

# CHRISTIANITY

## HISTORY

Christians are the followers of a Jew named Jesus of Nazareth (a town in what is now northern Israel). Jesus had such a great influence on the world that the Gregorian calendar, used by most of the world today, sets the year calculated to be that of Jesus' birth as year zero (although some scholars today disagree with the exact calculations).

Jesus was born to a young girl named Mary who was engaged to a man named Joseph. Many Christians believe that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was born, and that God was His father.

Jesus grew up to be a great teacher and healer, traveling from place to place, telling stories and curing all kinds of ailments. He gained a following, and thousands flocked to see and hear Him. He chose a small group, the twelve apostles, to be closest to Him and to carry on His message.

When he was about thirty-three years old, Jesus was sentenced to death by hanging on a cross, by the government authorities who saw Him as a threat to their political power. Christians believe that after three days in the tomb, Jesus was *resurrected* (came alive again) and appeared to his followers many times before finally leaving earth for heaven.

Jesus' followers banded together and began to tell others about His death and resurrection, gaining many converts. They began to be called *Christians*, from the Greek word *Christos*, a translation of the Hebrew *Messiah*, which means *anointed one*. At first, the Christians had to meet in secret as they were persecuted by the Romans, who were in power at the time. This changed in the fourth century, C.E., when Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire.

With the power of the growing Roman Empire behind it, Christianity quickly spread through Europe and parts of Africa and the Middle East.

The word *catholic* comes from the Greek word for *universal*, which was used to describe the early Christian church, which included all Christians. The Christian church became known as the *Roman Catholic Church*. Church and government leaders together controlled the empire. When the Roman Empire declined, the separate countries that formed in Europe were also ruled by a partnership of church and governmental leaders.

In 1054 C.E., churches in Greece and areas further east officially split off from the Roman Catholic Church, forming the Eastern Orthodox Church. Although the Roman church was no longer technically *catholic* (universal), it retained its name.

During the time called the Middle Ages (sixth through twelfth centuries, C.E.), the church was a part of the daily lives of most people in Europe. It played a great part in cultural developments such as art and music. It also became very powerful. In the sixteenth century some people, most notably Martin Luther, became



The Holy Eucharist, or Lord's Supper

dissatisfied with the church and broke away to form their own churches. This time is known as the Protestant Reformation. Denominations began to form, beginning with Lutheranism, named after Martin Luther. The Anabaptists (later to become Mennonites and Amish), Anglicans (who became Episcopalians in America), and the Reformed/Presbyterian denominations began soon after. As differences arose, many other denominations formed.

Christianity spread as people moved from place to place. Many Christians take seriously Jesus' words "preach the gospel to all nations," and send missionaries out to all parts of the world, making converts and creating new Christian communities. Today, Christianity as a whole is the largest religion in the world.

## BELIEFS

Although specific beliefs vary from denomination to denomination, all Christians honor Jesus and most believe that faith in His death and resurrection saves a person from the consequences of sin and gives them eternal life.

## CONCEPT OF GOD

Most Christians believe in the concept of the trinity: a supreme God, who came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ and is active in the world as the Holy Spirit.

## SACRED WRITINGS

The *Bible* contains the foundation of Christian teachings. It was written over a period of several centuries, and tells the stories of the Jewish people before Jesus, of Jesus' life and death, and of the early Christian church started by Jesus' followers. Some Christians believe that the *Bible* is completely and literally true. Others believe that the *Bible* is inspired by God but also influenced by the time and place in history in which it was written.

Many Christians also refer to historic Christian documents particularly the Apostles' Creed, which dates back to near the time of the apostles, and the Nicene Creed, which was written at the Council of Nicea (a large Christian meeting) in 325 C.E. Both creeds give an

outline of Christian beliefs about the trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

## SYMBOLS

The primary Christian symbol is the cross, representing the cross on which Jesus died. Most Christians use this symbol. Some also use the *crucifix*, a cross with Jesus' body represented on it.

## WORSHIP/SACRED SPACE

Most Christians worship in church buildings, which may be of any shape and size. Christian worship services also vary from denomination to denomination, but most include prayers, songs, readings from the *Bible*, and a sermon or talk by a clergyperson or lay person. One prayer common to all Christians is the Lord's Prayer, which was given by Jesus to His followers.

Most Christians believe in baptism as the ritual of entry into the Church. In some groups, water is sprinkled or poured on a person's head. In others, the person is fully immersed (dunked) in water. Baptism signifies the washing away of sins and rebirth into a new Christian life.

Most Christians also celebrate some form of what may be called the Lord's Supper, Communion, or the Holy Eucharist. The people share bread and wine or grape juice in remembrance of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and in anticipation of Jesus' return.

## HOLIDAYS/FESTIVALS

- **Christmas** – celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ, which is remembered on December 25<sup>th</sup>.
- **Easter** – the Sunday after the first full moon that occurs after March 21<sup>st</sup>. On Easter, Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- **Pentecost Sunday** – the seventh Sunday after Easter, many Christians celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the trinity.

## MEMBERSHIP/WORLD DISTRIBUTION

There are over two billion Christians, living all over the world. About half are Roman Catholics.



## LESSON 4

500  
B.C.

250  
B.C.

A.D.  
1

A.D.  
100

A.D.  
250

A.D.  
500

# BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTIANITY

### READ ALOUD

*"Fear not; for, behold, I bring you good news of great joy . . . for to you is born in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you; you will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."*

*These words, taken from the writings of an important new religion, announce the birth of a child in the Roman empire. Despite his humble birth, this child grew up to change the world.*

### THE BIG PICTURE

During the rule of Augustus, Rome increased its control over Judea, the region that once had been known as Canaan. You read in Chapter 5 that many Jews had been exiled from this land and brought to ancient Babylon. Many descendants had by now returned from their exile to rebuild their towns and cities. In Jerusalem they built a new temple that stood on the remains of the one that had been destroyed long ago. Elsewhere, towering aqueducts stood as reminders of the newer, Roman rule.

Into this world a new religion, Christianity, was born. The story of its birth is told in a collection of books called the New Testament. The Hebrew Bible, which you read about in Chapter 5, came to be called the Old Testament by followers of Christianity. Together, the Old and New Testaments formed their Bible. Its words are sacred to nearly 2 billion Christians living in the world today.

### Focus Activity

**READ TO LEARN**  
What did Jesus teach?

#### VOCABULARY

Christianity  
New Testament  
Messiah  
parable  
apostle  
bishop  
pope

#### PEOPLE

Jesus  
Peter  
Paul

#### PLACES

Judea  
Bethlehem  
Nazareth

## THE LIFE OF JESUS

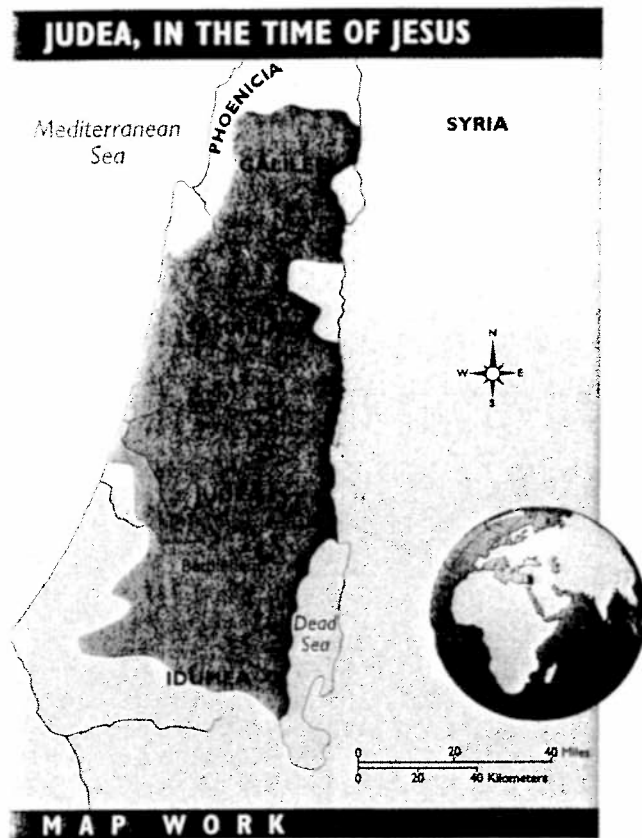
One book of the New Testament begins with an important order from Emperor Augustus that a census be taken throughout the entire empire. Augustus's order meant that all the people in the empire had to return to the towns where they were born so that they could be counted. So a Jewish carpenter named Joseph and his wife Mary set out for Bethlehem (BETH luh hem), a small town south of Jerusalem. Find Bethlehem on the map on this page. While there, the Bible says, Mary gave birth to a son, Jesus.

### Jesus' Childhood

The New Testament says little about Jesus' childhood. Jesus and his family lived in Nazareth (NAZ ur uth), a tiny village in the northern hills of Judea. The New Testament does say, though, that as a boy Jesus learned a great deal about the teachings of Judaism. According to the Bible, that became clear when Jesus was 12 years old and he went to Jerusalem with his parents. They went to celebrate the Passover festival there.

*When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. . . . When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.*

This passage would by no means be the last one in which the New Testament describes how Jesus amazed those around him.



Jesus lived in Nazareth, in northern Judea.

1. Which is farther east—Jerusalem or Bethlehem?
2. About how many miles from Jerusalem is Nazareth?

From the age of 30 on, the Bible says, Jesus spent much of his time teaching crowds of people. Many came to hear him, the Bible says, because he healed sick people and performed many other miracles.

According to Jewish belief, the Messiah is a special leader to be sent by God in order to guide the Jewish people and to set up God's rule on Earth. The word Messiah in Greek is *Christos*. In time the followers of Jesus came to believe that he was the Messiah, or Christos. The people who followed Jesus became known as Christians. Their religion soon became known as Christianity.

The New Testament states that Jesus often used \_\_\_\_\_, or simple stories that contain a message or truth. Some of these stories taught the value of seeking the right path in life. Others described the greatness of God's love for all people. Still others stressed the importance of loving other people. Many of Jesus' parables are recorded in the New Testament. How does Jesus describe love in this passage?

PRIMARY SOURCE

Excerpt from  
the Gospel of Luke,  
New Testament, c. A.D. 60

*I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus revealed many of his most important teachings.



## Twelve Apostles

Jesus' closest followers were called \_\_\_\_\_ (uh PAHS ulz). The apostles were 12 men Jesus had chosen to help him in his teaching. The Bible says they came from all walks of life. One of the apostles, \_\_\_\_\_, had fished for a living before joining Jesus. Another, Levi, had been a tax collector for Rome. The Bible tells us that the apostles had little in common before they met Jesus. It goes on to say, however, that they became united through Jesus' teachings. The apostles helped to spread Jesus' teachings after he died.

## A Growing Following

The New Testament says that while he taught, Jesus also cured many people of illnesses. Both Jews and non-Jews benefited from these miracles, the Bible says. As a result, the number of Jesus' followers grew. The New Testament states that a prophet called John the Baptist sent people to ask Jesus if he was the Messiah the Jews were



Christian church services (left) honor Jesus' life and teachings. Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (above) shows Jesus' final meal with the twelve apostles.

waiting for. The Bible says Jesus answered:

*Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk . . . , the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.*

Jesus' answer was made up of quotes from the Hebrew Bible.

### **Trouble with Rome**

Jesus' growing popularity troubled many people. Some of them were afraid that he wanted to be a king and was going to set up a new kingdom on Earth. These beliefs added to the fears of the Roman governors that talk of revolt was spreading throughout Judea.

When crowds jammed the streets of Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover festival, soldiers moved in on Jesus to arrest him. After questioning Jesus, a Roman governor sentenced him to die by crucifixion (kroo suh FIK shun). The word *crucifixion* means "putting to death by hanging from a cross."

Roman leaders throughout the empire commonly used crucifixion to punish slaves, rebel leaders, and others regarded as criminals.

According to the New Testament, Jesus may have been in his thirties when he died. The Bible also tells us that Jesus rose from the dead three days after he was crucified. Then he rejoined his apostles and told them again about the coming kingdom of God. Afterwards, the Bible says, Jesus rose to heaven. Today most Christians try to follow Jesus' teachings and to celebrate his renewed life and message of hope on Easter Sunday.



## THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

The New Testament does not end with the story of Jesus' ascent, or rise, into heaven. It goes on to tell how Christianity spread throughout the Roman world. Leading the growth of Christianity were the apostles of Jesus.

### A Christian Church

The New Testament says that after the death of Jesus, Christians scattered to cities throughout the Roman empire. There they set up dozens of Christian churches. Soon these churches drew the attention of Roman leaders. Some Roman rulers were angry at the Christians for refusing to worship the emperor. Still, the new religion continued to grow and attract followers.

According to the New Testament, the new churches included people from all ranks in life. These included the Roman commander Cornelius, the cloth merchant Lydia, and the slave Onesimus.

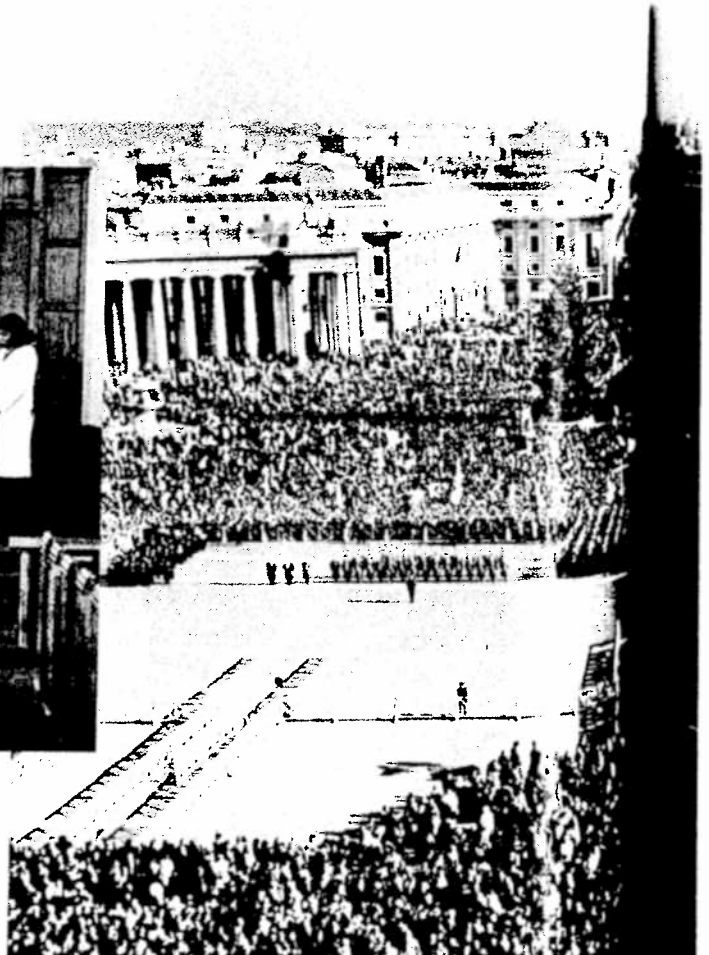
A church leader named \_\_\_\_\_ reminded them that

*There is no longer Jew or Greek, . . . slave or free, . . . male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*

Paul was not one of the first 12 apostles. Unlike the earliest followers of Jesus, Paul grew up in a big city, Tarsus, in what is today Turkey. Paul was well educated in both the Hebrew Bible and Greek classics. At first he was against Christianity, but later he became a Christian himself. Paul spoke in many different cities about Christianity. The New Testament says he debated with Jewish teachers in Jerusalem and with philosophers in the streets of Athens. Paul, together with other Christians, spread Christianity throughout the Roman world.



The Christians above are praying in a church in the United States. The Pope (right) blesses Christians in Rome.



## Christianity in Rome

Early church historians wrote that the apostle Peter helped bring Christianity to Rome's crowded neighborhoods. Before they died, Peter and Paul helped build the framework that would make Rome's Christian community the largest in the empire. Christians call Peter the first bishop, or regional church leader, of Rome. Later, Christians would give the bishop of Rome the title pope—from the Latin word for "father." The pope today is the leader of a branch of Christianity known as Roman Catholicism.

As time passed, Christians were tortured and killed by the Roman government. Despite increasing violence against Christians, Christianity continued to flourish in Rome and elsewhere. Both rich and poor continued to be drawn to Jesus' message of love and hope.

## WHY IT MATTERS

One of the most powerful supporters of Christianity was a man who became emperor of Rome. You will read about this man and the effects of his actions in the next lesson.

Since its beginnings in the hills of Judea and its spread throughout the Roman empire, Christianity has become one of the world's major religions. In chapters to come you will read about how Christianity has affected life on every continent on Earth.

### ✓ Reviewing Facts and Ideas

#### SUM IT UP

- Christianity developed in Roman-occupied Judea during the Pax Romana.
- The life and teachings of Jesus are recorded in the New Testament of the Christian Bible.
- The New Testament says that the followers of Jesus believed that he was the Messiah.
- Two of Jesus' followers, Peter and Paul, helped to spread Christianity throughout the Roman world.

#### THINK ABOUT IT

1. Why, according to the New Testament, was Jesus born in Bethlehem?
2. Why were the followers of Jesus called *Christians*?
3. **FOCUS** How were Jesus' teachings rooted in Judaism?
4. **THINKING SKILL** Make a conclusion about the importance of the Apostles to the spread of Christianity.
5. **GEOGRAPHY** What role did the Roman empire play in the movement of Christianity throughout the ancient Mediterranean world?

