



◀ Early Christians were hunted down and persecuted by Roman soldiers.

The Origins and Spread of Christianity

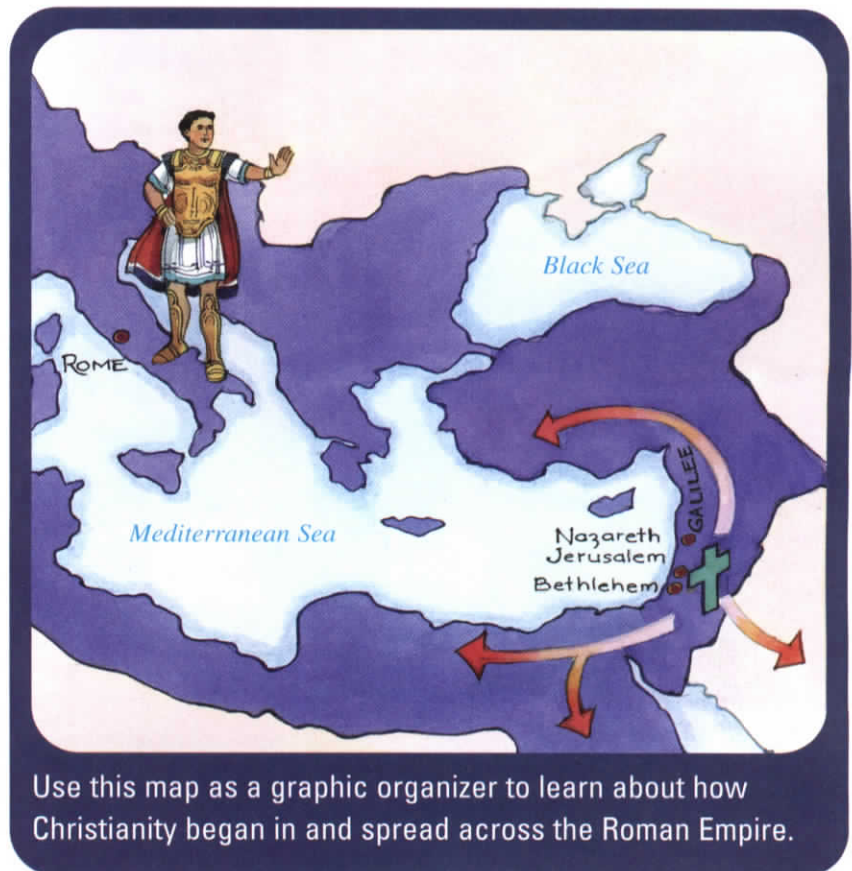
36.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, you explored daily life in Rome at the height of the Roman Empire. In this chapter, you will discover how a new religion, called **Christianity**, spread through the empire. Christians are followers of **Jesus Christ**, who was put to death on a Roman cross in the first century C.E. Christians believe that Jesus was the Son of God and rose from the dead.

Many Romans saw Christianity as a threat to Roman order and traditions. Several emperors tried to stop the spread of the new religion through violent persecutions. Then, in 312 C.E., the emperor Constantine had a dream about Jesus the night before going into battle against a rival. The next day, he had a vision of a cross hanging in the sky in front of the sun. Around the cross were the words “In this sign, you will conquer.”

Constantine’s men went into battle with the first two letters of the word *Christ* on their shields. At the Milvian Bridge, near Rome, they won a great victory. From that time on, Constantine favored the Christian God over all others. Eighty years later, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

How did this amazing change happen? Where did Christianity begin? How did it gradually spread throughout the empire? In this chapter, you’ll find out.



prefect a high official in ancient Rome

Messiah a savior that many Jews believed had been promised by God

36.2 Judea: The Birthplace of Christianity

The birthplace of Christianity was a remote territory on the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea where Jesus was born. The Romans called it Judea. Once it had been part of the ancient kingdom of Israel ruled by Kings David and Solomon.

The Jews were devoted to their homeland and to their belief in a single god. This belief, together with their religious customs, set them apart from their neighbors in the ancient world.

Once an independent kingdom, Judea came under Roman rule in 63 B.C.E. The Romans tried to govern the country by putting in charge Jewish rulers who agreed with Roman rule. But several times, groups of Jews rebelled against Roman control.

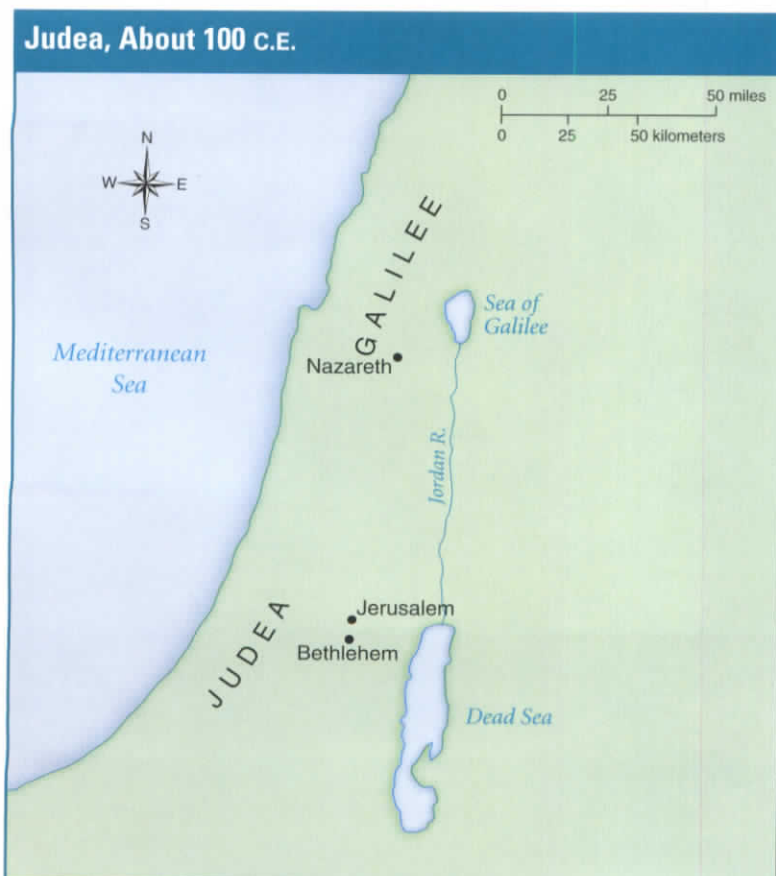
In 37 B.C.E., Rome appointed a man named Herod to be the king of Judea. Herod was not Jewish by birth, but he converted to the Jewish religion and rebuilt the Temple of Jerusalem. Still, many Jews distrusted him. They saw him as a puppet of, or controlled by, the Romans.

When Herod died in 4 B.C.E., his kingdom was divided among his three sons. Once again, unrest broke out. Finally, Rome sent

soldiers to Judea to take control of the Jews. They replaced Herod's sons with a **prefect**, or military governor.

The prefect kept order and made sure Judea paid tribute (money) to Rome. But he usually left local affairs to the Jews themselves. For example, a council of Jewish leaders, led by a high (chief) priest, ruled the Jews' holy city of Jerusalem.

At the time of Jesus' birth, Judea was outwardly peaceful. But many Jews hated the Romans. In their sacred writings, they saw prophecies that one day God would send a savior to restore the glorious kingdom of David. This savior was called the **Messiah**, or "anointed one." ("Anointed" means blessed with oil. More generally, it means specially chosen by God.) When, the Jews asked, will the Messiah come?



36.3 Writings About the Life of Jesus

Historical records tell us a great deal about the days of the Roman Empire. The lives of the emperors, for example, were recorded in detail. But there were no historians to write about the life of Jesus, a little-known teacher in the tiny and far-off territory of Judea. Instead, most of the information about him comes from the writings of his followers.

These writings make up the New Testament of the Christian Bible. Among them are four

gospels. The gospels are accounts of Jesus' life that were written in Greek by four of his followers. Their names have come down to us as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

The word *gospel* means "good news." The gospels were written to spread the news of Jesus' life and teachings. They were statements of faith in Jesus as the promised Messiah. Often the gospels relate events in Jesus' life to prophecies about the Messiah. The Greek word for Messiah was "Christos" (Christ). In time Jesus became known as Jesus the Christ, or simply Jesus Christ.

The gospels were written down from oral and written sources 30 to 70 years after Jesus died. They tell of many incidents in the life of Jesus. They describe him as working miracles, healing the sick, and befriending the poor and the friendless. They also tell about his preaching (what he taught). He preached of God's mercy and love, and urged his followers to love one another.

The writers of the four gospels are called *evangelists*, from a Greek word that means "bringer of good news."

gospel an account of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ



36.4 The Birth of Jesus

No one knows exactly when Jesus was born. Our modern calendar dates the start of the Common Era from the supposed year of Jesus' birth. But after careful study, later historians now believe that Jesus was probably born in about 6 B.C.E., during the reign of King Herod.

The gospel of Luke tells the story of Jesus' birth. According to the gospel, Jesus' mother, Mary, lived in a town called Nazareth, in the Roman territory of Galilee. There, the gospels claim, an angel appeared to her. The angel told Mary she would have a child and that she should name him Jesus.

Around this time, Luke's gospel says, the emperor Augustus ordered a census, or count, of all the people in the empire. Each man was supposed to go to the town of his birth to be counted. Mary's husband, a carpenter named Joseph, set out from Nazareth on the 90-mile journey to his hometown of Bethlehem, in the territory of Judea. Mary, already pregnant with Jesus, went with him.



According to the gospel of Luke, Jesus was born in a stable, where his mother laid him in a manger.



Bethlehem was called “the city of David,” after the revered king who had once ruled Israel. According to the gospel, when Mary and Joseph arrived, the inn was already crowded, and they were forced to seek shelter in a stable. There Mary gave birth. She wrapped her baby in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, or a feed box for animals. Only humble shepherds came to see the newborn baby.

According to the gospel of Luke, Jesus’ family returned to Nazareth after his birth. The gospels say little about Jesus’ childhood. It is likely that he grew up in Nazareth and learned carpentry, Joseph’s trade. Like other boys, he probably spent long hours studying Jewish law and religious writings. According to Luke, at the age of 12 Jesus astonished the rabbis, or teachers, in the great Temple of Jerusalem with his wisdom and his knowledge of Jewish law.

When he was about 30, Jesus was **baptized** in the Jordan River by a preacher known as John the Baptist. John was urging people to change their way of life because, he said, the Messiah was coming soon.

The gospel says that when Jesus came to be baptized, John identified him as the savior the Jews had been waiting for. His baptism was a turning point in his life. After 40 days of praying in the wilderness, Jesus returned to Galilee and began to preach.

This star marks the spot where, according to tradition, Jesus was born. The star is located in a cave underneath the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

baptize a ritual by which a person is welcomed into a religion

disciple a person who helps spread the religious teachings of another

36.5 Jesus' Teachings

According to the gospels, Jesus began his ministry—or career of teaching, healings, and service to others—in the towns and villages of Galilee. At first he preached in synagogues, Jewish places of worship. As his reputation spread, larger and larger

crowds came to hear him. So Jesus began teaching in open areas—in the street, on hill-sides, and by the Sea of Galilee.

Early on, Jesus called a small number to be his followers, or **disciples**. The disciples were mostly simple, plain-spoken people—laborers and fishermen. Throughout his ministry, Jesus spent time with ordinary people, the poor, and the sick rather than those who were wealthy and important.

Jesus based his teaching on traditional Jewish beliefs. But the gospels say he put special emphasis on love and mercy. Of all the Jewish laws, he said, two were the most important. The first was, “You shall love your God with all your heart and all your soul.” The second was, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus told his followers that the kingdom of God was coming soon. But for Jesus, God’s kingdom was not an earthly kingdom of power and riches.

Instead, the kingdom of God meant a time when people would live according to God’s will. Then, Jesus said, everyone would know God’s love for all people, even those who suffer or who are looked down upon by others.



Large crowds gathered to hear Jesus preach and to ask him to cure the sick.

One of Jesus' favorite ways of teaching was through **parables**, simple stories with moral or religious messages. Jewish law says that you should love your neighbor as yourself. When asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan. Once a traveler was beaten and robbed on the road. Two people passed by and ignored him. But a Samaritan stopped and helped the man. Because of the Samaritan's good deed, Jesus considered him to be a neighbor and worthy of love.

In another parable, Jesus described the happiness of a man who had found one lost sheep, even though he had 99 others. Like that man, Jesus said, God would rejoice more for one sinner who had changed his ways than for 99 righteous people who did not need to change.

Teachings like this shocked and angered some of Jesus' listeners. To some Jews, this way of thinking was wrong and dangerous. Others worried that Jesus' growing following would stir up trouble with the Romans.

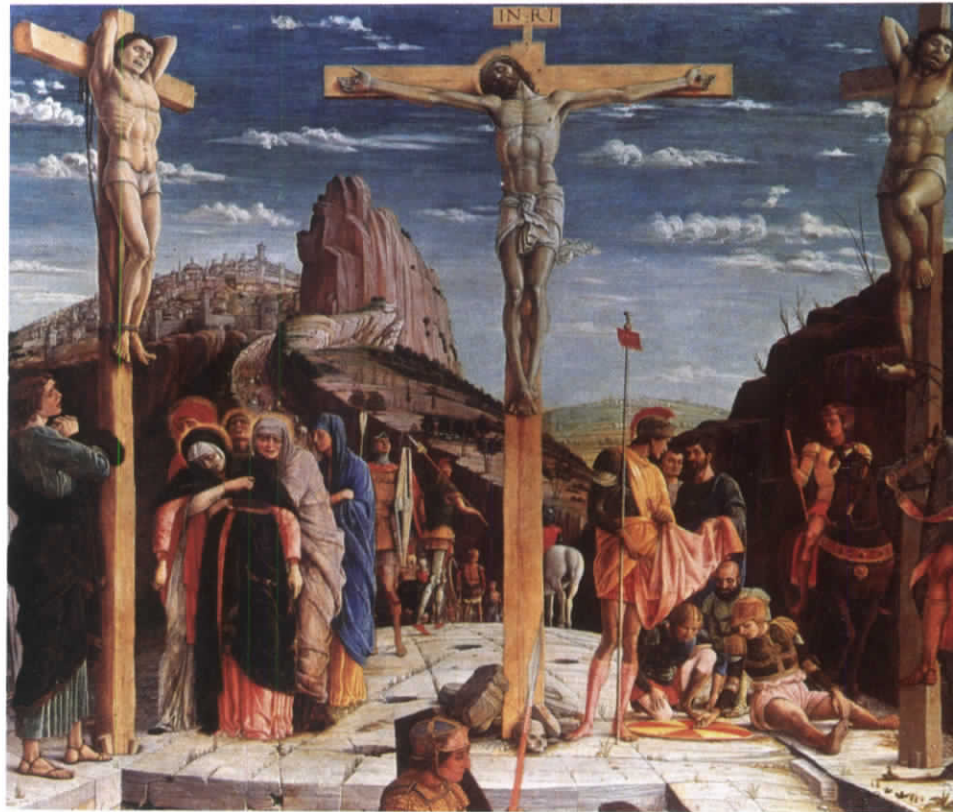
Jesus did not preach revolt against the Romans. "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God," he said. Still, it was easy for some people to see him as a troublemaker.

parable a simple story that explains a moral or religious lesson



Jesus taught along these shores of the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus died the painful death of a common criminal.



36.6 The Crucifixion and Resurrection

After a year or two of traveling and preaching, Jesus went to Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Passover. The festival celebrated God's rescue of the Jews from Egypt more than a thousand years before Jesus' time. Every year, many thousands of Jews came to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Roman soldiers kept a sharp eye out for anyone who might start a demonstration against Rome.

Shouting crowds welcomed Jesus into the city. At the Temple, Jesus saw the traders and money-changers who were allowed to do business in the outer court. In a fury, he drove them from the Temple. "This is a house of prayer," he cried, "but you have made it into a den of thieves!" Jesus' bold action enraged the temple's priests.

The gospels say that Jesus knew what would happen. He knew that his enemies would come together to destroy him and that he would be killed.

Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' handpicked disciples, had decided to betray him. After a final meal (the Last Supper) with his disciples, Jesus went to pray in a garden. Judas told the temple priests where Jesus could be found. As Jesus was led away under guard, the other disciples ran away.

Jesus had angered both Jewish and Roman leaders. The Jewish priest accused Jesus of claiming to be the Son of God. This, said the priest, was **blasphemy**, the crime of saying something that was deeply insulting to God. In addition, the gospels say, some of Jesus' enemies claimed he called himself the king of the Jews.

The Roman leaders feared that Jesus was becoming too powerful. If Jesus called himself king of the Jews, then he was a threat to Roman rule in Judea. Quick to put down any possible rebellion, the Roman prefect condemned Jesus to a rebel's death. Jesus would die by crucifixion—being nailed to a cross.

After being whipped, Jesus was taken to a hill outside the city walls. There he was crucified and left to die between two other condemned men. A sign above his head read, "The King of the Jews."

After hours of agony, Jesus died. A few faithful followers took his body and buried it that Friday in a tomb carved out of rock.

On Sunday, the gospels say, Jesus rose from the dead. His followers call this event the Resurrection. Belief in the Resurrection convinced Jesus' disciples that he was the Son of God. According to the gospels, Jesus left them again some time later to join his Father in heaven. His disciples then found the courage to begin spreading the news of his life and teaching.

blasphemy a disrespectful act or statement against God



This 15th-century painting by Piero della Francesca is called *The Resurrection of Christ*. It is the artist's interpretation of how Jesus may have risen from his tomb after his death.

36.7 The Missionary Work of Paul

When Jesus' followers began preaching that he was the Son of God, they ran into fierce opposition. One of their enemies was a man named Saul. Saul came from Tarsus, a town in modern-day Turkey. He was a Greek-speaking Jew and a Roman citizen. Saul thought the new religion was both wrong and dangerous. He did not believe the new teachings and argued against them.

According to the New Testament, one day he was riding on his horse to the town of Damascus in Syria. Suddenly he fell from his horse, blinded by a light from heaven. He heard a voice calling, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Blind and paralyzed, Saul was taken by some of his followers to Damascus, where a Christian healed him. Saul firmly believed



Even under arrest, Paul continued to teach and encourage communities of Christians through his letters. The letters became part of the Christian Bible.



In this enamel plaque from the 12th century, Paul speaks with Jews and Gentiles.

that he had heard the voice of the risen Jesus. From that time on, he was convinced that Jesus was the promised Messiah and the Son of God. Saul adopted the new faith himself and became a tireless Christian **missionary**, one who tries to convert others to his or her religion.

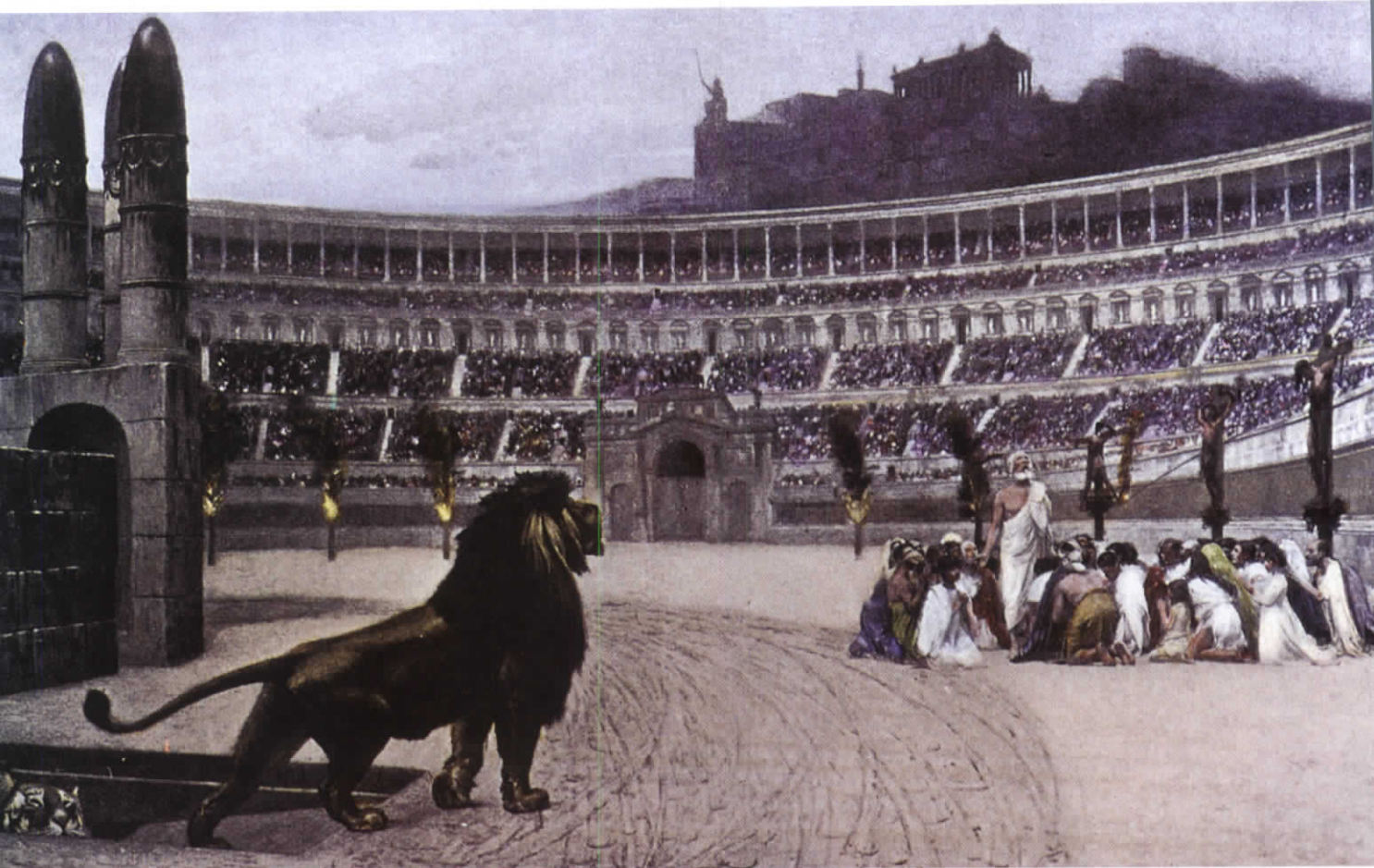
The early converts to Christianity were Jews, just as Jesus and his disciples had been. As an educated man who spoke Greek, Saul made it his special mission to convert non-Jews, called Gentiles, to the new religion. Known as Paul to the Greeks, he spent 17 years visiting cities throughout the Greek-speaking world. Wherever he went, he made new converts and started new churches.

In his preaching and letters, Paul stressed the need to believe in Jesus as the Son of God. He taught that all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, were God's children. Jesus, he said, was the Christ, God's chosen one. He was a Messiah for everyone, not just his fellow Jews. Paul made it easier for Gentiles to become Christians by teaching that they did not have to adopt such Jewish customs as not eating pork or shellfish.

Paul's journeys took him through much of the empire. He preached throughout Asia Minor, in Greece, and in Rome. Sometimes his visits caused riots when angry Jews protested what they considered blasphemous teaching.

For a time Paul was jailed in Rome, where he continued to write letters to other Christians. Tradition says that the Romans cut off his head in about 65 C.E. By that time, the Romans were beginning to persecute Christian believers.

missionary someone who tries to persuade others to believe in his or her religious teachings



Christian martyrs—people killed for their faith—faced terrible deaths with courage.

36.8 Persecution and Triumph

By the 60s C.E., Christians were beginning to attract the notice of the Romans. Christian preachers traveled along the roads of the empire, winning converts to their new religion. Both Paul and Peter, a close friend of Jesus, preached in Rome itself. At first, Rome was not unfriendly to Christians. What was another god, among so many?

But Christians refused to worship the other Roman gods. Worse, they would not admit that the emperor was a god. Their very way of life seemed to be an insult to Roman customs. Instead of wealth and luxury, they preferred simplicity. Recalling Jesus' message of peace and love, many of them refused to serve in the army.

As the number of Christians grew, many Romans saw them as a threat to Roman order and patriotism. Eventually the Christian religion was declared illegal.

Some emperors were determined to make an example of these disloyal citizens. For refusing to honor the Roman gods, Christians were sentenced to die in cruel and painful ways. Some

were crucified. Some were burned to death. Others were hauled into arenas, where they were devoured by wild animals in front of cheering crowds.

But the persecutions failed to destroy the new religion. Instead, Christians won new admirers by facing death bravely, even singing hymns (religious songs) as lions or bears tore them apart. And Christianity offered many people in the empire a sense of purpose and hope. It taught that even the poor and slaves could look forward to a better life after death if they followed the way of Christ.

Gradually, people of all classes adopted the new faith. By 300 C.E., there were perhaps 5 million Christians in the Roman lands of Europe, North Africa, and western Asia.

In 313, Emperor Constantine gave Christians the freedom to practice their religion openly. Future emperors also accepted the new faith. In 392, Emperor Theodosius I banned all pagan sacrifices. By the time he died in 395, Christianity was the official religion of the Roman Empire.



Emperor Constantine supported Christianity and was baptized before he died.

36.9 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned how Christianity was born in Judea. You read about Jesus Christ and his followers. And you saw how the new religion survived harsh persecution and gradually spread throughout the Roman Empire. Eventually, it outlasted the mighty empire itself.

Although the Roman Empire fell more than 1,500 years ago, its influence has lasted to this day. The Christian religion became part of the legacy of ancient Rome.

In the next chapter, you will learn what caused the Roman Empire to fall. Then you will explore other ways in which the civilization of ancient Rome continues to influence us today.