



# DREADFUL DIOCLETIAN

Are you ever given a hard time because you go to church or Sunday School? If you are being brought up in a Christian home, you may sometimes find that you are teased about this. But if you had been brought up in a Christian home in Nicomedia in the reign of Emperor Diocletian, you would have had a very hard time indeed. Here are five facts about Diocletian.

## Boons Ablaze

**1.** A.D. 245 – A little boy was born to a freed slave and his wife in the country that is now Yugoslavia. At that time the land was called Illyricum. The couple named their son Diocles.

**2.** As a young man Diocles joined the Roman Army. He rose through the ranks unusually quickly. Roman soldiers were not gentle people and they didn't get promotion for being kind and thoughtful. Diocles fought in the Persian War.

**3.** On 17th September in the year A.D. 284, when he was thirty-nine years old, Diocles (now called Diocletian) was appointed Emperor after being elected by the Roman Army.

**4.** He was a strong and a violent man, known to have killed with his own hands.

**5.** Diocletian worshipped the Roman gods, who were idols and not gods at all.

## *and Other Historical Stories You've Got To Hear*

Imagine that you are a Christian in Nicomedia in the year A.D. 299. News reaches your town that Diocletian, who is in Antioch, has asked his fortune tellers what's going to happen in the future. They are unable to tell him and he decides that it is the Christians in the city who are stopping his fortune tellers from doing their work! So he orders all members of the Imperial Court and all soldiers in the Army to sacrifice to the Roman gods or leave their jobs. Of course, the Christians can't do that. They know that there's only one God, the Creator of all things and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Many lose their jobs in the two or three years that follow. Some lose their lives.

While this is happening, it's as though Diocletian is giving all the good jobs to men who hate Christians. Imagine you are a member of the newly-built church in Nicomedia. You hear that the enemies of Jesus are being given important jobs in government. Bad things are happening

## Books Ablaze

to Christians and the people in the church know that worse things might follow. They hear that Diocletian is going for advice to an oracle of the Roman god Apollo (an oracle was a kind of priest who spoke for an idol god). The oracle says that the great god Apollo can't give advice because of 'the just on earth' and Diocletian decides that 'the just on earth' are Christians!

Had you lived in Nicomedia then, the 23rd of February A.D. 303 would have been a day to remember for very sad reasons.

That day Diocletian orders that the lovely new Christian church in the city should be completely destroyed. Not only that, he orders that all the books in the church should be taken out and burned.

Can you begin to imagine what it's like to see your church taken apart and destroyed? It must have been terrible. But how much worse it would

## *and Other Historical Stories You've Got To Hear*

have been to see God's Word, the Bible, torn apart, set alight and burned into flakes of grey ash.

The next day Diocletian issues another command. This time he says that throughout the entire Empire all Christian places of worship (some of them churches, many of them homes) are to be totally destroyed. Every single sheet or scroll of Christian writing is to be burned. Not only that, but Christians are told they cannot meet with one another for worship.

Emperors may pass all kinds of laws, but do you think if you had been there in February A.D. 303, you would have obeyed Diocletian? Or might you have met up with your Christian brothers and sisters in secret to pray for God's help? Of course that's what the Christians did in Nicomedia!

Diocletian probably saw fires burning and smiled as he thought of the holy books going

## Booms Ablaze

up in flames. He was not nearly so happy when part of the Imperial Palace also caught fire! I imagine that the Christians in the city knew from the time they heard of the blaze that they'd be blamed for it, and they were, even though a legal investigation couldn't find out who started it. As February turned into March Christians in the city, and in the Empire, were treated very cruelly. Some faced death rather than sacrifice to Roman gods, and Diocletian thought up many unspeakable ways of killing them. But there was something that he didn't know. When each of these martyrs died, they went straight to be with Jesus in heaven.

Two weeks and two days after the first fire in the Imperial Palace in Nicomedia there was a second one. It was decided that the palace and the city were unsafe and not long afterwards Diocletian left.

## *and Other Historical Stories You've Got To Hear*

Although he left, the Christians were still treated harshly. Roman soldiers ordered them to make sacrifices to idols. Ministers were especially picked out for persecution. Persecution is when Christians are treated badly, sometimes even killed, for believing in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now imagine that the year is A.D. 311. How do you think the Christians react to the most recent news? After years of persecuting believers, the authorities decide that it hasn't been effective and that the persecution should stop. Then later on that year there is more news. Diocletian has died. There is even a possibility that he took his own life. How do you think the Christians feel about that? Do you think they rejoice to be rid of him? Or might it be that there is a deep sadness that he died not believing in Jesus?