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HISTORICAL PERSECUTION OF BELIEVERS – LESSON 4

FOURTH ROMAN PERSECUTION – 161-180 A.D.

Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, a man of stern and severe nature, was well-studied in philosophy and civil government. He was very fierce in his persecution of Christians. He came up with new methods of torture and death that shocked even the pagans who were accustomed to seeing Christians tortured and killed.

Some martyrs, with feet already wounded, were forced to walk, or crawl over thorns, nails, and other sharp objects. Some were scourged (whipped) until their veins and tissues were exposed bare. Other excruciating pain tortures were done before they were executed. It did not please Marcus Aurelius just to kill them; they first had to suffer such extreme torture that execution would almost be like an act of mercy.

The story of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, is a remarkable one. When he was arrested, he requested an hour of prayer before being taken away. His prayer was so fervent that his guards repented. Other guards came and took him away to the proconsul who condemned Polycarp to be burned at the stake in the public marketplace.

The proconsul urged Polycarp to renounce Christ and go free. His answer was “Eighty-six years have I served Him, and He never once wronged me. How then shall I blaspheme my King who has saved me?” Once at the stake, they only tied him to it instead of nailing him to it in the usual fashion, because Polycarp assured them that he would stand immovable. As the wood was set afire, the flames circled around his body but would not touch him. When the executioner saw that no fire could touch Polycarp, he ordered him to be pierced by a sword. Upon being slain by sword, such a great quantity of blood gushed out that it completely extinguished the fire. Only God could have orchestrated such an event.

The famed philosopher and Christian apologist Justin was also scourged and beheaded. Some others were executed for refusing to sacrifice to the pagan image of Jupiter. The catacombs that had been excavated beneath Rome imprisoned some believers and was the repository for the bones of many others. Christian symbols etched on the walls included the fish, the Good Shepherd with a lamb on His shoulder, a ship under sail, harps, anchors, crowns, and vines.

Christians often honored martyrs’ bodies with ornaments and with the garlands of flowers and wreaths which symbolized the victor’s crowns given at Roman Olympics. They had run their race and were now victorious.