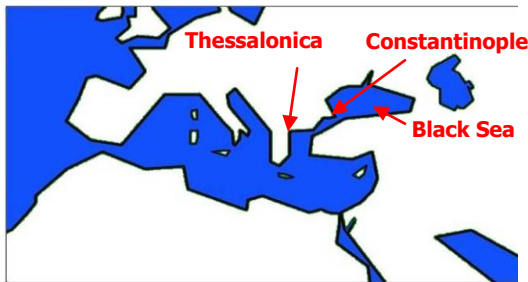


Where: Thessalonica, Greece

Martyr: October 26, 306 A.D.

Name: Demetrius (Roman); Dimitrios (Greek); Димитрий or Dmitri (Russian)

The 4th century was a time when Christians were severely persecuted and were martyred for their faith in Jesus Christ. The Roman government was determined more than ever to have its people



return to the practice of worshiping pagan gods. The parents of Demetrius were secretly Christians, and he was baptized as a child and raised in the Christian Faith in a secret church in his father's home. His father was a proconsul¹ in Thessalonica, Greece, but died when Demetrius was growing up.

By the time Demetrius became an adult, the emperor Galerius Maximian had taken the throne of the Roman

Empire. Maximian heard about Demetrius' excellent education as well as his administrative and military skills, and he decided to have him take over his father's position as proconsul of the Thessalonica district. It would be Demetrius' job to defend the city from barbarians and to prohibit Christians from gathering together and worshiping. The emperor's policy regarding Christians was very simple: "Put to death anyone who calls on the name of Christ." The emperor had no idea that Demetrius was a Christian, nor did he know that, by sending Demetrius to Thessalonica, he was providing a way for Demetrius to lead many people to Christ.

Demetrius accepted the position and traveled to Thessalonica. Once he was there, he openly confessed and glorified our Lord Jesus Christ. Instead of persecuting and executing Christians, he began to teach the Christian Faith to those living in the city and to overthrow pagan customs and idolatry. St. Simeon Metaphrastes (who wrote about many saints) said that because of Demetrius' passion for teaching others the gospel, he became like "a second Apostle Paul" for Thessalonica. Paul was the one who established the first church in Thessalonica² in the 1st century. You will learn that Demetrius would also follow the Apostle Paul in being a martyr.

When Maximian found out that the newly-appointed proconsul of Thessalonica was a Christian and that Demetrius had converted many Roman citizens to Christianity, he was filled with anger. As he was returning from a battle in the region of the Black Sea, the emperor decided to lead his army through Thessalonica. His purpose was to get rid of the Christians there by killing all of them.



¹ **proconsul** - a governor or military commander in charge of a Roman province.

² **Thessalonica** - you can read two of Paul's letters to this church - they are in the New Testament as 1 Thessalonians and 2 Thessalonians.

When Demetrius heard that the emperor was coming, he ordered his faithful servant Lupus to give all of his wealth to the poor saying, "Distribute my earthly riches among them, for we shall seek heavenly riches for ourselves." He began to pray and fast, preparing himself for martyrdom.



Maximian

When the emperor came into the city, he ordered that Demetrius be brought before him. Demetrius boldly confessed that he was a Christian and spoke against the lies of Roman polytheism³. Maximian had Demetrius locked up in prison. An angel came to him, giving him comfort and encouragement.

Meanwhile, the emperor decided to entertain himself by staging games in the circus⁴. His greatest athlete was a German by the name of Lyaeos. He challenged Christians to wrestle with him on a platform that was built over spears with their sharp points upward. A brave Christian named Nestor went to Demetrius and asked him for a blessing to fight the barbarian. With the blessing and prayers of Demetrius, Nestor overcame the fierce German and threw him from the platform and onto the spears (This is what Lyaeos would have done to Nestor if Nestor had lost the fight). This angered one of the Roman commanders so much that he ordered Nestor be killed. He also decided to send a guard to the prison to kill Demetrius too.

It was early morning, on October 26, 306 A.D., and soldiers appeared in the Demetrius' underground prison and killed him with spears. His faithful servant, Lupus, gathered up the blood-soaked garment and took the imperial ring from Demetrius' finger (which was a symbol of his high position in the Roman government) and dipped the ring in the blood. With the ring and other holy things that were now sanctified⁵ by the blood of St. Demetrius, Lupus began to use them to heal those who were sick and dying. When the emperor found out, he issued orders to have him arrested and killed.

After Demetrius' death, the Romans threw his body to the wild animals, but the Christians were able to take it away and they secretly buried it in the earth.

During the reign of St. Constantine (306-337 A.D.), a church was built over the grave of St. Demetrius in Thessalonica. A hundred years later, during the construction of a majestic new church on the old spot, the relics of the holy martyr were uncovered. Since the 17th century an amazing flow of fragrant myrrh⁶ has been found beneath the crypt of the Great Martyr Demetrius, so he is called "the Myrrh-gusher."



Commiphora myrrha

Several times, those venerating the holy wonderworker tried to bring his holy relics, or a part of them, to the city of Constantinople. But St. Demetrius had made it very clear that he would not let anyone remove even a portion of his relics.

³ **polytheism** – the worship of more than one god (usually many gods).

⁴ **circus** – a huge stadium where various sports and games were played; often where Christians were martyred.

⁵ **sanctified** – made holy.

⁶ **myrrh** – made from the sap of the tree *Commiphora myrrha*; it was used for perfumes and was greatly valued in ancient times; also, one of the gifts the Wise Men brought to Jesus after he was born; it is also used by the Eastern Orthodox church as "holy oil" for chrismations and healings.