

A New Religion: Christianity

**BEFORE
YOU
READ**

Reach Into Your Background

How would you feel if people teased or criticized you for a belief that you held? What would you do? Would you

defend your belief? If so, how would you do this?

Questions to Explore

1. What ideas did Jesus teach?
2. How did the Roman government attack Christianity? How did the religion finally triumph?

Key Terms

messiah
disciple
Gospel
epistle
martyr

Key People and Places

Jesus
Paul
Nero
Judea

▼ In this Roman sculpture, Jesus restores sight to a blind man. Belief in Jesus' powers helped early Christians face cruel persecution.



“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the lowly, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for what is right, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be treated with mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted in the cause of right, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

—*The Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:1–10*

According to the Bible, Jesus, a Jewish religious teacher, spoke these words to his followers and others in the first century A.D. These words are an important part of the religion called Christianity. In the beginning, its followers were mainly the poor and slaves. Roman rulers tried to stamp out Christianity by killing its followers. But over time, it spread throughout the entire Roman Empire.

The 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 conquered people had to show loyalty to Roman gods and to the emperor.

The Romans conquered the Jewish homeland of Judea 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 Romans struck back with harsh punishment. In 37 B.C., the Roman senate appointed a new ruler of Judea named Herod (HAIR uhd). It was during Herod's reign that a man named Jesus was born in the Judean town of Nazareth. *Bethlehem*

Most of what we know about Jesus' life is 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 stories of his life were written from these oral traditions. People came to believe that four disciples—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—had each written one story. These writings are called the **Gospels**.

We know little of Jesus' childhood and youth except that he grew up in Nazareth. He learned to be a carpenter and began teaching when he was about 30 years old. 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 into which he had been born. Like all Jewish teachers, Jesus preached that there was only one true God.

According to the Gospels, Jesus taught that God was loving and forgiving. He said that a person had the responsibility to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus also said he

READ ACTIVELY

Ask Questions What questions do you have about Jesus and his beliefs?

▼ This scene, painted on a wall of a catacomb in Rome, shows Jesus with his disciples.



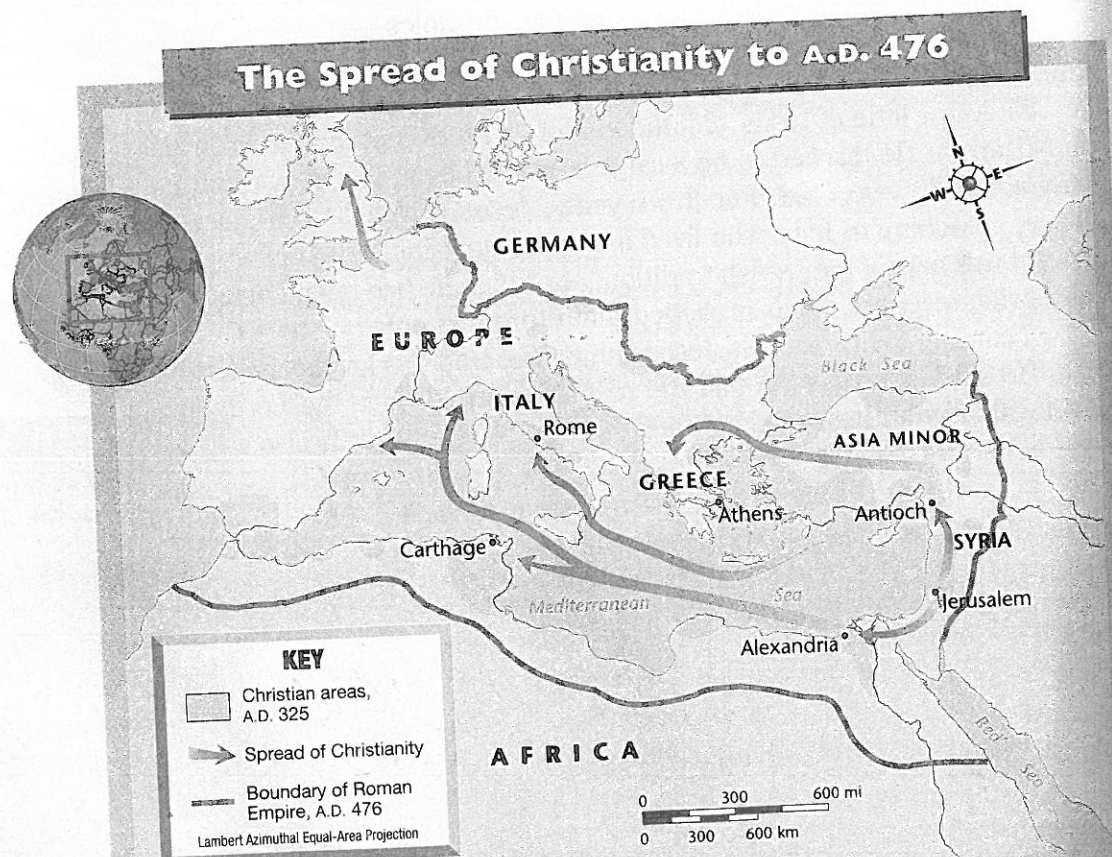
was the Son of God and the Messiah. He promised that people who believed in him and followed his teachings would have everlasting life.

Jesus' teachings alarmed many people. Some complained to the Romans that Jesus was teaching that God was greater than the emperor. The Romans feared that he would lead an armed revolt against Roman rule, so 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.

One of Jesus' most devoted disciples was a Jew named Paul. Paul was well educated and spoke both Greek and Latin. According to the



Map Study Paul and other apostles carried the Christian message to far-flung places. From its beginning in Jerusalem, the new religion eventually extended throughout the Roman Empire. **Location** Christianity spread out from Jerusalem. To which North African cities did it spread? To which Italian city did it spread?

pels, Paul at first rejected the Christian message. One day as he reached the Syrian city of Damascus, he had a vision that Jesus spoke to him. After this experience, Paul decided to travel to spread the word of Jesus. He persuaded Jesus' followers that his teachings should spread to Greeks and Romans, and not just to Jews. Paul carried Christianity to the cities around the Mediterranean. Paul's writings also helped turn the Christian faith into an organized religion. Paul wrote many **epistles** (ee PIS uhlz), or letters, to Christian groups in distant cities. Many of these epistles became a part of the Christian Bible.

The fast-growing new religion soon alarmed the Roman government. Christians refused to worship the 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 burned for nine days and left much of the city in ruins. Nero blamed the Christians. He watched with pleasure as Christians were sent to their deaths. Some were forced to fight wild animals in the Colosseum. Others were soaked with oil and burned alive. Others, like the disciple Paul, were crucified.

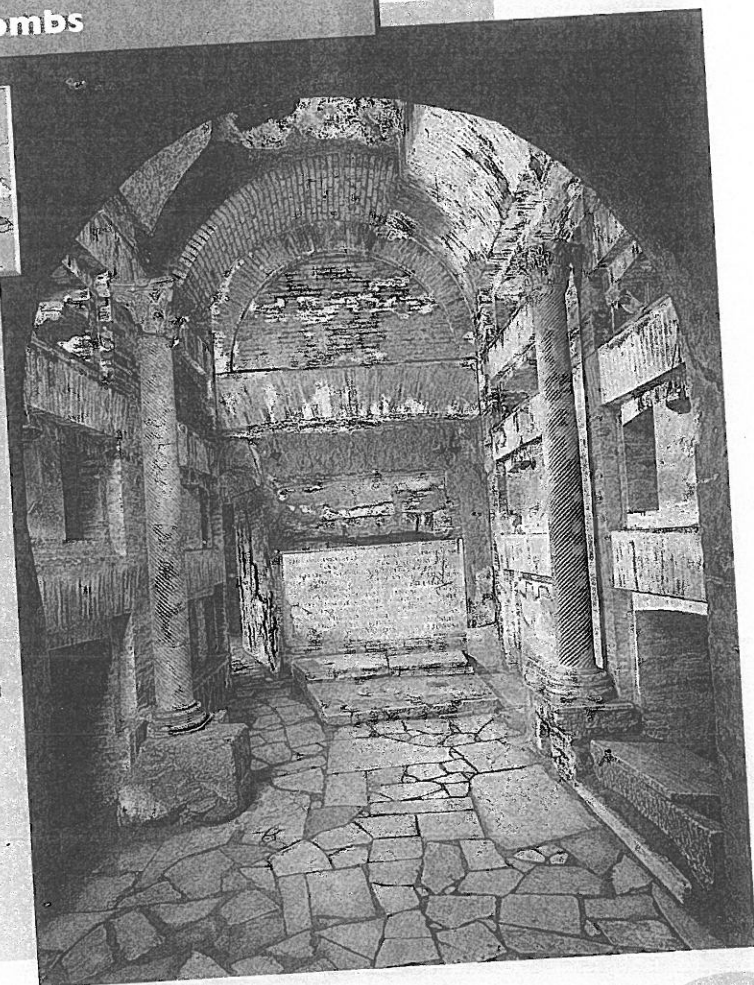
LINKS TO LANGUAGE ARTS

Sign of the Fish A secret sign that Christians used to identify one another was a simple image of a fish. How did a fish come to be an early Christian symbol? Each letter of the Greek word for fish, *ichthys*, was the first letter of a word in a Greek phrase. The phrase meant "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior."

Christian Catacombs



Hidden deep underground, in passageways called catacombs (right), early Christians buried their dead and worshipped in secret. They decorated the tombstones with Christian symbols such as the fish and cross-shaped anchor (left).



CITIZEN HEROES

To Be a Leader Fabiola was a rich Roman noblewoman. Near the end of the 300s, she gave up her comfortable life and became a Christian. She gave money to support her religion. Fabiola founded and worked in a hospital where anyone could come for care. It was the first public hospital in Western Europe.



◀ Statues and paintings showing Jesus as a shepherd borrowed a popular pre-Christian symbol for gentleness and charity.

The Romans tormented Christians off and on for another 250 years. During these years, the Roman Empire began to lose its power. To explain the decline, Romans looked for people to blame. They found them among the followers of the new religion. As one Roman wrote:

“If the Tiber River reaches the walls, if the Nile fails to rise to the fields, if the sky doesn’t move or the Earth does, if there is famine or plague, the cry is at once: ‘The Christians to the Lions.’”

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 people. Not even the emperor Diocletian (dy uh KLEE shuhn) could stop its growth. Diocletian outlawed Christian services, imprisoned Christian priests, and put many believers to death.

However, these actions did the opposite of what Diocletian wanted. Many Romans admired the Christians. They saw them as martyrs and heroes. **Martyrs** are people who choose to die for a cause they believe in. By the A.D. 300s, about one in every ten Romans had accepted the Christian faith.

SECTION 4 REVIEW

- 1. Define** (a) messiah, (b) disciple, (c) Gospel, (d) epistle, (e) martyr.
- 2. Identify** (a) Jesus, (b) Paul, (c) Nero, (d) Judea.

- 3.** What ideas of Jesus attracted followers?
- 4.** Why did Christianity seem threatening to the Roman government?

Critical Thinking

- 5. Drawing Conclusions**
Why do you think the Christians refused to worship the Roman gods and the emperor?

Activity

- 6. Writing to Learn** You are a Roman official at the time of Jesus. Write a journal entry that describes your feelings about the new religion.