

BIOGRAPHY: ST. NICHOLAS

(c. 270 – 343 AD)

Saturday, December 27

Nicholas of Myra¹ was born to wealthy Christian parents in what is now Turkey around 270 AD. His parents died when he was young and he went to live with his uncle in a monastery. Nicholas lived by Jesus' words, "It is better to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35) and so he gave all his family wealth away to help the poor. His generosity and godly reputation led to his appointment as bishop of Myra at the young age of 28.

This was not an easy time for Christians. The Roman emperor Diocletian began an empire-wide persecution of the church in 303 that saw many church leaders imprisoned and tortured for their faith and refusal to sacrifice to the Roman gods. Nicholas was exiled, imprisoned, and probably tortured during the persecution. This all ended when Constantine became emperor in 306. He restored legal rights for Christians, officially ending the persecution by 313 with the Edict of Milan. Church leaders, including Nicholas, were released and church land was restored.

In the following years, Constantine made Christianity the preferred religion of the Empire. In 325, the Council of Nicaea was called to clarify some theological questions that had arisen in various churches. Over 300 bishops from throughout the Empire assembled to discuss these issues. There is some evidence that Nicholas attended this important council. One of the outcomes was the Nicene Creed which clearly stated what the Bible taught about important doctrines. Other matters discussed were the date for Easter and the establishment of Christmas as an official church holiday.

The most important controversy came from a man named Arius who taught that Jesus was a created being and thus was not equal with God the Father. According to one legend, as Arius spoke to the council espousing his view that Jesus was not fully God, Nicholas became so upset that he left his seat and struck Arius in the face. After suffering for his faith in Jesus, Nicholas was not about to let someone deny Jesus was God. Arius' view was declared heresy, but Nicholas was disciplined for his hot-headed action.

Most of the stories about Nicholas are somewhat fanciful with multiple miracles and supernatural events surrounding his life. But all the stories and legends do make one important point: Nicholas was known for his love of giving and helping those in need. He died on December 6, 343. Today, he is celebrated as the patron saint of children. It is his legend that eventually developed into the 'Santa Claus' of today.

In the final evaluation, Nicholas is a good example of a Christian life lived for God. His generosity and zeal for the truth of the gospel is something we should all emulate today.

¹ We have no official records of Nicholas' life. What we have are traditions and legends that were not written until hundreds of years after his death. These contain a lot of embellishments and miraculous events attributed to him (which was common when writing about early saints). What is presented here is what is probably the truth among the legends.