over his 27-year tour of duty.

Only 300 years after the resurrection of Christ, His Gospel was impacting the outer reaches of civilization, and the prophecies of the Old Testament were coming to pass.

*“Sing to the Lord, bless His name; Proclaim the good news of His salvation from day to day. Declare His glory among the nations, His wonders among all peoples. For the Lord is great and greatly to be praised; He is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the Lord made the heavens.” (Psalm 96:2-5)*