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HISTORICAL PERSECUTION OF BELIEVERS – LESSON 1

NERO 67-70 A.D.

We have just finished eleven lessons on the martyrdom of the early church apostles and deacons. Those persecutions were carried out prior to Roman Emperor Caesar Nero almost exclusively by Jewish leaders. Beginning with Nero, the source of persecution shifted from the traditional Jewish establishment to the Roman Empire.

I will use the traditionally accepted dates from church history as laid forth by Bishop James Ussher and found annotated in some bibles, especially the KJV. Modern history often gives a date four years earlier. For example, traditional calendars give Jesus' death and resurrection as 33 A.D. while modern research says it was most likely 29 A.D. Fox's Book of Martyrs uses the traditional dates that I shall follow which may not match current history being off by four years or so.

Nero was emperor about fourteen years having ascended as a teenager. His early years were fairly calm and normal, but then things radically changed within him. He turned quite evil. His stepmother had orchestrated his rise to power so that she could have power. After a marriage turned bad, he had both his wife and his stepmother executed. He became evil and extremely cruel. I would say he became demented as had his forebear Caesar Caligula had been two decades earlier.

According to several early historians he had a desire to build himself a huge elaborate garden estate. In order to make room for it, he had Rome set on fire. The fire burned nine days, clearing land so he could rebuild as he wished. However, to avoid Roman citizens blaming him for the fire, Nero blamed it on the Christians. To lend credibility to that false claim, he began severe persecution of all Christians throughout his empire, but especially in Jerusalem which was the ruling center of the Christian church.

The persecution began in A.D. 67 when his forces entered Jerusalem, took many prisoners of both Christians and Jews, and destroyed many of the buildings. He had Peter executed. Nero also had Paul executed at this same time. Paul had been held captive in Rome. It did not end then. His army returned in 70 A.D. and destroyed what remained of Jerusalem. Many were killed, and all other Jews and Christians fled the city to seek refuge in other countries.

The Roman Senate grew weary of Nero's atrocities and was in the process of passing a resolution of condemnation against Nero. He was away from Rome when he learned of it, at which time he chose to take his own life. He became the first Caesar to commit suicide and was the last of the inheritance line which lasted a little more than a hundred years that came down from Julius Caesar. Emperors continued to rule Rome, but not of Caesar's blood line.

The rule of terror under Nero was the first of ten periods of Roman persecution of Christian believers. It covered 67 to 70 A.D., or 63 to 66 A.D. by some modern accounts. We will begin to look at each of the remaining nine periods of Roman persecution beginning tomorrow.