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Christian History Made Easy (Rose Bible Basics)

10. The Empire Strikes Back: When the Church Gained Power

This chapter traces how the church went from persecuted to powerful in the 300s AD. Rome's later persecutions gave way to Emperor Constantine, who made Christianity favored and legal. But the chapter's real point is a warning: newfound growth, wealth, and political favor did not automatically mean God was glorified. Faithfulness matters more than numbers.

Key takeaways

- After Rome's 1,000th birthday (AD 247), a plague was blamed on Christians who skipped the pagan festival; Emperor Decius launched empire-wide persecution requiring sacrifice certificates.
- When persecution ended, churches argued over readmitting Christians who had sacrificed or forged certificates. Cyprian urged mercy after proven repentance; the stricter Donatists said sacraments by compromised bishops were invalid.
- Before the Battle of Milvian Bridge (312), Constantine claimed a vision of the cross ('By this sign, you will win'), won, and soon issued the Edict of Milan (313) granting toleration.

- Constantine's favor came at a cost: churches began asking the emperor to settle disputes, tying church to state for about 1,200 years, and Christianity got mixed with sun-worship in his own mind.
- Arius taught Jesus was created, not eternal God ('Once the Son did not exist'). The Council of Nicaea (325) rejected this, affirming the Son is 'of one essence with the Father.'
- Athanasius fought for Nicaea for decades, exiled repeatedly, refusing to readmit Arius. The later Synod of Alexandria confirmed Father, Son, and Spirit as three persons of one essence.
- As persecution faded, monks (like Anthony) and nuns fled to the desert; Macrina and Basil built healthier city communities that worked, taught, and cared for the poor.
- Jerome, aided by the scholars Marcella and Paula, translated the Bible into common Latin, the Vulgate, which became the standard for centuries.

Passages worth keeping

"Growth alone doesn't guarantee that God is being glorified."

The chapter's key concept, repeated as its central lesson about the church's rise to power.

"Begotten not created, of one essence with the Father; God from God, Light from Light, very God from very God."

The heart of the Nicene Creed, the church's answer to Arius on Christ's full deity.

How it connects

The recurring 'if only' game, the author's about church growth, the early Christians' about escaping persecution, frames the whole chapter: God's approval is measured by faithfulness where He places you, not by attendance, treasures, or political favor.

Scripture referenced

- **Malachi 4:2** -- 'Sun of righteousness' — cited to explain Constantine's confusion of Christ with the Sun-God.
- **John 8:12** -- Jesus the 'light of the world' — same point about sun imagery.
- **Genesis 2:18** -- 'Not good to be alone' — why solitary monks began forming communities.
- **Colossians 1:15** -- 'Firstborn' text Arius misused to argue Jesus was created.
- **Hebrews 1:5-6** -- Text Arius used to claim Jesus was made, not eternal.