

CHAPTER III - Persecutions of the Christians in Persia

The Gospel having spread itself into Persia, the pagan priests, who worshipped the sun, were greatly alarmed, and dreaded the loss of that influence they had hitherto maintained over the people's minds and properties. Hence they thought it expedient to complain to the emperor that the Christians were enemies to the state, and held a treasonable correspondence with the Romans, the great enemies of Persia.

The emperor Sapore, being naturally averse to Christianity, easily believed what was said against the Christians, and gave orders to persecute them in all parts of his empire. On account of this mandate, many eminent persons in the church and state fell martyrs to the ignorance and ferocity of the pagans.

Constantine the Great being informed of the persecutions in Persia, wrote a long letter to the Persian monarch, in which he recounts the vengeance that had fallen on persecutors, and the great success that had attended those who had refrained from persecuting the Christians.

Speaking of his victories over rival emperors of his own time, he said, "I subdued these solely by faith in Christ; for which God was my helper, who gave me victory in battle, and made me triumph over my enemies. He hath likewise so enlarged to me the bounds of the Roman Empire, that it extends from the Western Ocean almost to the uttermost parts of the East: for this domain I neither offered sacrifices to the ancient deities, nor made use of charm or divination; but only offered up prayers to the Almighty God, and followed the cross of Christ. Rejoiced should I be if the throne of Persia found glory also, by embracing the Christians: that so you with me, and they with you, may enjoy all happiness.

In consequence of this appeal, the persecution ended for the time, but it was renewed in later years when another king succeeded to the throne of Persia.

Persecutions Under the Arian Heretics

The author of the Arian heresy was Arius, a native of Lybia, and a priest of Alexandria, who, in A.D. 318, began to publish his errors. He was condemned by a council of Lybian and Egyptian bishops, and that sentence was confirmed by the Council of Nice, A.D. 325. After the death of Constantine the Great, the Arians found means to ingratiate themselves into the favor of the emperor Constantinus, his son and successor in the east; and hence a persecution was raised against the orthodox bishops and clergy. The celebrated Athanasius, and other bishops, were banished, and their sees filled with Arians.

In Egypt and Lybia, thirty bishops were martyred, and many other Christians cruelly tormented; and, A.D. 386, George, the Arian bishop of Alexandria, under the authority of the emperor, began a persecution in that city and its environs, and carried it on with the most infernal severity. He was assisted in his diabolical malice by Catophonius, governor of Egypt; Sebastian, general of the Egyptian forces;

Faustinus, the treasurer; and Heraclius, a Roman officer.

The persecutions now raged in such a manner that the clergy were driven from Alexandria, their churches were shut, and the severities practiced by the Arian heretics were as great as those that had been practiced by the pagan idolaters. If a man, accused of being a Christian, made his escape, then his whole family were massacred, and his effects confiscated.

Persecution Under Julian the Apostate

This emperor was the son of Julius Constantius, and the nephew of Constantine the Great. He studied the rudiments of grammar under the inspection of Mardonius, a eunuch, and a heathen of Constantinople. His father sent him some time after to Nicomedia, to be instructed in the Christian religion, by the bishop of Eusebius, his kinsman, but his principles were corrupted by the pernicious doctrines of Ecebolius the rhetorician, and Maximus the magician.

Constantius, dying the year 361, Julian succeeded him, and had no sooner attained the imperial dignity than he renounced Christianity and embraced paganism, which had for some years fallen into great disrepute. Though he restored the idolatrous worship, he made no public edicts against Christianity. He recalled all banished pagans, allowed the free exercise of religion to every sect, but deprived all Christians of offices at court, in the magistracy, or in the army. He was chaste, temperate, vigilant, laborious, and pious; yet he prohibited any Christian from keeping a school or public seminary of learning, and deprived all the Christian clergy of the privileges granted them by Constantine the Great.

Bishop Basil made himself first famous by his opposition to Arianism, which brought upon him the vengeance of the Arian bishop of Constantinople; he equally opposed paganism. The emperor's agents in vain tampered with Basil by means of promises, threats, and racks, he was firm in the faith, and remained in prison to undergo some other sufferings, when the emperor came accidentally to Ancyra. Julian determined to examine Basil himself, when that holy man being brought before him, the emperor did every thing in his power to dissuade him from persevering in the faith. Basil not only continued as firm as ever, but, with a prophetic spirit foretold the death of the emperor, and that he should be tormented in the other life. Enraged at what he heard, Julian commanded that the body of Basil should be torn every day in seven different parts, until his skin and flesh were entirely mangled. This inhuman sentence was executed with rigor, and the martyr expired under its severities, on June 28, A.D. 362.

Donatus, bishop of Arezzo, and Hilarinus, a hermit, suffered about the same time; also Gordian, a Roman magistrate. Artemius, commander in chief of the Roman forces in Egypt, being a Christian, was deprived of his commission, then of his estate, and lastly of his head.

The persecution raged dreadfully about the latter end of the year 363; but, as many of the particulars have not been handed down to us, it is necessary to remark in general, that in Palestine many were burnt alive, others were dragged by their feet through the streets naked until they expired; some were scalded to death, many stoned, and great numbers had their brains beaten out with clubs. In Alexandria, innumerable were the martyrs who suffered by the sword, burning, crucifixion and stoning. In Arethusa, several were ripped open, and corn being put into their bellies, swine were brought to feed therein, which, in devouring the grain, likewise devoured the entrails of the martyrs, and in Thrace, Emilianus was burnt at a stake; and Domitius murdered in a cave, whither he had fled for refuge.

The emperor, Julian the apostate, died of a wound which he received in his Persian expedition, A.D. 363, and even while expiring, uttered the most horrid blasphemies. He was succeeded by Jovian, who restored peace to the Church.

After the decease of Jovian, Valentinian succeeded to the empire, and associated to himself Valens, who had the command in the east, and was an Arian and of an unrelenting and persecuting disposition.

Persecution of the Christians by the Goths and Vandals.

Many Scythian Goths having embraced Christianity about the time of Constantine the Great, the light of the Gospel spread itself considerably in Scythia, though the two kings who ruled that country, and the majority of the people continued pagans. Fritegern, king of the West Goths, was an ally to the Romans, but Athanarich, king of the East Goths, was at war with them. The Christians, in the dominions of the former, lived unmolested, but the latter, having been defeated by the Romans, wreaked his vengeance on his Christian subjects, commencing his pagan injunctions in the year 370.

In religion the Goths were Arians, and called themselves Christians; therefore they destroyed all the statues and temples of the heathen gods, but did no harm to the orthodox Christian churches. Alaric had all the qualities of a great general. To the wild bravery of the Gothic barbarian he added the courage and skill of the Roman soldier. He led his forces across the Alps into Italy, and although driven back for the time, returned afterward with an irresistible force.

The Last Roman "Triumph"

After this fortunate victory over the Goths a "triumph," as it was called, was celebrated at Rome. For hundreds of years successful generals had been awarded this great honor on their return from a victorious campaign. Upon such occasions the city was given up for days to the marching of troops laden with spoils, and who dragged after them prisoners of war, among whom were often captive kings and conquered generals. This was to be the last Roman triumph, for it celebrated the last Roman victory. Although it had been won by Stilicho, the general, it was the boy emperor, Honorius, who took the credit, entering Rome in the car of victory, and driving to the Capitol amid the shouts of the populace. Afterward, as was customary on such occasions, there were bloody combats in the Colosseum, where gladiators, armed with swords and spears, fought as furiously as if they were on the field of battle.

The first part of the bloody entertainment was finished; the bodies of the dead were dragged off with hooks, and the reddened sand covered with a fresh, clean layer. After this had been done the gates in the wall of the arena were thrown open, and a number of tall, well-formed men in the prime of youth and strength came forward. Some carried swords, others three-pronged spears and nets. They marched once around the walls, and stopping before the emperor, held up their weapons at arm's length, and with one voice sounded out their greeting, Ave, Caesar, morituri te salutant! "Hail, Caesar, those about to die salute thee!"

The combats now began again; the gladiators with nets tried to entangle those with swords, and when they succeeded mercilessly stabbed their antagonists to death with the three-pronged spear. When a gladiator had wounded his adversary, and had him lying helpless at his feet, he looked up at the eager faces of the spectators, and cried out, Hoc habet! "He has it!" and awaited the pleasure of the audience to kill or spare.

If the spectators held out their hands toward him, with thumbs upward, the defeated man was taken away, to recover if possible from his wounds. But if the fatal signal of "thumbs down" was given, the conquered was to be slain; and if he showed any reluctance to present his neck for the death blow, there was a scornful shout from the galleries, Recipe ferrum! "Receive the steel!" Privileged persons among the audience would even descend into the arena, to better witness the death agonies of some unusually brave victim, before his corpse was dragged out at the death gate.

The show went on; many had been slain, and the people, madly excited by the desperate bravery of those who continued to fight, shouted their applause. But suddenly there was an interruption. A rudely clad, robed figure appeared for a moment among the audience, and then boldly leaped down into the arena. He was seen to be a man of rough but imposing presence, bareheaded and with sun-browned face. Without hesitating an instant he advanced upon two gladiators engaged in a life-and-death struggle, and laying his hand upon one of them sternly reproved him for shedding innocent blood, and then, turning toward the thousands of angry faces ranged around him, called upon them in a solemn, deep-toned voice which resounded through the deep inclosure. These were his words: "Do not requite God's mercy in turning away the swords of your enemies by murdering each other!"

Angry shouts and cries at once drowned his voice: "This is no place for preaching!--the old customs of Rome must be observed!--On, gladiators!" Thrusting aside the stranger, the gladiators would have again attacked each other, but the man stood between, holding them apart, and trying in vain to be heard. "Sedition! sedition! down with him!" was then the cry; and the gladiators, enraged at the interference of an outsider with their chosen vocation, at once stabbed him to death. Stones, or whatever missiles came to hand, also rained down upon him from the furious people, and thus he perished, in the midst of the arena.

His dress showed him to be one of the hermits who vowed themselves to a holy life of prayer and self-denial, and who were revered by even the thoughtless and combat-loving Romans. The few who knew him told how he had come from the wilds of Asia on a pilgrimage, to visit the churches and keep his Christmas at Rome; they knew he was a holy man, and that his name was Telemachus-no more. His spirit had been stirred by the sight of thousands flocking to see men slaughter one another, and in his simple-hearted zeal he had tried to convince them of the cruelty and wickedness of their conduct. He had died, but not in vain. His work was accomplished at the moment he was struck down, for the shock of such a death before their eyes turned the hearts of the people: they saw the hideous aspects of the favorite vice to which they had blindly surrendered themselves; and from the day Telemachus fell dead in the Colosseum, no other fight of gladiators was ever held there.

Persecutions from About the Middle of the Fifth, to the Conclusion of the Seventh Century

Proterius was made a priest by Cyril, bishop of Alexandria, who was well acquainted with his virtues, before he appointed him to preach. On the death of Cyril, the see of Alexandria was filled by Discorus, an inveterate enemy to the memory and family of his predecessor. Being condemned by the council of Chalcedon for having embraced the errors of Eutyches, he was deposed, and Proterius chosen to fill the vacant see, who was approved of by the emperor. This occasioned a dangerous insurrection, for the city of Alexandria was divided into two factions; the one to espouse the cause of the old, and the other of the new prelate. In one of the commotions, the Eutychians determined to wreak their vengeance on Proterius, who fled to the church for sanctuary: but on Good Friday, A.D. 457, a large body of them rushed into the church, and barbarously murdered the prelate; after which they dragged the body through the streets, insulted it, cut it to pieces, burnt it, and scattered the ashes in the air.

Hermenigildus, a Gothic prince, was the eldest son of Leovigildus, a king of the Goths, in Spain. This prince, who was originally an Arian, became a convert to the orthodox faith, by means of his wife Ingonda. When the king heard that his son had changed his religious sentiments, he stripped him of the command at Seville, where he was governor, and threatened to put him to death unless he renounced the faith he had newly embraced. The prince, in order to prevent the execution of his father's menaces, began to put himself into a posture of defence; and many of the orthodox persuasion in Spain declared for him. The king, exasperated at this act of rebellion, began to punish all the orthodox Christians who could be seized by his troops, and thus a very severe persecution commenced: he likewise marched against his son at the head of a very powerful army. The prince took refuge in Seville, from which he fled, and was at length besieged and taken at Asieta. Loaded with chains, he was sent to Seville, and at the feast of Easter refusing to receive the Eucharist from an Arian bishop, the enraged king ordered his guards to cut the prince to pieces, which they punctually performed, April 13, A.D. 586.

Martin, bishop of Rome, was born at Todi, in Italy. He was naturally inclined to virtue, and his parents bestowed on him an admirable education. He opposed the heretics called Monothelites, who were patronized by the emperor Heraclius. Martin was condemned at Constantinople, where he was exposed in the most public places to the ridicule of the people, divested of all episcopal marks of distinction, and treated with the greatest scorn and severity. After lying some months in prison, Martin was sent to an island at some distance, and there cut to pieces, A.D. 655.

John, bishop of Bergamo, in Lombardy, was a learned man, and a good Christian. He did his utmost endeavors to clear the Church from the errors of Arianism, and joining in this holy work with John, bishop of Milan, he was very successful against the heretics, on which account he was assassinated on July 11, A.D. 683.

Killian was born in Ireland, and received from his parents a pious and Christian education. He obtained the Roman pontiff's license to preach to the pagans in Franconia, in Germany. At Wurtzburg he converted Gozbert, the governor, whose example was followed by the greater part of the people in two years after.

Persuading Gozbert that his marriage with his brother's widow was sinful, the latter had him beheaded, A.D. 689.

Persecutions from the Early Part of the Eighth, to Near the Conclusion of the Tenth Century

Boniface, archbishop of Mentz, and father of the German church, was an Englishman, and is, in ecclesiastical history, looked upon as one of the brightest ornaments of this nation. Originally his name was Winfred, or Winfrith, and he was born at Kirton, in Devonshire, then part of the West-Saxon kingdom. When he was only about six years of age, he began to discover a propensity to reflection, and seemed solicitous to gain information on religious subjects. Wolfrad, the abbot, finding that he possessed a bright genius, as well as a strong inclination to study, had him removed to Nutselle, a seminary of learning in the diocese of Winchester, where he would have a much greater opportunity of attaining improvements than at Exeter.

After due study, the abbot seeing him qualified for the priesthood, obliged him to receive that holy order when he was about thirty years old. From which time he began to preach and labor for the salvation of his fellow creatures; he was released to attend a synod of bishops in the kingdom of West-Saxons. He afterwards, in 719, went to Rome, where Gregory II who then sat in Peter's chair, received him with great friendship, and finding him full of all virtues that compose the character of an apostolic missionary, dismissed him without commission at large to preach the Gospel to the pagans wherever he found them. Passing through Lombardy and Bavaria, he came to Thuringia, which country had before received the light of the Gospel, he next visited Utrecht, and then proceeded to Saxony, where he converted some thousands to Christianity.

During the ministry of this meek prelate, Pepin was declared king of France. It was that prince's ambition to be crowned by the most holy prelate he could find, and Boniface was pitched on to perform that ceremony, which he did at Soissons, in 752. The next year, his great age and many infirmities lay so heavy on him, that, with the consent of the new king, and the bishops of his diocese, he consecrated Lullus, his countryman, and faithful disciple, and placed him in the see of Mentz. When he had thus eased himself of his charge, he recommended the church of Mentz to the care of the new bishop in very strong terms, desired he would finish the church at Fuld, and see him buried in it, for his end was near. Having left these orders, he took boat to the Rhine, and went to Friesland, where he converted and baptized several thousands of barbarous natives, demolished the temples, and raised churches on the ruins of those superstitious structures. A day being appointed for confirming a great number of new converts, he ordered them to assemble in a new open plain, near the river Bourde. Thither he repaired the day before; and, pitching a tent, determined to remain on the spot all night, in order to be ready early in the morning. Some pagans, who were his inveterate enemies, having intelligence of this, poured down upon him and the companions of his mission in the night, and killed him and fifty-two of his companions and attendants on June 5, A.D. 755. Thus fell the great father of the Germanic Church, the honor of England, and the glory of the age in which he lived.

Forty-two persons of Armorian in Upper Phrygia, were martyred in the year 845, by the Saracens, the circumstances of which transactions are as follows:

In the reign of Theophilus, the Saracens ravaged many parts of the eastern empire, gained several considerable advantages over the Christians, took the city of Armorian, and numbers suffered martyrdom.

Flora and Mary, two ladies of distinction, suffered martyrdom at the same time.

Perfectus was born at Corduba, in Spain, and brought up in the Christian faith. Having a quick genius, he made himself master of all the useful and polite literature of that age; and at the same time was not more

celebrated for his abilities than admired for his piety. At length he took priest's orders, and performed the duties of his office with great assiduity and punctuality. Publicly declaring Mahomet an impostor, he was sentenced to be beheaded, and was accordingly executed, A.D. 850; after which his body was honorably interred by the Christians.

Adalbert, bishop of Prague, a Bohemian by birth, after being involved in many troubles, began to direct his thoughts to the conversion of the infidels, to which end he repaired to Dantzic, where he converted and baptized many, which so enraged the pagan priests, that they fell upon him, and despatched him with darts, on April 23, A.D. 997.

Persecutions in the Eleventh Century

Alphage, archbishop of Canterbury, was descended from a considerable family in Gloucestershire, and received an education suitable to his illustrious birth. His parents were worthy Christians, and Alphage seemed to inherit their virtues.

The see of Winchester being vacant by the death of Ethelwold, Dunstan, archbishop of Canterbury, as primate of all England, consecrated Alphage to the vacant bishopric, to the general satisfaction of all concerned in the diocese.

Dunstan had an extraordinary veneration for Alphage, and, when at the point of death, made it his ardent request to God that he might succeed him in the see of Canterbury; which accordingly happened, though not until about eighteen years after Dunstan's death in 1006.

After Alphage had governed the see of Canterbury about four years, with great reputation to himself, and benefit to his people, the Danes made an incursion into England, and laid siege to Canterbury. When the design of attacking this city was known, many of the principal people made a flight from it, and would have persuaded Alphage to follow their example. But he, like a good pastor, would not listen to such a proposal. While he was employed in assisting and encouraging the people, Canterbury was taken by storm; the enemy poured into the town, and destroyed all that came in their way by fire and sword. He had the courage to address the enemy, and offer himself to their swords, as more worthy of their rage than the people: he begged they might be saved, and that they would discharge their whole fury upon him. They accordingly seized him, tied his hands, insulted and abused him in a rude and barbarous manner, and obliged him to remain on the spot until his church was burnt, and the monks massacred. They then decimated all the inhabitants, both ecclesiastics and laymen, leaving only every tenth person alive; so that they put 7236 persons to death, and left only four monks and 800 laymen alive, after which they confined the archbishop in a dungeon, where they kept him close prisoner for several months.

During his confinement they proposed to him to redeem his liberty with the sum of 3000 pounds, and to persuade the king to purchase their departure out of the kingdom, with a further sum of 10,000 pounds. As Alphage's circumstances would not allow him to satisfy the exorbitant demand, they bound him, and put him to severe torments, to oblige him to discover the treasure of the church; upon which they assured him of his life and liberty, but the prelate piously persisted in refusing to give the pagans any account of it. They remanded him to prison again, confined him six days longer, and then, taking him prisoner with them to Greenwich, brought him to trial there. He still remained inflexible with respect to the church treasure; but exhorted them to forsake their idolatry, and embrace Christianity. This so greatly incensed the Danes, that the soldiers dragged him out of the camp and beat him unmercifully. One of the soldiers, who had been converted by him, knowing that his pains would be lingering, as his death was determined on, actuated by a kind of barbarous compassion, cut off his head, and thus put the finishing stroke to his martyrdom, April 19, A.D. 1012. This transaction happened on the very spot where the church at Greenwich, which is dedicated to him, now stands. After his death his body was thrown into the Thames, but being found the next day, it was buried in the cathedral of St. Paul's by the bishops of London and Lincoln; from whence it was, in 1023, removed to Canterbury by Ethelmoth, the archbishop of that province.

Gerard, a Venetian, devoted himself to the service of God from his tender years: entered into a religious house for some time, and then determined to visit the Holy Land. Going into Hungary, he became acquainted with Stephen, the king of that country, who made him bishop of Chonad.

Ouvo and Peter, successors of Stephen, being deposed, Andrew, son of Ladislaus, cousin-german to Stephen, had then a tender of the crown made him upon condition that he would employ his authority in extirpating the Christian religion out of Hungary. The ambitious prince came into the proposal, but Gerard being informed of his impious bargain, thought it his duty to remonstrate against the enormity of Andrew's crime, and persuade him to withdraw his promise. In this view he undertook to go to that prince, attended by three prelates, full of like zeal for religion. The new king was at Alba Regalis, but, as the four bishops were going to cross the Danube, they were stopped by a party of soldiers posted there. They bore an attack of a shower of stones patiently, when the soldiers beat them unmercifully, and at length despatched them with lances. Their martyrdoms happened in the year 1045.

Stanislaus, bishop of Cracow, was descended from an illustrious Polish family. The piety of his parents was equal to their opulence, and the latter they rendered subservient to all the purposes of charity and benevolence. Stanislaus remained for some time undetermined whether he should embrace a monastic life, or engage among the secular clergy. He was at length persuaded to the latter by Lambert Zula, bishop of Cracow, who gave him holy orders, and made him a canon of his cathedral. Lambert died on November 25, 1071, when all concerned in the choice of a successor declared for Stanislaus, and he succeeded to the prelacy.

Bolislaus, the second king of Poland, had, by nature, many good qualities, but giving away to his passions, he ran into many enormities, and at length had the appellation of Cruel bestowed upon him. Stanislaus alone had the courage to tell him of his faults, when, taking a private opportunity, he freely displayed to him the enormities of his crimes. The king, greatly exasperated at his repeated freedoms, at length determined, at any rate, to get the better of a prelate who was so extremely faithful. Hearing one day that the bishop was by himself, in the chapel of St. Michael, at a small distance from the town, he despatched some soldiers to murder him. The soldiers readily undertook the bloody task; but, when they came into the presence of Stanislaus, the venerable aspect of the prelate struck them with such awe that they could not perform what they had promised. On their return, the king, finding that they had not obeyed his orders, stormed at them violently, snatched a dagger from one of them, and ran furiously to the chapel, where, finding Stanislaus at the altar, he plunged the weapon into his heart. The prelate immediately expired on May 8, A.D. 1079.