

## FREEDOM

## STORIES

*Saint Valentine, The Martyr*

February 14



## The Valentine Who Defied an Empire

**Historical Spotlight**

Long before courtly love was described in the poetry of Chaucer, Valentine's Day was born in the shadow of tyranny.

The early Christian Church was formed inside an intolerant, tyrannical empires. Rome demanded public loyalty through ritual worship of the emperor and their gods. Refusal to comply was seen as political rebellion. From the first century onward, Rome scapegoated Christians for disasters, torturing them, and often executing them publicly. Nero was known for his incredible cruelty, but later emperors also issued policies demanding sacrifices to their gods. The punishment for failing to comply included imprisonment and death. Roman officials were careful to record these trials. It was not crimes these Christians were guilty of, but refusal to worship outside their Christian calling.

This period produced some of Christianity's earliest heroes of conscience.

In AD 155 Polycarp of Smyrna, a disciple of the Apostle John, was burned alive after refusing to deny Christ, declaring, *"Eighty-six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"* Many early Christians suffered torture and grisly deaths for their faith. Eusebius of Caesarea documented that far from destroying the faith, persecution spread it.

Into this world stepped a martyr we now remember as  
Freedom Stories

St. Valentine. Our specific knowledge about this man (potentially two Valentines are actually mentioned in early church history) is limited. But we know that by the third century, Rome was fractured by plague, invasion, and political instability. Emperor Claudius II believed unmarried soldiers fought more effectively, so he outlawed marriage for his soldiers, treated family and fidelity as liabilities to the state.



The story explains that Valentine quietly defied the decree and secretly married Christian couples, honoring God's design when the government forbade it.

When ordered to worship Rome's idols, he refused and was imprisoned, where he STILL continued preaching.

Although time has obscured much, the story told for generations included a singular phrase we see every February. Before his execution, Valentine supposedly wrote his final note of encouragement, signing it simply: *"From your Valentine."*

On February 14, A.D. 269, the Martyr, Valentine, was stoned and beheaded outside Rome. Love had truly defied an empire.

Geoffrey Chaucer later connected Valentine's Day with faithful, lifelong love, transforming the memory of a martyr into a celebration of covenant devotion in his poem "Parlement of Foules" leading to a broad celebration of love in many forms, as we see today.

The Christian Martyr's Last Prayer  
Jean-Léon Gérôme, 1883