

## Chapter 7 Section 4 --- Christianity and the Roman Empire

### Key Terms:

<b>Jesus</b>	-- Founder of Christianity; believed by his followers to be the Messiah
<b>Messiah</b>	-- a savior in Judaism and Christianity
<b>Disciple</b>	-- a follower of a person or a belief
<b>Epistle</b>	-- letter; in the Christian Bible, any of the letters written by disciples to Christian groups
<b>Martyr</b>	-- a person who dies for a particular cause

Sermons and their meanings are an important part of the religion called Christianity. **Jesus** was the founder of Christianity. In the beginning, the followers of Christianity were often the poor and slaves. Over time, Christianity spread throughout the entire Roman Empire.

### Beginnings of Christianity

Christianity was one of many religions in the vast Roman Empire. The empire contained many lands with different languages, customs, and religions. The Romans were tolerant toward the people in these lands. They allowed them to follow their own religions. But the people Rome conquered also had to show loyalty to Roman gods and to the emperor.

**Unrest in Judaea:** The Romans conquered the Jewish homeland of Judaea in 63 B.C. At first, they respected the Jews' right to worship their God. But many Jews resented foreign rule. Some believed that a **messiah**, or savior, would come to bring justice and freedom to the land. As opposition to Roman rule grew, the Roman senate appointed a new ruler of Judaea named Herod. It was during Herod's reign that Jesus was born in the Judaeian town of Bethlehem.

Stories about what Jesus taught and how he lived are found in the New Testament, a part of the Christian Bible. After Jesus died, his **disciples**, or followers, told stories about his life and teaching. Between 40 and 70 years after his death, four of these stories --- believed to have been written by men named Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John --- came to be accepted by Christians as true descriptions of Jesus' life and work. These writings are known as the four Gospels.

**Christian Beliefs:** According to the New Testament, Jesus grew up in Nazareth and learned to be a carpenter. He began teaching when he was about 30 years old. Christian tradition holds that for three years, Jesus traveled from place to place, preaching to Jews who lived in the countryside. Much of what he taught was part of the Jewish tradition he learned as he was growing up. Like all Jewish teachers, Jesus preached that there is only one true God.

According to the Gospels, Jesus taught that God is loving and forgiving. He told his followers, "love the Lord your God with all your heart... and love your neighbor as yourself."

He promised that people who believe in him and follow his teachings will have everlasting life. His followers believed that Jesus was their messiah.

**Fears of Christianity:** Jesus' teachings alarmed many people. Some complained to the Romans that Jesus was teaching that God was greater than the emperor. Fearing that he might lead an armed revolt against the government, the Roman governor condemned Jesus to death. He was crucified, or put to death by being nailed to a large wooden cross. According to the Gospels, Jesus rose from the dead and spoke to his disciples, telling them to spread his teachings.

## Christianity Spreads

The Greek equivalent of the word messiah was christos. Many educated people of that day spoke Greek. As these people accepted Jesus' teachings, they began calling him Christ. After his death, his followers, called Christians, spread the new religion from Jerusalem to Antioch in Syria, and finally to Rome itself.

**The Letters of Paul:** One of the most devoted followers of Jesus' teachings was a Jew whose original name was Saul. Saul was well educated and spoke Greek, the common language of the eastern Roman Empire. According to the New Testament, Saul at first rejected the Christian message. One day, however, he believed he had a vision in which Jesus spoke to him. After this experience, Saul changed his name to Paul and carried Christianity to the cities around the Mediterranean, spreading Jesus' teachings as he traveled.

Paul's writings also helped turn the Christian faith into an organized religion. Paul wrote many epistles, or letters, to Christian groups in distant cities. Some of these epistles became a part of the Christian Bible.

**Rome Burns:** Because Christians refused to worship Roman gods or the emperor, many Roman officials began to view them as enemies of the empire. Under the emperor Nero, the first official campaign against the Christians began in A.D. 64. One night, a fire started in some shops in Rome. The fire spread and burned for nine days, leaving much of the city in ruins.

According to some accounts, Nero blamed the Christians. He ordered the arrest of Christians, who were sent to their deaths. According to tradition, Paul was imprisoned and then killed.

**The Appeal of Christianity:** At times over the next 250 years, the Romans tormented Christians. During these years, the Roman Empire began to lose its power. To explain the decline, the Romans sometimes blamed the Christians.

Still, Christianity spread throughout the empire. Its message of hope for a better life after death appealed to many. The help that Christian communities gave to widows, orphans, and the poor also attracted followers.

Emperor Diocletian, who ruled from A.D. 284 to 305, outlawed Christian services and put many believers to death. Nonetheless, many Roman admired the Christians. They saw them as martyrs and heroes. A **martyr** is someone who dies for a particular cause. By the A.D. 200s, over 50,000 Romans had accepted the Christian faith.

**Questions:**

1. Why did some Jewish people resent Roman rule?
2. How did the Romans regard early Christians?
3. Why do you think the Roman governor had Jesus put to death?

**Guided Reading:** These questions are attached to your daily email. 😊