

The Roman Persecution of Christians: Nero's Cruelty

By John Foxe

It was this cruel tyrant who put to death the apostles St. Peter and St. Paul; and it was he who began what is called in history the first general persecution of the Christian in the early ages of the church. He was the sixth emperor of Rome, and the Caesar to whom St. Paul appealed when he was accused before Festus.

Nero was made emperor when only sixteen years old, through the dark plots of his wicked mother Agrippina, who by poisoning her husband, the emperor Claudius, and his son, cleared the way to the throne for Nero, who was her own son by a former marriage. During the first five years of his reign the young emperor was influenced by the advice of able counsellors, and ruled wisely; but as he grew older his violent nature began to show itself. He fell under the sway of a beautiful and notorious woman, Poppaea Sabina, who was a model for vanity and evil living, and who was said to keep five hundred she-asses so that she might bathe in their milk to preserve her complexion. Nero wanted to marry her, although he already had a wife, Octavia. Agrippina taking the part of the neglected wife, Nero planned his mother's death by the ingenious device of sending her to her country seat in a boat, which was cunningly contrived to fall to pieces as soon as it left the shore. Agrippina saved herself by swimming to the land, but was directly afterward slain by the swords of executioners, who were dispatched by her son Nero as soon as news had been brought of her escape from drowning. Octavia was divorced, sent to an island, and put to death there; Nero then married Poppaea and gave himself up to the wildest and most reckless course of life.

Throwing aside the state and dignity usually maintained by a Roman emperor, Nero would descend into the arena and mingle with the gladiators, or professional fighting-men, sometimes even taking part in the bloody scenes enacted there. This delighted the rabble, who crowded the tiers of seats in the great circus and shouted their approval, but the nobility turned with disgust from the spectacle of an emperor so degrading himself. Caring only for the applause of the mob, Nero used every means to extort money from the rich and spent it in wasteful extravagance. A huge palace, called the Golden House because of its splendid decorations, was built. This magnificent structure was of great size and surrounded by gardens, lakes, baths, and pleasure-grounds. Now, at last," said Nero, "I am lodged as an emperor should be."

In order to get money to complete this palace, accusations were brought against many rich men of Rome, who were put to death, and their property taken by the emperor. His hatred and cruelty seemed especially directed toward the higher classes. Seneca, the philosopher, Nero's former teacher and adviser, was accused, and chose to die by his own hand, by bleeding to death in a warm bath, his wife dying in the same way. So common did it become for men to receive a message sentencing them to death that they searched for easy ways of dying, so as to escape the public executioners.

About this time a terrible fire broke out at Rome, which destroyed six of the fourteen quarters, or districts, of the city. For six days the fire burned furiously, and scarcely had it died down when another fire began in the opposite direction. Many ancient temples, monuments, and works of art were ruined by the flames. The people were panic-stricken, and believed that the fire had been started by the emperor for the mere pleasure of seeing it burn. It was said that when the flames were at their height,

he went up into a tower and sat there, looking down upon the burning city while he played upon his harp, and sang of the burning of Troy, saying, "I would that I might see the ruin of all things."

Nero Accuses the Christians

But becoming alarmed at the hatred he had aroused in his people, and finding his throne endangered, Nero hastened into the streets, and with a free hand scattered money among the crowds until his treasury was empty. Then, with characteristic cruelty and cunning he undertook to divert the attention of the angry mob from himself by leading them to wreak their vengeance upon helpless and innocent victims. He therefore accused the Christians of having set fire to Rome, and ordered them to be hunted down, slain, and tortured in such a variety of horrible ways as awakened the pity of even the heartless Romans themselves.

Nero's Torches

In particular he had some sewed up in the skins of wild beasts, and then worried by savage dogs until they expired. Others he had wrapped in tow and smeared with pitch; they were fastened to tall poles planted in the garden of his palace, and set on fire, while Nero, attended by his slaves and courtiers, reclined upon a balcony and watched the blazing of what he called his "torches."

The Catacombs of Rome

In those dark days the Christians had no churches and dared not meet in public, so they tried to find some secret places where they could gather together without being disturbed. Now it happened that, just outside the city of Rome there were deep tunnels or caves in the rock, called catacombs, which had been dug long before to get stone for building the city. The rock had been hollowed out in many galleries, with here and there a vaulted chamber, where several passage-ways crossed or met. Slaves and convicts worked in these places, and they became known to the Christians as a safe place in which to hide. They also buried their dead in some of these caves, in niches or shelves cut in the sides of the galleries, and over the bodies they placed their names, with loving inscriptions, some of which remain plainly visible to this day. The Christians used to meet for religious services in these gloomy, underground chambers, in which they could worship God without fear of being thrown to the lions or given over to the flames.

At night these Christian men and women might be seen stealing forth from their homes, carefully looking behind them from time to time to see that they were not followed; then, hastening to the outskirts of the great city, they entered the dark openings in the rock and passed along the gloomy galleries. Soon they heard sweet music, and a vaulted chamber, brightly lighted, came into view at the end of the dark tunnel; men and women, dressed in white robes, were there singing a psalm of joy.

Early Christian Worship

At these meetings they told each other of the trials they had suffered in their homes; they confessed to one another their sins and doubts, or related the blessings received in answer to their earnest prayers. In their underground church they listened to sermons from their elders, and perhaps heard read a letter from one of the apostles. They then partook of the bread and the wine, in memory of Him whose blood was shed for them, and they kissed one another when the love-feast was ended.

At these meetings there was no distinction of rank; the high-born lady sat by the slave whom she had once scarcely looked upon as a man. Humility and submission were among the chief virtues of the early Christians; slavery had not been forbidden by the apostles, because it was believed that those who were the lowest in this world would be the highest in the next. Slavery was therefore considered a state of grace, and some Christians appear to have refused their freedom on religious grounds, for St. Paul exhorts such persons to become free if they can.

Spreading the Gospel

In that age every Christian was a missionary. The soldier tried to win recruits for the heavenly host; the prisoner sought to bring his jailer to Christ; the slave girl whispered the gospel in the ears of her mistress; the young wife begged her husband to be baptized, that their souls might not be parted after death; every one who had experienced the joys of believing tried to bring others to the faith.

Thus the numbers of the Christians rapidly increased. It began to be noised abroad that there was in Rome a secret society which worshipped an unknown God. The rulers, who believed respect for the ancient gods was necessary to the safety of the state, became alarmed and issued orders aimed against the Christians, forbidding secret meetings. Thus it came about that when any public calamity – pestilence, fire, famine, or flood – appeared it was blamed upon the Christians, who, it was supposed, had brought down the anger of the offended gods.

Then came cruel laws, riots and commotions, and the terrible cry of "*Christiani ad leones!*" – To the lions with the Christians! – was raised by the mob and resounded through the streets of Rome.

The Colosseum at Rome

Combats to the death between trained fighting-men called gladiators, or between prisoners of war, slaves, criminals, and wild beasts, were the favorite amusements of the Romans. The emperor who could give the people the greatest number of these bloody entertainments was the idol of the populace.

An immense stone building, or circus, called the Colosseum, was begun by Vespasian and finished by Titus, in which to hold these great shows. Its ruins still stand, and amaze the traveler by their huge size and massive strength. Tier above tier, sloping backward from around a level central space or arena, rose seats for nearly 100,000 spectators. The outer wall was almost circular, filled with arched and pillared openings, and mounted storey upon storey to the height of 160 feet. In length the Colosseum was 612 feet, and in breadth 515 feet. The building was without a roof and was open to the sky except during the games, when a great awning was stretched all across it, from poles fixed at regular intervals around the topmost gallery.

To the Colosseum flocked the populace of the greatest city in the world, to witness scenes of cruelty and bloodshed. The emperor himself, beautiful ladies of high rank, haughty senators and nobles, as well as all the rabble of the mighty city, crowded the seats ranged around the arena and gazed pitilessly down upon men being stabbed to death by human adversaries, or torn to pieces by ravenous lions and tigers, let loose from dens under the walls. It is recorded that when the Colosseum was finished and first opened to the public, the games continued for one hundred days, and that 5000 wild beasts, brought from all parts of the then known world, were slain. It was into this blood-stained arena that many of the early Christians were brought, to suffer death in its most terrible forms.

Courage and Increase of the Christians

But persecution could not diminish the ever-increasing flow of converts. It served, indeed, to make their numbers greater, for, to the Christian, death was but the beginning of eternal happiness. They therefore welcomed it almost with joy, and the sight of their cheerful countenances as they were led to execution, astonished the lookers-on, and made many inquire what this belief could be that seemed to rob death of its terrors. Thus a desire was awakened in hundreds of troubled hearts to share in the consolations which the new faith afforded believers.