

LIGHT TO THE NATIONS

The Development of Christian Civilization

Part One

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Chapter 1 A Light to the Nations

The birth of a baby is not the sort of event that historians or chroniclers would have thought worth recording. But they might have thought the birth of the baby, Jesus of Nazareth, worthy of recording, if they had known who he is.

There is little record of Jesus' life apart from the accounts now called the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. From these same Gospels, we learn of Jesus' teachings, what he did, and his final sacrifice for mankind. Jesus did not write his teachings down, but his disciples, inspired by the Holy Spirit, wrote their memories of his words and deeds.



Symbols of the four Evangelists who recorded the life of Christ in the Gospels: Matthew, the human face; Mark, the lion; Luke, the bull; and John, the eagle

Testament: a contract. The covenant of God with Israel, recorded in the books of the Hebrew Scriptures, is called the Old Testament. The covenant with all mankind made through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and recorded in the books of the Christian Scriptures is called the New Testament.

Herod, the King of Judea, 73–04 B.C.

When Jesus was born, his homeland, the land of the Jewish people, was under Roman control. Rome had stepped into Palestine to quiet civil strife there in 47 B.C. Eventually the Romans made a Jewish ally, named Herod, king of Judea, and placed him under Roman “protection,” or control. Herod was not a Judean; he was an Idumean, or Edomite, from a desert tribe in the south that had only recently converted to Judaism.

King Herod is known to history as “Herod the Great.” But Herod was great only in outliving all his rivals; he ruled for about 33 years, from 37 to 4 B.C. He executed his wife, fearing her disloyalty. He also killed his two eldest sons for plotting against him, killed or blinded other relatives he suspected of plotting his overthrow, and taxed and terrorized his subjects—who called him not the Great, but the Terrible.



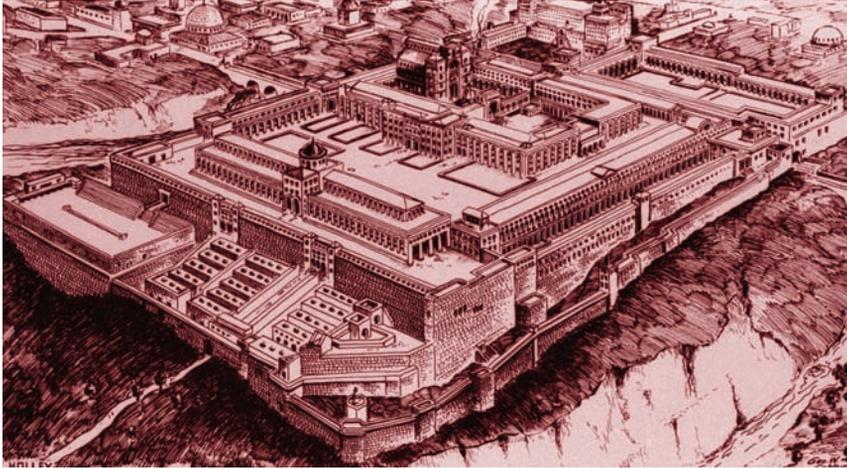
Roman-era Palestine

A Divided People

Herod ruled over a deeply divided nation. Though all Israelites worshiped the one true God, they disagreed about how to live that faith.

One small group of Israelites were the Samaritans, who were descended from the kingdom of Israel, made up of the ten northern Israelite tribes and destroyed by the Assyrians five hundred years before. The Samaritans worshiped God at their holy place on Mount Gerizim, near the ruins of ancient Samaria. The Samaritans claimed that only the Torah, or five books of the Law—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—were inspired. All other writings of our Old **Testament**, they thought, were merely human. Since the days of the Babylonian exile, the Samaritans had resisted being united with the majority group—the Judeans, or Jews. By Herod’s time, the Samaritans were a despised and oppressed group, living in the hills of Palestine.

The Jews were united, in that all of them worshiped at the Temple in Jerusalem. Yet, they were divided into two major religious groups with political as well as religious differences. These were the Sadducees and Pharisees.



The Temple in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus

The *Sadducees* (the “Righteous”) came chiefly from old aristocratic families. They were not strict in observing the Law and did not believe in an afterlife of heaven and hell. Like the Samaritans, they accepted only the Torah as inspired **scripture**. The high priest was always chosen from the Sadducees.

The *Pharisees* (the “Separated”) were closer to the ordinary people and concerned with matters of practical justice and easing the misery of the poor. They accepted belief in the afterlife. They made study of the Law, the Torah, the center of their religious lives. They accepted the rest of the scripture, the prophets and the other writings, as inspired by God. The greatest Jewish thinkers of the time, Hillel and Shammai, were both Pharisees.

The Pharisees came from merchant and professional families, with connections and ties to the Jewish communities in Judea and dispersed throughout the cities of the Roman Empire. From among the Pharisees came the scribes, judges, and teachers of the Law, who decided how Jews were to practice the commands of the Law.

scripture: the sacred writings of a religion. The Hebrew Scripture is what Christians call the Old Testament. It consisted of the first five books, called the Torah, that recounted the origins and Law of the Hebrew people, as well as books of Israel’s history, books of the prophets’ teachings, and literature such as the poetry of the Psalms.

The Birth of Jesus

Our Lord Jesus the Christ was born sometime before Herod’s death in 4 B.C., in the year of Augustus’ great **census** of the empire, “when Quirinius was governor of Syria,” as St. Luke’s Gospel puts it. No official

census: an enumeration or count of the population

Mystic Nativity by
Boticelli



Roman records document this birth. No notice was taken of it by the world at large. The most important birth in the history of the world occurred not in a palace but in a cave—used as a stable for horses and cattle—on the edge of a small town in Judea called Bethlehem. Jesus’ mother, Mary, and Joseph, her husband, had traveled from Nazareth up into the hills to Bethlehem to comply with the Roman order for a general census of the empire’s population. They went to Bethlehem because Joseph was “of the house and lineage of David.” Bethlehem was David’s birthplace and, thus, the center for David’s descendants in a census. When the child was

born, the parents named him Jesus (Hebrew *Yehoshua*, or *Yeshua*, meaning “God’s Salvation”).

Jesus’ Infancy and Hidden Life

In his last years, King Herod was full of dread. Enemies, he feared, were plotting against him to seize his throne. So it was that when he heard of the birth of an infant “king of the Jews,” his only desire was to destroy the child.

The king had received some exotic visitors—*magi*, wise men from the East—who had come to find the promised child-king of the Jews (Matthew 2:1–12). They had stopped at Herod’s court to find out what he knew about the child. They told him the prophecies had named Bethlehem as the site of the birth. Herod asked them, if they found the child, to return and tell him; Herod said he himself wanted to worship the infant king.

The magi did find the child, but they returned to their homes without going back to tell Herod. When the magi did not return, Herod was enraged. He ordered all male babies in Bethlehem killed (Matthew 2:16–18), to be sure that the prophesied babe should be destroyed.

The Four Periods of Jesus’ Life

Christians divide the life of Jesus into four periods. These are: the Infancy and Hidden Life, the Public Ministry, the Passion, and the Resurrection.



The Procession of the Magi by Benozzo Gozzoli

But the child, Jesus, was not destroyed. His foster father, Joseph, warned by an angel in a dream, took his wife and the child down to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath. When news of Herod's death reached Joseph, he returned to Galilee and the town of Nazareth, where the family lived a normal, unremarkable life.

When the boy Jesus was about 12 years old, Joseph and Mary again journeyed to Jerusalem, to make the pilgrimage all Jews were to undertake at least once in their lives to worship at the Temple of Jerusalem. When they were returning home after having traveled some miles from the city, Joseph and Mary discovered their son was missing. Hurrying back to Jerusalem, they found Jesus, still in the temple, talking with a group of learned men about the things of God.

To his mother and Joseph, who wondered why he had worried them so, Jesus said, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

When Jesus was still a boy, the Romans divided Herod's kingdom into two territories, Judea and Galilee. The larger territory, old Judea and Samaria, went to Herod's eldest surviving son, Herod Archelaus. But when he proved too incompetent to keep the peace, the Romans, in A.D. 6, made his kingdom a Roman province and placed it under the control of a Roman official, known as a procurator, or governor. Under the procurator's supervision, the Romans allowed the Jews a form of self-government under a council (the Sanhedrin) directed by the Jewish high priest.

To the north and east, Herod's possessions in Galilee and across the Jordan were given to his younger son, Herod Antipas, who ruled four districts as Rome's agent or *tetrarch* (meaning "ruler of four regions"). Joseph and his family lived in Nazareth of Galilee, the territory ruled by Herod Antipas.

In Galilee, the boy Jesus grew up without incident or notice, though he must have studied the sacred Scriptures intently and prepared himself for the years ahead. These are the years of the Hidden Life, about which we know nothing. Joseph, it appears, died in Jesus' youth, and the son may have taken up the trade of carpentry.

Jesus' Public Life and Ministry

When Jesus was about 30 years old, a Jewish prophet and preacher appeared on the desert fringes of Herod Antipas' territory, calling on all Jews to repent of their sins and be baptized in the Jordan River. This preacher was Jesus' cousin John—the son of Mary's cousin Elizabeth.

Many crowds followed this prophet called John the Baptist, or Baptizer. He taught that the kingdom of God was at hand and that all who repented of their sins and received his baptism would be part of that kingdom when it came.

One of those who came to ask John for baptism was Jesus.

When John saw who stood before him, he balked at baptizing him and said, “I have need of being baptized by you. And yet you are coming to me?”

Jesus answered him, “Allow this now, for it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Both knew that the entire history of the Jews was a history of salvation—the history of the Lord’s mighty deeds among his chosen people, who strived through righteousness to be worthy. In submitting to baptism, Jesus was both fulfilling the ancient prophecies and purifying the waters of baptism through his own sinlessness. When Jesus came up out of the water, a voice from heaven declared, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

After his baptism, Jesus withdrew into the desert of Judea, where he fasted for forty days and was tempted by Satan, the Enemy. After this he returned to the region of the Baptist’s ministry, Galilee, and was acknowledged by John twice again. Jesus then began to collect around him a group of friends with whom he lived and taught.

At Cana in Galilee, at a wedding feast, Jesus performed his first miracle: the changing of water into wine. His mother asked him to do something to save the young groom from embarrassment, for the wine had run out. Jesus at first refused; but his mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” Obeying Jesus’ command, the servants filled large jugs with water, which was then poured out as fine wine.

Jesus and his followers journeyed through the countryside and villages of Galilee. He spent his days in teaching anyone who would listen, forgiving sins, healing the sick, driving out demons, and bringing the dead back to life. His miracles drew large crowds to him, and they listened to his teaching.



The Baptism of Christ
Pietro Vannucci Perugino

The Death of John the Baptist

Meanwhile, John the Baptist was scolding both Pharisees and Sadducees for neglecting their duties. But then, John did a dangerous thing; he denounced the tetrarch, Herod Antipas, for his immoral life and oppression of the poor. Herod had taken his brother Philip's wife, Herodias, and kept her as his wife. John publicly condemned this adultery, and Herod arrested him.

Though Herod feared John as a prophet of God, Herodias hated him. She laid plans for his death. One night at a feast, her daughter danced before Herod and the assembled guests. So pleased was Herod with his stepdaughter's dancing that he promised to give her anything she desired. The young girl, coached by her mother, asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Even though he was afraid of John, Herod was obliged by his hasty promise to give her what she wanted. After John's death, many of those John had baptized became followers of Jesus.

John the Baptist rebukes Herod by Giuseppe Fattori





*Christ Preaching by
Giuseppe Bartolomeo
Chiari*

Jesus Calls the Twelve

Many, both men and women, followed Jesus. From these followers, Jesus selected 12 men as his closest companions to accompany him on his journeys through the towns of Galilee.

Jesus preached to large crowds and explained that the Law of God was a law of love—love of neighbor and of God. Jesus spoke of God as his father and explained the righteous life as the love of God, our father in heaven. He taught that true righteousness is mercy and kindness, not just obedience to the rules. He worked wonders and miracles that cured the sick and troubled and commanded the forces of nature. He raised from sickness the daughter of a synagogue official and the servant of a Roman centurion and revived from death the son of a poor widow in the village of Nain. His followers saw him calm the waves on the Sea of Galilee and even walk over the waters. He began to be known throughout the country

Messiah: (Hebrew *Mesach*; Greek *Christos*) the “Anointed One,” a king or royal person

as a miracle worker as well as a teacher with authority. Was this Jesus another prophet, the people asked, or could he be the long-awaited **Messiah** (the Christ)?

The Teachings of Jesus

Jesus’ insistence that the love of God and neighbor is the primary message behind the Law and the prophets was a familiar teaching in the Jewish tradition. In the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, the people could read: “Thou shalt love the lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind” (Deuteronomy 6:5) and “Love thy neighbor as thyself” (Leviticus 19:18). To the question, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus answered with the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus taught that the one who shows mercy on the afflicted is the true neighbor of him. He said:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be the sons of your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:43–44)

Jesus preached a radical courage emboldened by faith in God. “Be not afraid,” Jesus said, “not a sparrow falls but that the Father sees it. You are more valuable than sparrows and will not be forgotten before God” (Luke 12:7).

St. Luke (5:20–24) tells us that Jesus once said to a paralyzed man who was brought to him by friends and let down through the roof into the room where Jesus was teaching, “Man, your sins are forgiven you.” When Jesus did this, the scribes and Pharisees whispered among themselves that this was blasphemy (claiming to be the equal of God): “Who can forgive sins but God only?” Jesus knew their thoughts, and replied, “but that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’ (he turned to the paralyzed man and said), ‘I say to you, rise, take up your bed and go home.’” Immediately the man rose and went home, praising God.

The forgiveness of sins was a focal point of Jesus’ ministry, arising from his insistence on love as the first element of the kingdom of heaven. He forgave sins, and he told his followers to forgive the sins others commit against them.

Peter said to him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”

Jesus replied to Peter, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:21).

Greater even than Jesus’ powerful teaching was his personality, drawing many to him in friendship. His example moved others to find the meaning behind the Law rather than to despair of keeping it. He said, “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17).

Jesus dared to forgive sins and accept the repentant sinner back into the company of the righteous. He dared to reinterpret the Law to bring people to God, as when he said, “Man was not made for the Sabbath; the Sabbath was made for man” (Mark 2:27). The final authority would not be the letter of the Law, but Jesus’ actions and his teachings about the true meaning of the Law.

Jesus the Messiah, Son of the Father

Jesus spoke and acted not as a mere representative of God, as the Jewish tradition had expected of the Messiah, but as the Son of the Father. The Jews who opposed him accused him of blasphemy when he called himself the “Son of Man,” a title of the Messiah. He left no doubt of who he claimed to be when he said that as the Son he was one with the Father in heaven: “The Father and I are one.”

His last and greatest example would be the acceptance of the pain and death his enemies would force on him in the Crucifixion.

Jesus’ Passion

Jesus had known for some time that he would have to go down to Jerusalem for one last attempt to speak to the leaders of the people. He had prophesied that he would die and be raised again on the third day: “Destroy this temple and I will build it up in three days” (John 2:19). He knew also that the officials of the Jewish government would try to silence him, even kill him. On the first day of the week before **Passover**, Jesus entered the city.

Like the Hebrew kings of old, Jesus rode through the gates on a colt. The acclaim of the people, throwing down their cloaks and palm branches, crying out to Jesus, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” disturbed the temple officials. They paid one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, to lead the guards to arrest Jesus privately so that his arrest would not provoke a riot.

On the Thursday before the Passover, Jesus arranged for a room where he and his closest disciples could celebrate the Passover together. Jesus’

passion: painful suffering (from Latin *passio*, endurance). Christian tradition has long referred to Christ’s suffering and death on the Cross as his Passion.

Passover: (Hebrew *passoch*) the Jewish ceremonial meal and feast commemorating the escape and deliverance of the Hebrew people from the bondage of Egypt

Eucharist: so named from the Greek word for “thanksgiving.” The central sacrament of the Christian Faith. In the Mass, the Church gives thanks for Christ’s sacrifice and redemption of sinners by repeating the words of Our Lord and consecrating of the sacred bread and wine.

action at this Last Supper was the institution (or start) of the greatest sacrament of Christian life—the Holy **Eucharist**. Since that night, Christians have joined themselves to Jesus the Christ by taking, as he commanded, the bread of his Body and the cup of his Blood and repeating his words, “Take, this is my body” and “This is my blood of the new covenant which is shed for many” (Luke 22:19–20). The Catholic Church has defined that in this sacrament the bread and wine are changed to become the body and blood of Jesus. This change the Church calls “transubstantiation.”

After the supper, Jesus went out from the city with his 12 disciples to a public garden on the Mount of Olives, east of the city. He went off from the others to pray and to ask God to spare him from what he knew was ahead: “Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless

Judas betrays his master



not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42). Knowing where Jesus would likely be, Judas brought the temple soldiers to arrest him.

After his arrest, Jesus was taken first to the palace of Caiaphas, the high priest, for trial. The temple officials found Jesus guilty of blasphemy. But they were afraid to act without Roman permission; so they sent him to the Roman governor, Pilate, who sent him to Herod Antipas, the tetrarch, who was in the city for the Passover. Herod was afraid to make a judgment, for his treatment of John the Baptist had made him many enemies among the people, so he sent Jesus back to Pontius Pilate.

Pilate saw Jesus in the early hours of the morning, but Jesus would not respond to the governor’s questions. Being reluctant to put Jesus to death, Pilate looked for a way to put the burden on others. It was the custom to offer two condemned men to the mob, letting the people choose one to be executed and one to be pardoned. Pilate brought Jesus and a well-known rioter and murderer, Barabbas, to the porch of the governor’s palace and let the people in the square decide which man to release. The temple officials incited the people to choose Barabbas for release. And when asked what then to do with Jesus, the mob cried, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

The governor had sent Jesus to his guards for flogging. They scourged Jesus with whips, as Roman law required. Then, because Jesus had claimed to be the Messiah, or King of the Jews, the soldiers mocked him by forcing on him a crown of thorns and an old cloak to be his royal costume.

Rejected and alone, Jesus was forced to walk to the place of execution. On his bleeding back he had to drag his own crossbeam—possibly as much as 125 pounds of heavy wood—from the Roman headquarters, across the streets of Jerusalem, outside the walls, to the hill of Golgotha.

Jesus was nailed to the cross on Friday morning and lifted upright to hang there until dead. Jesus hung between two other crucified men, both criminals. On Jesus’ cross Pilate had



The Virgin, John, and Mary Magdalene by the Cross

Roman Scourging

Roman law prescribed a serious and torturous whipping with both rods and a lead-weighted leather whip of several strands, a Roman version of the later “cat-o-nine-tails.” This scourging was so severe that many of the condemned died in the beating.

ordered the placing of an inscription to proclaim Jesus' crime: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

Toward evening, the Jewish officials asked that Jesus and the other two criminals hanging with him be killed and taken down so that no bodies would be there for the Holy Days of the Passover. Soldiers went to break the legs of the condemned; unable to push themselves up to take a breath, the condemned would die of suffocation. When, however, the soldiers went to break Jesus' legs, they found he was already dead—after only three hours, an unexpectedly short time. To be certain, a soldier plunged his spear into Jesus' side. Both blood and water, a sign of death, came forth. The soldiers did not break Jesus' legs; as the Hebrew Scriptures had prophesied of him, "not a bone of his shall be broken" (Psalm 34:20).

Jesus' Resurrection and Ascension

Because the Jewish Sabbath was approaching and Jewish tradition forbade anyone to prepare a body for burial on the Sabbath, Jesus was hastily buried in a borrowed, unused tomb set in a garden. The tomb had been prepared for Joseph of Arimathea, one of Jesus' followers and also one of the Sanhedrin. Remembering that Jesus had said he would rise up on the third day and fearing a plot by the apostles, the chief priests and Pharisees set a guard by the tomb.

Sometime in the early morning of Easter Sunday, a tremendous physical disturbance—something like an earthquake—stunned the guards. By the time they recovered their senses, the stone had been rolled back and the tomb was empty. The guards went to the Pharisees, afraid they would be punished for neglecting their duty. Instead, they were given money and told to spread a story that the apostles had stolen the body while the soldiers were asleep. This they did.

Later that same morning, several of the women who had followed Jesus came to the tomb. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought spices to complete the embalming of the body. Arriving first, the two Marys saw that the tomb was empty; and an angel appeared, telling them, "He is not here, for he has risen as he said" (Matthew 28:6). Mary Magdalene immediately went to tell the disciples.

The other women then arrived and were greeted by an angel, who gave them the message that Jesus had risen and instructed them to report this news to the disciples. When the women brought this incredible story to the apostles, John and Peter ran immediately to the tomb to see for themselves. John, arriving first, saw the shroud in which Christ had been buried;



Resurrection of Christ
by Giovanni Bellini

it was neatly folded, something no thief would have done. Peter ran into the empty tomb to confirm that no dead body was there.

However, the other apostles were stubborn men who refused to believe the women or the other men. But that night, when they were behind locked doors, Jesus suddenly appeared in their midst. To prove that he had



*Ascension of Christ by
Sebastiano Ricci*

truly returned to life and was not a disembodied ghost, he sat down and ate with them.

One disciple, however, was absent from that meeting—Thomas. On hearing of it, he refused to be convinced until he personally saw Jesus’ wounds. But the following Sunday, Christ appeared again and spoke to Thomas directly and by name. Thomas fell on his knees, saying, “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28).

Forty days after his resurrection, Jesus led his disciples to the Mount of Olives and mysteriously left the world. Before his wondering followers Jesus rose up, ascended, into heaven (Acts 1:9–10). But though he had departed from them, Jesus left in their hearts a strength and courage they had not held before, empowering them to “go and teach all nations” the good news of their salvation. “I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matthew 28:20), he said before leaving them.

Jesus’ promise to be with his followers would have a new significance in the years to come, when they—like he—had to meet opposition and persecution, torture and death for their faith.

Pentecost and the Jerusalem Church

After Jesus’ death, the disciples were in hiding for fear the temple authorities would arrest them. On a Jewish holy day called **Pentecost**, only 10 days after Jesus’ ascension into heaven, the disciples assembled in the same upper room where they had shared the Last Supper. Suddenly, a strong, driving wind filled the house. Those present were

The Holy Eucharist

Following Jesus' death and resurrection, in the very beginnings of the Church, the disciples held weekly gatherings, sharing the bread and the cup and repeating Jesus' words. The weekly sacred meal became a moment of union with Jesus as brought to them through his words and command, "Do this in remembrance of me."

St. Paul, in an account that was written earlier than the Gospels (1 Corinthians 10:16), says of this meal, "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?" Then later in the same epistle (1 Corinthians 11:23–26), Paul gives the words of Jesus as "This is my body which is for you" and "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me." From the earliest records of the Church, it is clear that the apostles and their

flock took the words of the Lord seriously and made of the weekly meal a sacred moment of participation in the Lord's body and blood.

The early Church's weekly gatherings gave thanks for what had been done for them and what had been revealed to them about the nature of their lives through the life of Jesus. The meal was called a Thanksgiving, a Eucharist (Greek *eucharistos*). In other places it was called an *agapeia*, a "love feast," because of the expression of love that the sharing commanded.



The Last Supper by Leandro Bassano

crowned with tongues of flame, and they each began to speak in different languages previously unknown to them (Acts 2:1–2). Those present were given a new courage. They immediately ran out into the city to begin preaching to the crowds of pilgrims, who had come to Jerusalem for the feast, that Jesus of Nazareth had risen from the dead and held the promise of salvation and spiritual light for all nations.

Pentecost: a Jewish holy day of thanksgiving for the wheat harvest. It was held 50 days after Passover (from the Greek word *pentekoste*, meaning "fiftieth").

apostle: (from Greek *apostolos*) one sent forth, a messenger

The Twelve Apostles

Just as the people of Israel had been made up of 12 tribes descended from the 12 sons of Jacob, so the Church was established on the witness of 12 men—Jesus’ disciples. Since these men were to go forth as Jesus’ messengers to all the world, they were called **apostles**.

There was a problem, however. The traitor, Judas Iscariot, was no longer with them. He had killed himself soon after the death of Jesus on the cross, and Judas’ place as one of the Twelve had to be filled. The apostles voted to restore their significant number by naming Matthias to the twelfth place. Matthias had been a disciple from the beginning and could bear witness to Jesus’ Resurrection.

As in so many other critical moments of history, the hope of the future rested with unlikely heroes. The Twelve were ordinary workmen. The chief of the apostles, Simon Peter, once had been just Simon, a humble fisherman on Lake Galilee; then Jesus had called him, along with his brother Andrew, to follow him and become “fishers of men.” As an apostle, Simon was also called Cephas (*Petros* in Greek, *Cephas* in Aramaic, both meaning “rock”). Simon had received his new name, Peter, from Jesus, who said, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18).

Jesus’ apostles had been far from perfect men. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, had also been simple fishermen, given to displays of such hot temper that they were called the “sons of thunder.” Matthew had been a tax collector, despised by the Jews for working under the Roman oppressor. Simon the Zealot had been a member of one of the rebel bands that annoyed the Romans and terrorized the villagers with demands for supplies. Thomas had refused to believe in the Resurrection until he had touched the wounds in Jesus’ hands and side.

Jesus had said, “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” The Twelve were all sinful men and unimportant peasants, but in their new faith they found the strength to be great heroes and saints.

The disciples included many women. Among them was Jesus’ mother, Mary, known to all his friends as the first disciple. Because of Mary’s love, obedience, and holiness, and because of her special relationship with Jesus, she has been honored above all other disciples and women through the ages. “All generations shall call me blessed,” she had proclaimed in the “Magnificat” (Luke 1: 46–55), her hymn of joy at the great things that God had done in his love for human beings.

There were also other Marys, the mother of James and John, who had followed her sons up to Jerusalem with Jesus; and Jesus’ friends, Mary and

The Twelve

The Twelve, as named in the Gospels, were

1. Simon Peter (Cephas bar-Jona)
2. Andrew (Peter's brother)
- 3, 4. James and John (the sons of Zebedee)
5. Philip
6. Bartholemew

7. Thomas (Didymus)
8. Matthew (Levi, the tax collector)
9. James the Less (the son of Alpheus)
10. Jude (Lebbaeus, Thaddaeus)
11. Simon the Zealot
12. Judas Iscariot (who betrayed the Lord)

Martha of Bethany, sisters of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Then there were also unhappy and disreputable women—like Mary of Magdala (a town in Galilee), who had been cured of demonic possession.

To these women, as to his male friends, Jesus entrusted the deepest mysteries of the religious life: incarnation, forgiveness of sins, and resurrection.

At first, after Jesus' ascension, the disciples stayed in the city of Jerusalem. They pooled all their resources to support every member of the community and appointed James (Jesus' cousin, not one of the Twelve) the leader of the community. They held all their possessions in common while they waited for the return of Jesus. However, this arrangement did not work well. Some held back their property, and some ate at the common table but did not contribute to it. The disciples finally abandoned communal living after the Roman siege and capture of Jerusalem in A.D. 71.



Apostles—detail of *The Tribute Money* by Masaccio

St. Stephen, the first martyr



martyr: (from Greek *martyros*, “witness”) a witness, later coming to mean someone who dies rather than deny his faith

martyr. He died in around A.D. 34 or 36, not long after the death of Jesus.

Stephen’s death had a great effect on at least one young man present at the stoning. He was Saul, a wealthy and learned Pharisee from the city of Tarsus in Asia Minor.

The First Martyr

The first Christians were eager to share their new faith with others, especially with their fellow Jews. At first, most converts to the Church were Jews; but after he baptized a Roman named Cornelius, Peter convinced his fellow Christians to admit non-Jews, or gentiles, into the community.

The young Church attracted more and more followers and appointed deacons (from Greek *diakonos*, meaning “servant”) to teach and serve the new converts. The common life of the community in Jerusalem centered on the common meal (the Eucharist) and prayer on the first day of the Jewish week, Sunday, when the stronger members cared for the weaker by providing the food and drink.

But the growing number of converts threatened the Jewish authorities. Angered at the public preaching of a deacon named Stephen, they ordered him to be stoned to death as a blasphemer (Acts 7:60). Stephen became the first Christian

The Life and Journeys of St. Paul

Saul was a Pharisee, a learned and respected teacher of the Law. He was from the city of Tarsus in Asia Minor, and he had studied at Jerusalem with the great teachers of the Pharisees, Hillel and Gamaliel. By family

connections he was a Roman citizen, with the right to travel throughout the empire.

Saul did not himself take part in the stoning of Stephen, but he watched it without protest and sympathized with the Jewish authorities. It is recorded that he “held the cloaks” of those who did the stoning. After Stephen’s death, Saul volunteered to take the orders from the Jerusalem authorities to the Jewish leaders of Damascus in Syria to punish the followers of Jesus living in Syria.

Saul Becomes Paul

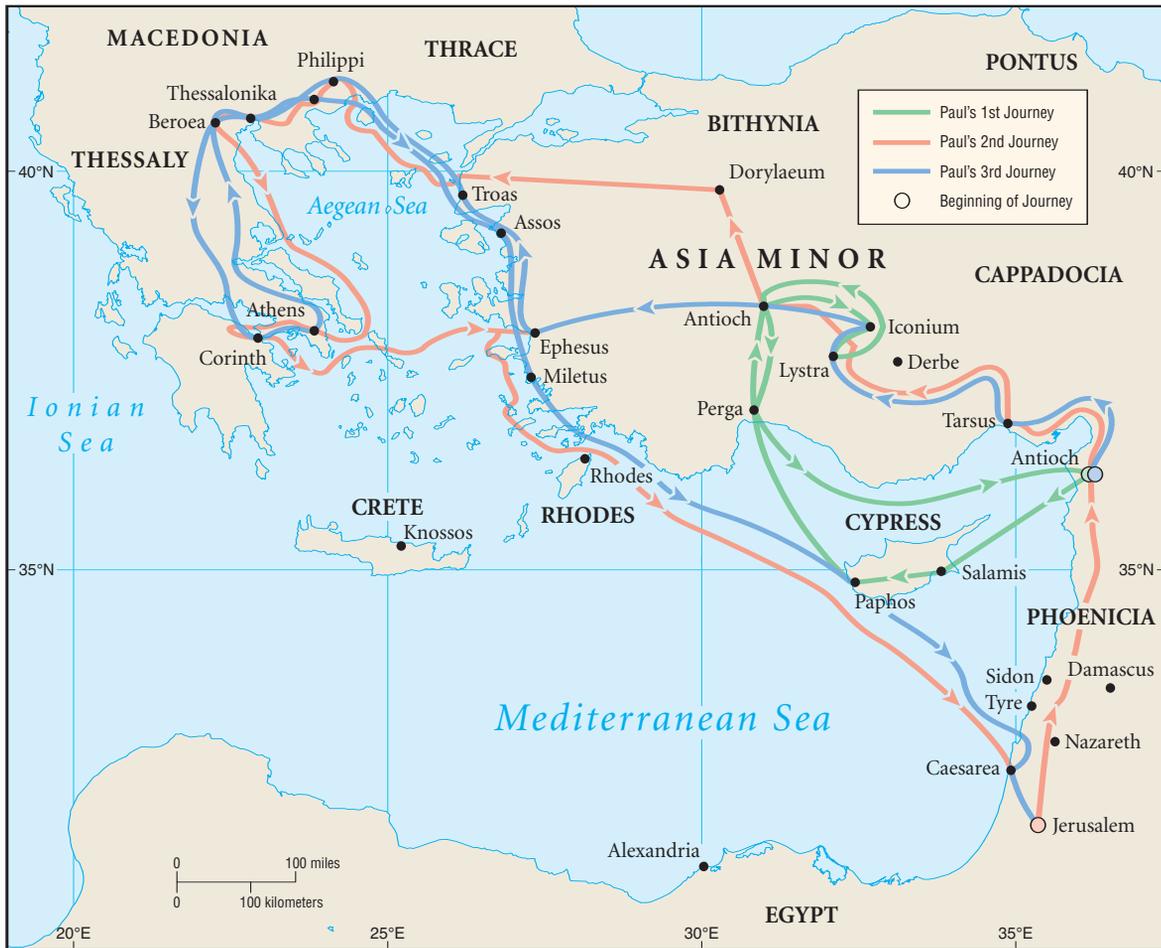
On the road to Damascus, Saul was struck down by a blinding light. He heard a voice saying, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:4–5). For three days Saul could see nothing, and he ate and drank nothing.

Following Jesus’ instructions given to him in his vision, Saul went on to Damascus. Instead of going to the authorities, he went to the Christians, who baptized him and tended him until his sight was miraculously restored. After Saul could see again, he began speaking in the synagogues of Damascus about Jesus as the promised Messiah. Over time, he began to use his Roman name, Paul, rather than his Hebrew name, Saul. Paul called himself an apostle, just like the Twelve, or the “least of the apostles.”

Taking Jesus’ command to heart, to “go and teach all nations” of the salvation brought by Jesus, over the next 30 years, A.D. 36–68, Paul traversed thousands of miles, winning converts among both Jews and Gentiles, establishing churches in dozens of cities throughout Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, and as far away as Spain.



The Apostle Saint Paul
by Marco Pino



The journeys of St. Paul

The Epistles

Of the 21 epistles contained in the New Testament, the first 14 are by St. Paul. They are Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and Hebrews. They were arranged in this

order in the early Church, and are positioned according to the importance of the church community addressed, not the order of their composition or their subject. The remaining epistles collected in the New Testament are called the "Catholic," or Universal epistles, and are addressed to all the churches at once about more general topics rather than local concerns. They are James; 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 John; and Jude.

He met opposition at every step along the way. Once, his enemies stoned Paul and, supposing he was dead, dragged his unconscious body out of their city. The next day, Paul rose up and returned to the city. Paul and Barnabas then established a community of believers, appointing elders to guide them.

After Paul departed from a city, leaving behind a new Christian church, he wrote letters back to the community he had begun there, continuing to teach his distant friends and converts through the written word. These letters were treasured heirlooms of the churches that he founded and have continued down through the ages to teach us in the new millennium. The surviving letters are collected in Christian Bibles as the Letters or **Epistles** of Paul. The Epistles are the oldest books in the New Testament.

epistle: letter (from Greek *epistole*)

The Teachings of St. Paul

Paul witnessed to the love of Christ. He taught that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross brought salvation to all mankind, not just the Jewish people. Salvation, he said, does not come through observing Jewish rituals. Non-Jews, he insisted, do not have to become Jews before baptism. Salvation, Paul taught, is a free gift of God's grace through faith in Christ. Grace transforms the human heart by hope and charity and promises believers a share in Christ's resurrection. "For as in Adam all men die, so in Christ will all be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:20).

Paul's teachings made him enemies, both Jewish and gentile. They engineered disturbances, beat him up, drove him out of towns, and complained about him to the Jewish elders or to the city police officials. Everywhere he went, Paul's missionary work brought him into conflict with the Jewish authorities—and sometimes with the Romans, who were trying to keep the peace and prevent local disturbances. His three journeys, each lasting many years, were full of troubles—both from natural causes and human attacks. St. Paul became known to the Church as the model of faithful endurance of suffering for Christ's sake.

Paul returned to Jerusalem about A.D. 58. There, the Jewish elders accused him of blasphemy, and the Roman procurator arrested him to save his life from the elders. He was sent to the Roman provincial capital at Caesarea on the coast and there kept under house arrest while two successive Roman governors tried to think of some way to let him go. Finally, Paul claimed his rights as a Roman citizen and asked to be sent directly to the emperor in Rome to be tried. He was sent under guard by ship but was shipwrecked off the coast of Malta, where he spent some time at liberty.

Paul then traveled to Syracuse in Sicily and to Rhegium on the toe of Italy. Paul finally arrived at Rome, where he spent two years in comparative liberty while waiting for the imperial courts to hear his case. During this time he lived in a private house where he prayed, wrote, and daily received visitors from the Christian community in Rome.

Peter and Paul Martyred

Paul of Tarsus and Simon Peter were the two most prominent and important figures in the early years of the Church. Peter was the head and

Saint Peter by Peter
Paul Rubens



spokesman for the Twelve Apostles, while Paul was the greatest missionary and founder of churches.

Both Peter and Paul were in Rome during the first imperial persecution of Christians. In A.D. 68, a great fire laid waste to much of Rome. The Emperor Nero, knowing that many Romans blamed the fire on him, was looking for a scapegoat. He found it in the strange, new sect called Christians. Nero blamed the fire on the Christians and began brutally persecuting them. Paul was condemned to death and executed by beheading, the punishment for a condemned citizen of Rome. His death occurred about A.D. 68. His body, at first buried outside the city, is now contained in the basilica of St. Paul's Outside the Walls in Rome.

Tradition says that Peter's death took place in the same year as Paul's. According to the later Christian writer, Origen, Nero's judges condemned Peter to be crucified. However, deeming himself unworthy to suffer the same death, in the same way, as his Lord and Savior, Peter asked to be nailed to the cross head down. The bones of Peter are buried in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. A statue of St. Peter in the front of the basilica is near the actual site where Peter was crucified.

All but one of the Twelve suffered martyrdom. Tradition relates that only St. John died a natural death, after his exile to the tiny island of Patmos off the coast of Asia Minor. He returned to Ephesus in Asia Minor, where he died in old age. The churches the Twelve left behind grew and survived the persecutions that followed. They carried faith and courage to the highest and the lowliest alike, across the empire and beyond into Europe, Africa, and India—and finally, many centuries later, to the Americas.



Statue of Peter at the front of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome

Jesus' Gifts to Civilization

Jesus' death on the Cross for our salvation was his greatest gift to humanity. But his death also gave gifts to civilization that cannot be ignored—hope, and an image of God in human form, a story of sacrifice and promise. The followers of Jesus and missionaries like St. Paul brought a new hope to the empire's great and small, rich and poor. Life without fear was promised to all who believed in Jesus and accepted him as Lord. As Jesus had taught, "He that loveth his life shall lose it, and that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal. If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be" (John 12:25–26). "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 16:12). God was in Christ Jesus, and the human heart could love him as he had loved us.

In the light of this hope, civilization could follow paths of thought and invention not possible before. Individuals could develop ideas and practices that had not occurred to anyone caught in the old worship of nature. A civilization of love and forgiveness of sins was now possible. Jesus gave civilization a new purpose and goal, union in love with God.

Chapter Review

Summary

- Christian history begins with the birth of Jesus. His parents, Mary and Joseph, raised him in Nazareth of Galilee. This period of Jesus' life is known as the Infancy and Hidden Life.
- The second period of Jesus' life is known as the Public Life. After being baptized by John, Jesus journeyed through Galilee and Judea teaching, healing the sick, casting out demons, and bringing the message of hope and forgiveness. Jesus taught that love of God and neighbor is our proper response to God's forgiveness and love for us.
- At last, in the Passion and Death, the Jewish leaders plotted against Jesus, paying Judas Iscariot, one of the disciples, to betray him. On the Thursday before the Passover, Jesus instituted the sacrament of the Eucharist in a last supper with his disciples. That night, Jesus was arrested and brought before the Roman authority, Pontius Pilate; the Jewish leaders accused him of blasphemy of God and treason to Rome. Pilate condemned Jesus to death by crucifixion. Jesus endured this terrible torture and died on the cross.

- When the third day had dawned after his death, Jesus rose and was seen by several of his disciples and followers. His followers saw him ascend to Heaven on the fortieth day after his Resurrection.
- Jesus' followers experienced a renewal of their fervor 50 days after his death. On the feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit filled them with new life and zeal to carry Jesus' good news of forgiveness to all the world.
- The Twelve Apostles remained in Jerusalem after Pentecost, organizing the first community of believers in Jesus. Peter, the chief of the apostles, convinced his fellow Christians, who had all been Jewish, to admit Gentiles into the Church of the believers.
- Although he at first persecuted Jesus' followers, St. Paul was converted by a miraculous vision of the Lord and became the chief apostle and missionary to the people of the Roman world. His letters (epistles) to the churches he founded are now part of the Christian Scriptures. Paul and Peter together suffered martyrdom in Rome in the reign of the Emperor Nero.

Key Concepts

testament: a contract, the covenant between God and Mankind. The covenant of God with Israel recorded in the books of the Hebrew Scriptures is called the Old Testament. The covenant with all mankind made through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and recorded in the books of the Christian Scriptures is called the New Testament.

Passover: (Hebrew *passoch*) the Jewish ceremonial meal and feast commemorating the escape and deliverance of the Hebrew people from the bondage of Egypt

Eucharist: so named from the Greek word for "thanksgiving." The central sacrament of the Christian Faith. In the Catholic Mass, the Church gives thanks for Christ's sacrifice and redemption of sinners by repeating the words of Our Lord and the consecration of the sacred bread and wine.

Messiah: (Hebrew *Mesach*; Greek *Christos*) the "Anointed One," a king or royal person

scripture: the sacred writings of a religion. The Hebrew Scripture is what Christians call the Old Testament. It consisted of the first five books, called the Torah, that recounted the origins and Law of the Hebrew people, as well as books of Israel's history, books of the prophets' teachings, and literature such as the poetry of the Psalms.

apostle: (from Greek *apostolos*) one sent forth, a messenger

martyr: (from Greek *martyros*, "witness") a witness, later coming to mean someone who dies rather than deny his faith

Dates to Remember

37–4 B.C.: reign of Herod the Great

6 or 4 B.C.: birth of Jesus Christ

A.D. 28 or 30: death and resurrection of Jesus

A.D. 68: deaths of Sts. Peter and Paul by martyrdom in Rome

Central Characters

Jesus: the Son of God and Jewish Messiah, who brought salvation to Jews and Gentiles alike and gave new light and hope to civilization

John the Baptist: cousin of Jesus; a Jewish prophet and preacher who preached a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. John announced the coming of Jesus.

Herod the Great: king of Judea when Jesus was born

Mary: mother of Jesus

Joseph: foster father of Jesus, husband of Mary

the Twelve Apostles: Jesus' closest companions and disciples

Peter: a fisherman who became the chief of the apostles of Jesus

Pontius Pilate: Roman procurator, or governor, of Judea, under whom Jesus was crucified

Paul: Saul the Pharisee, who persecuted Christians but was converted after receiving a vision of Christ. Paul spread the Gospel throughout the Mediterranean basin.

Questions for Review

1. What written evidence do we have for Jesus' life?
2. What are the four periods of Jesus' life? Which period or periods do we know most about? Which period do we know least about? Why?
3. What does *Eucharist* mean? Why was, and is, weekly celebration of the Eucharist so important to Christians?
4. Why do you think the Christian faith spread so quickly?
5. What is a martyr? Who was the first martyr?
6. Where were Peter and Paul martyred?

Ideas in Action

1. Attend Mass. Read the accounts of the Last Supper in the Gospels. Then discuss as a class: How is the Mass like the Last Supper? How is it different? What are the major divisions of the Mass? Why do we

read Scripture from the Old Testament and the New? What is going on in the consecration? What is said and what is done? How does the Communion of the congregation repeat the early Church's thanksgiving love-feast meal?

2. Read from one of St. Paul's epistles (for instance, Ephesians or Colossians), and discuss what he is saying. Why would he say these things to an audience of the ancient world? What is he saying to people who were pagans? What is he saying to Jewish Christians?
3. How does the Church in our day spread the Gospel? Do we have preachers like Sts. Peter and Paul? In what ways can Christians spread the Gospel among their friends and family?

Highways and Byways

From St. Peter's Sermon on Pentecost Day

“Peter stood up with the Eleven and addressed them in a loud voice: ‘Men of Judaea, and all you who live in Jerusalem, make no mistake about this, but listen carefully to what I say. This is what the prophet spoke of:

*In the days to come — It is the Lord who speaks —
I will pour out my spirit on all mankind.
Their sons and daughters shall prophesy,
your young men shall see visions,
your old men shall dream dreams.
Even on my slaves, men and women,
in those days, I will pour out my spirit,
I will display portents in heaven above
and signs on earth below.
The sun will be turned into darkness
and the moon into blood
before the great Day of the Lord dawns.
All who call on the name of the Lord will be saved.*

“Men of Israel, listen to what I am going to say; Jesus the Nazarene was a man commended to you by the miracles and portents and signs that God worked through him when he was among you, as you all know. This man, who was put into your power by the deliberate intention and foreknowledge of God, you took and had crucified by men outside the Law. You killed him, but God raised him to life, freeing him from the pangs of Hades; for it was impossible for him to be held in its power:”

—Acts 2:14–25 (trans. *Jerusalem Bible*, 1966)