

CHRISTIANITY

THE FIRST THREE CENTURIES

FROM CHRIST TO CONSTANTINE

How could a tiny sect ever conquer the world?



An Eight Session Video Series
with Study and Leader's Guide

by

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Professor and Best-Selling Author

CHRISTIANITY

THE FIRST THREE CENTURIES

The Early Church from Christ to Constantine

An eight-part video series with

Dr. Paul L. Maier

This study guide is intended for use with the video series, which is © 2002 by Paul L. Maier and produced by Tobias Communications. The eight segments run from 25 to 30 minutes each, leaving the balance of the hour for discussion. All eight parts of this study guide (though not the video) may be duplicated for use in discussion groups. A brief summary of the video segment is included on the top half of each page, with discussion questions and issues following. Group leaders may wish to select some questions from the list and omit others, or supply their own. A brief leader's guide follows Part 8.

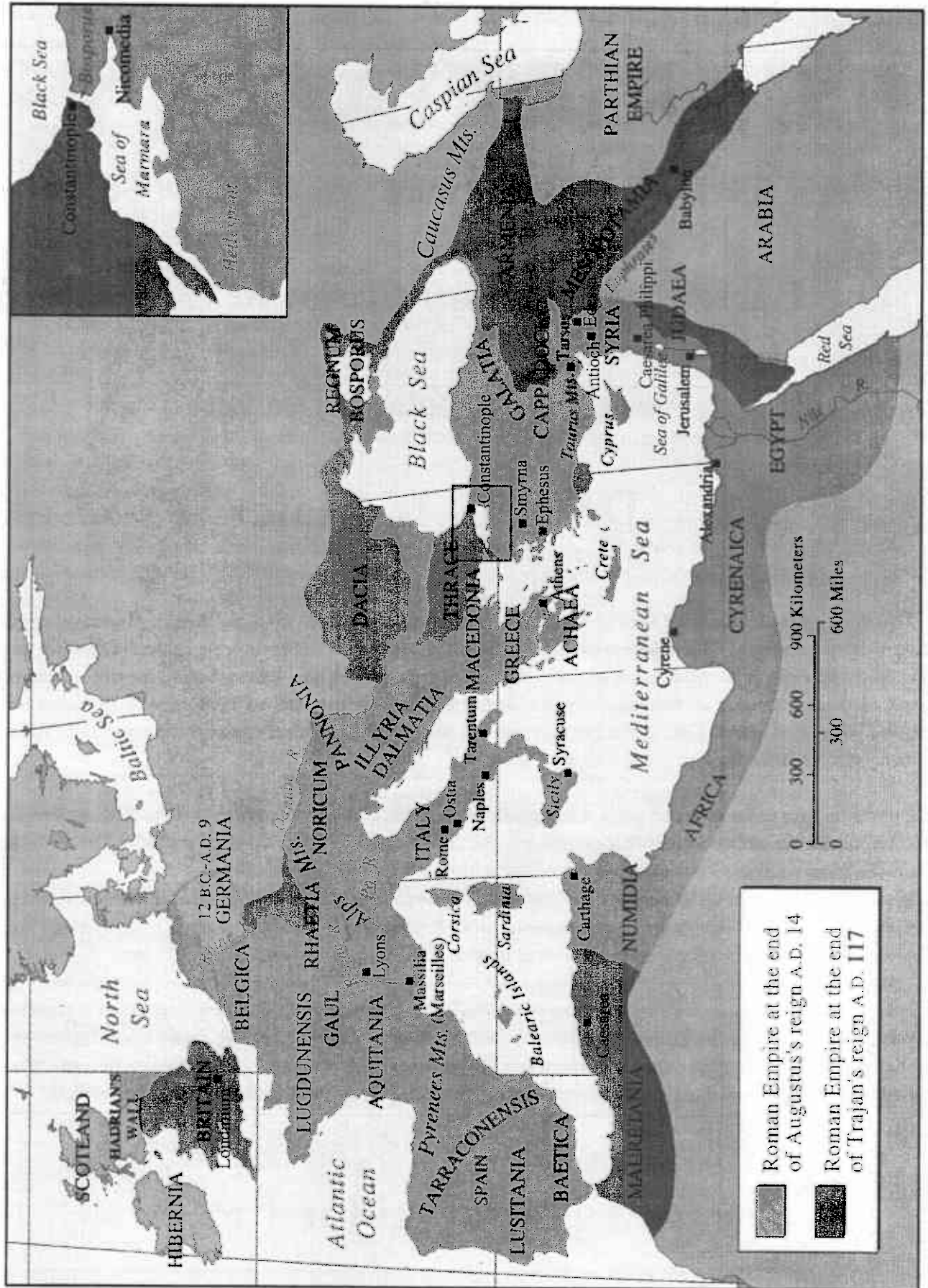
During its first three hundred years, Christianity grew from a tiny sect, tortured by the Roman Empire, to a faith that would not only conquer that empire but the future itself. On the basis of statistics alone, the Christian faith is the most successful phenomenon in all of history: no other religion, teaching, philosophy, political system, or movement has captured the allegiance of two billion people - in the present generation alone. During its early years, however, the faith was fragmented, persecuted, and seemingly doomed by having to fight a two-front war: an external struggle for survival against a hostile empire, and an internal battle against heresy.

How did the church succeed? What happened to Jesus' disciples after the New Testament record breaks off? Did Simon Peter ever get to Rome? Did Nero condemn Paul in Rome or set him free? What happened to John? When were the Gospels written, who wrote them, and where? *Why* were the Christians persecuted? This series will provide answers, based on both biblical and secular evidence, to these and many other questions.

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MAP OF THE MEDITERRANEAN



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1. OUR SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The very first church history was Luke's second treatise, *The Book of Acts*, which closes about A.D. 61-62 with Paul's imprisonment in Rome. The early church fathers pick up the record from that point, and their writings resonate well with secular evidence from the ancient world. Geographical and archaeological data in this series will supplement the works of eyewitness historians in the first three centuries, both Christian and non-Christian. (All further dates in this study guide are A.D.)

Pagan Roman historians do indeed mention Christ and early Christianity, among them Cornelius Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44; Gaius Suetonius, *Divus Claudius* 25; and Pliny the Younger, *Letter to Trajan*. The Jewish rabbinical traditions cite the arrest notice for "Yeshua Hannotzri" - Jesus of Nazareth - in *Sanhedrin* 43a of the *Mishna*. Far and away our most important ancient source, apart from the Bible itself, is the first-century Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus (37-100), whose *Jewish Antiquities* twice mentions Jesus (18:63 and 20:200), and whose *Jewish War* records the very destruction of Jerusalem predicted by Jesus.

The true "Father of Church History," however, is Eusebius (260-339), Bishop of Caesarea, who wrote the first comprehensive history of the church in ten books, the first seven of which were based on his research at libraries in Caesarea, Jerusalem, and elsewhere, while the last three are his own eyewitness accounts. Eusebius's extensive citations from the writings of other ancient authors are often the *only* survivals from their writings that are otherwise lost.

DISCUSSION

1. Why is history important? Why is it especially important for Christianity?
2. John 20:31 is a partial answer to the above. If John is biased (in favor of the faith), does this mean his Gospel is unreliable?
3. Why did it take the early Christians so long to record their history?
4. Is it important to compare sacred *and* secular evidence? Isn't the Bible enough?
5. Some attack Christianity by denying that Jesus ever lived - even as a man. How would you respond?
6. What else happened at Caesarea-on-the-Sea, where Eusebius was bishop? See Acts 10:1 ff.; 21:8; 23:23 ff.
7. What sources of information would you use to write the history of *your* church?
Eusebius quite probably used similar records.

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2. JESUS OF NAZARETH: WHAT ELSE DO WE KNOW?

While the Gospels provide most of our information on Jesus, important data on “the greatest life ever lived” comes also from non-biblical sources. Eusebius, for example, gives much detail on the prophecy-fulfillment couplets regarding the Messiah that bind the Old and New Testaments together. He also solves the problem of the differing genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke. For centuries, critics have pointed to these as “proof” of the unreliability of the Gospels, yet Matthew clearly traces the *physical* lineage down to Jesus, while Luke traces the *legal* lineage, according to the Levirate law in Deuteronomy 25:5-10.

Josephus provides fascinating additional detail on Jesus’ forerunner, John the Baptist, such as the name of Herodias’s dancing daughter, Salome, and the place where John was beheaded, the Machaerus fortress. He also tells of previous run-ins Pontius Pilate had with his Jewish subjects, including the standards affair and the aqueduct riot. This set the stage for his actions on Good Friday, when the high priest Caiaphas - whose burial ossuary has been discovered - indicted Jesus. Hard evidence such as this mutes uninformed charges that Jesus’ trial is not historical.

Pilate did not commit suicide, as tradition has it, nor did Jesus’ ministry end with his death. The empty tomb and the resurrected Lord - cited even by the non-Christian Josephus - would now ignite the greatest movement in history.

DISCUSSION

1. Why was it so important that the earliest Christian message (the *kerygma*) was this:
Jesus is the Messiah, predicted in Scripture, who has risen from the dead?
2. Childhood stories of the great are fascinating. How come we don’t have more about Jesus?
3. An outside source - Josephus - directly corroborates biblical evidence on John the Baptist as well as Jesus. Is this significant for a Christian? An unbeliever?
4. The bones of Joseph Caiaphas, the high priest who indicted Jesus before Pilate on Good Friday, were discovered in 1990. How important are such finds?
5. The Apostle’s Creed states that Jesus “suffered under Pontius Pilate.” Is this blame or documentation?
6. Are the Gospels more favorable to Pilate than our Good Friday sermons?
7. Who, finally, is to blame for what happened at Golgotha?

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3. APOSTLES and EMPERORS

There were several echelons among Jesus' followers: the inner 3 (Peter, James, John), the 12 apostles, the 70 secondary disciples, and the 120 core Christians in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. Eusebius reports that Joseph Barnabas, Sosthenes (1 Cor. 1: 1), Matthias, Justus, and Thaddeus were among the 70. -- Abgar Uchama, ruler of Edessa, presumably wrote a letter to Jesus and received his reply, after which Thaddeus cured his illness. - The Simon Magus mentioned in Acts 8:9 ff. was the father of many future heresies after moving to Rome, where Simon Peter finally silenced him.

According to Eusebius and the earliest traditions of the church, both the apostles Peter and Paul reached Rome. Paul was set free after his first trial before Nero, journeyed to Spain, and then back eastward in a fourth mission journey, after which he was again arrested and subsequently beheaded. Peter, however, was crucified in connection with Nero's persecution after the great fire of Rome in 64. On the testimony of the early Roman elder Gaius, Peter was buried in a pagan cemetery on the Vatican hill, while Paul was interred along the Ostian Way southwest of Rome. Constantine would later erect basilicas at both locations.

The first persecution of Christians was by priestly authorities in Jerusalem, according to Acts 4 ff. Nero ordered the first Roman persecution, which was largely limited to Rome, though broader and more deadly ones would follow.

DISCUSSION

1. Who were Matthias and Justus? (Acts 1:23 ff.) And Barnabas? (Acts 4:36; 13:2 ff.).
2. If Jesus' letter to the ruler of Edessa were authentic, this would be the only surviving material that Jesus actually wrote. Why don't we have more?
3. Simon Magus was not the only weird practitioner of the magical arts. The ancient world seems to have been filled with such, including sorcerers, fortune tellers, witches, and exorcists. Where else do we find them in the New Testament?
4. Why does the Book of Acts end as it does in chapter 28, with Paul awaiting trial after a two-year detention in Rome?
5. Did Peter or Paul found the church at Rome?
6. Did Peter's arrival at Rome mean that he was the first pope?
7. What else do you recall about the emperor Nero?

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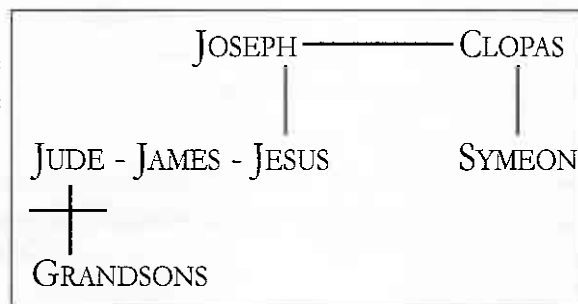
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4. PERSECUTIONS and BISHOPS

The first bishop of the Christian church was Jesus' half-brother, James the Just, as indicated by his presiding at the Apostolic Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). Joseph, Simon, and Jude are three more half-brothers of Jesus, according to Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3, plus several unnamed sisters. (Roman Catholics and other Christians who speak of "the ever-Virgin Mary" generally interpret these as cousins or relatives.) While the New Testament does not tell us how James died, Josephus reports that he was stoned to death by the Jewish Sanhedrin in the year 62 (*Antiquities* 20:200). Eusebius, quoting the Jewish-Christian writer Hegesippus, provides even more detail. The death of James caused Christians to flee Jerusalem, and thus they avoided its terrible destruction eight years later. Church and synagogue would now part ways but share mutual hostility.

The beginnings of a "family tree" for Jesus would look something like this.....

Symeon, the second Bishop of Jerusalem, was crucified, and the grandsons of Jude appeared before the emperor Domitian and were set free.



The bishops at Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, and Rome were the principal leaders of Christianity in the first three centuries, and Eusebius gives us their names. While the emperors Vespasian and his son Titus took no action against the Christians, Titus' brother Domitian (81-96) launched the second Roman persecution, which this time included converts in the higher nobility, such as Flavius Clemens and Domitilla.

DISCUSSION

1. Would it detract from Mary's unique role as the mother of Jesus if she had children by Joseph *after* Jesus' birth?
2. Why were Jesus' half-brothers unbelievers before his resurrection, but believers after?
3. What else do we know about James the Just?
4. What other institution in the world has the names of all its chief officers going back 2000 years?
5. Why would the Bishop of Rome become particularly important in later centuries?
6. Did Christianity filter slowly into the Mediterranean world or spread rapidly?
7. Did it attract one or another class of people, or cut across all segments of society?

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5. DEFENDERS OF THE FAITH

The apostle John became bishop of the church at Ephesus, where Paul had previously conducted a three-year ministry during his third mission journey. John was also buried there. Meanwhile, through their wide usage in the major churches, a canon ("standard") of writings was established around a core that included the four Gospels, the Book of Acts, the Pauline letters, and those of Peter and James. -- The Christian creed developed from a simple "Jesus is Christ" (i.e., the Messiah) to "Jesus Christ is the Son of God and Savior." Expressed in Greek, an acrostic of the first letters in this phrase spells *ichthys*, the Greek word for fish, which became a Christian symbol along with the cross. The longer "Apostle's Creed" would follow.

Heretics continued to trouble the church internally, particularly the Gnostics, a weird group with clashing opinions that reflected a higher, secret knowledge in matters spiritual, so they claimed. Irenaeus (fl. 175), a missionary to Gaul, opposed them in his *Against Heresies*. Among the heretics, Cerinthus and his carnal pleasures, as well as Marcion of Pontus and his truncated canon are egregious examples.

A brilliant series of scholars - the Apologists - boldly defended the persecuted faith before the Roman authorities, including some of the so-called "Five Good Emperors." Quadratus, c. 125, wrote that Jesus' healings were not transitory but permanent. Justin Martyr (fl. 150), after choosing Christianity as the finest philosophy of all, defended it masterfully until his own martyrdom. He also provided a nugget of information on Jesus' youth: that Joseph's carpenter shop specialized in plows and yokes.

DISCUSSION

1. Was the apostle John martyred, as were most of the apostles?
2. Why are creeds (from the Latin *credo* - "I believe) useful?
3. "Heretics are actually helpful, because they force the church to define and defend its theology." Comment.
4. The so-called "Five Good Emperors" of the second century A.D. were Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius. Were the rest bad?
5. Should every Christian be an apologist, a defender of the faith? See 1 Peter 3:15.
6. In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, a Jew at Ephesus, Justin Martyr insisted that Isaiah's famous prophecy, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive..." (7:14) should indeed be translated "virgin," not "young woman," as Trypho claimed. Is this important?
7. Does the church need defenders of the faith today? Against whom?

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6. MARTYRS FOR THE FAITH

In North Africa, Tertullian (fl. 200) was another illustrious and much-quoted defender of Christianity before the Roman authorities. Indeed, the famous correspondence between Pliny and Trajan, as well as between Fundanus and Hadrian showed that Rome seemed to be moderating in its attitude toward Christians, most of whom were spared during the second century. Not so in the case of church leaders! Some of the great martyrs included Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch (d. c. 110) and Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna (d. 156), who had studied under the apostle John himself. In the west, Justin suffered imprisonment and death at Rome, while Christians in Gaul were tormented at Lyons, where the noble Blandina set an example of heroic endurance.

Internally, there was danger too, again from heresy. Montanism broke out in Asia Minor, named for the "prophet" Montanus (fl. 225) who combined millenarianism with glossolalia, as well as Manichaeism, named for a Mani (fl. 250) who claimed to be the Holy Spirit! As if this were not enough, the Greek-speaking eastern half of Christendom had a great dispute with the Latin-speaking western half of the church over *when* to celebrate Easter - the date or the day? Polycarp and Anicetus debated in round one, Polycrates and Victor in round two.

Today's fallen television evangelists and clergy sex abusers had an ancient counterpart in Paul of Samosata (fl. 270), Bishop of Antioch. Morally and theologically corrupt, he was excommunicated by the Synod of Antioch and compelled by the pagan emperor Aurelian to turn over the church's property.

DISCUSSION

1. Who seems to have inaugurated the persecutions against Christians? The Roman government, or locals complaining to Roman governors?
2. Some have claimed that Bishop Ignatius was a masochist who enjoyed pain because of his eagerness for martyrdom. Is that fair, or even logical?
3. Were the Christians in Smyrna justified in trying to hide Bishop Polycarp?
4. Are there Christians today who seem to place *too* much emphasis on biblical prophecy, like Montanus, at the expense of the Gospel itself?
5. Are there religious leaders today, like Mani, who claim quasi-divinity?
6. Is God concerned over whether we celebrate Easter on the day or the date?
7. False *political* leadership is bad enough, but why is false *religious* leadership even worse?

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7. TORMENTS OF THE THIRD CENTURY

Egypt produced great theologians for the church, including Clement of Alexandria (fl. 200) and Origen (fl. 230), a brilliant linguist and biblical scholar who later moved to Caesarea with his library. Eusebius would use it in writing his *Church History* as well as the many local resources in the Holy Land, including such hard objects as the statue of Jesus at Caesarea-Philippi and the bishop's throne of James the Just of Jerusalem, Jesus' half-brother.

But Egypt and Rome would also torture the church. While many Christians enjoyed peace in the second century, the climate worsened in the third. Rome was failing. In the fifty years following 235, there were 22 emperors, only two of whom died in bed! Christians were blamed also for this civil catastrophe, and it was the emperor Decius (249-251) who planned to eradicate them permanently in a house-by-house persecution throughout the empire, especially in Egypt. Believers responded in four ways: the *lapsi* (who lapsed from the faith); the *libellatici* ("certificaters" who had forged documents that they had done pagan sacrifice but had not); the confessors (who were ready to die for the faith but survived); and the martyrs (who did die).

Many believers now fled to the catacombs. When Decius died in battle, so did his persecution. Whether or not the church should re-admit those who had abandoned the faith but now pleaded for forgiveness led to the Novatianist schism at Rome.

DISCUSSION

1. If Greco-Roman sculpture at that time portrayed people so accurately, how come there are no busts or paintings of Jesus? Or of the apostles?
2. Does Exodus 20:4-5 condemn art or idolatry?
3. Jesus' statue at Caesarea-Philippi was later destroyed by the emperor Julian the Apostate. What if it had instead survived and we had it today?
4. Was it ethical for Christians of the time to flee Roman persecutions?
5. Does Eusebius' admission that some Christians, under persecution, lapsed from the faith detract from the church's record? Or does such honesty make that record more credible?
6. *You may answer this question privately:* if you faced persecution today for your faith, which of the above four categories of response would be yours?
7. "More Christians are being persecuted today across the world than in the previous 1900 years of church history." Comment by pointing out places of persecution now.

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8. THE GREAT DELIVERANCE

With Book 8 of his *Church History*, Eusebius now reports on an eyewitness basis. His astonishing statement about the spread of Christianity again demonstrates how the Roman persecutions were dreadful but sporadic. Still, a terrible persecution broke out in 303 under Diocletian (284-305) at his eastern capital, Nicomedia, and it spread also to the west, where his colleague Maximian was in charge. Amid a bewildering variety of tortures, those at Alexandria, Egypt, were particularly horrible.

To ensure the succession of emperors, Diocletian arranged that his successor, after a term of years, would be Galerius, while Maximian's would be Constantius Chlorus. The last was an attractive, moderate ruler, who did not persecute the church. When he died in Britain in 306, his army immediately proclaimed his son Constantine as emperor (306-337), even though Rome and Italy were under the control of Maximian's corrupt and depraved son, Maxentius.

The stage was now set for a showdown between Constantine and Maxentius, a duel between good and evil. Like Caesar, Constantine advanced through Gaul toward Rome, where Maxentius had destroyed the bridge over the Tiber River to prevent Constantine's using it. On October 27, 312, the night before the momentous Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Constantine dreamed of Jesus, who told him: "In this sign you shall conquer." The next morning, he had his army paint the familiar Chi-Rho symbol on their shields. Maxentius, who had reversed strategy, now marched across the Tiber over his pontoon-bridge to meet Constantine, but was defeated in battle and drowned when his bridge collapsed into the Tiber. The victorious Constantine halted the persecutions and converted to Christianity -- as did virtually the whole Roman Empire by the close of the 300s.

DISCUSSION

1. "Even before the Edict of Milan in 313 legalized Christianity, the usual portrait of believers as a small sect huddling in the catacombs is faulty." Please comment.
2. Does Eusebius's claim that one reason for the final persecution was *internal dissension* in the church have a modern ring to it?
3. *Why* did the Romans persecute Christians? False rumors about them? Christian "intolerance" of paganism? The fact that believers had higher loyalties than to Rome: a "heavenly citizenship"? Their refusal to worship the emperor?
4. "In terms of how it affected the future, the Battle of the Milvian Bridge is probably the most important military operation in history." Please comment.
5. Which of the following is true: Christianity caused the fall of Rome - or - the fall of Rome aided the rise of Christianity?

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LEADER'S GUIDE

There may well be more discussion on Constantine. A few scholars claim that his conversion was politically motivated, rather than genuine. Despite some failings in his later career, however, the overpowering weight of evidence remains that he became a sincere Christian. Constantine reimbursed the church for its great losses, gave dramatic legal advantages to the clergy, built or rebuilt many Christian basilicas in both West and East - including the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Church of the Nativity in Judea - and prescribed Sunday as a holy day. He remained an active lay Christian for the rest of his life, convening both the Council of Arles in 314 and the Council of Nicea in 325, for which he also paid the traveling expenses of clergy delegates. He consecrated his new city on the Bosphorus - Constantinople - to "The God of the Martyrs," and in a dozen other ways showed that he too was a "bishop of those outside the church," as he once remarked in jest to a banquet of bishops. Although such a close alignment of church and state would, in the future, become a mixed blessing, this is the man who stopped the persecutions, legalized the faith, and enabled the ultimate triumph of Christianity.

Following are suggested answers only for what may be the more challenging questions:

1.
 1. The past is the very foundation of the present. Christianity is based, not on myth, but on real events that truly happened in history two or three millennia ago.
 2. A favorable bias does *not* mean dishonest reporting.
 3. The early Christians expected Jesus' imminent return, so history wouldn't be necessary for any future generations.
2.
 1. The only Scripture in those days was the Old Testament and its Messianic predictions.
 2. With only one scroll available to tell the Good News, the evangelists got to the point quickly.
 5. Primarily documentation. Pilate was regarded more favorably in the early church.
3.
 2. If we had Jesus' own writings, there is danger that the words themselves might be worshiped.
 3. Elymas (Acts 13:8), a girl at Philippi (Acts 16:16), the sons of Sceva at Ephesus (Acts 19:13).
 4. Probably Paul's trial had not yet taken place. Reaching Rome was also a good place to finish.
 5. No, the church was founded by Roman converts at the first Christian Pentecost (Acts 2:10).
 6. The term "pope" and papal authority were a later development.
 7. Some will respond, "Nero fiddled while Rome burned." But the fire was accidental, and the violin will not be invented until eleven centuries later.
4.
 1. Not at all. The doctrine of the "ever-Virgin Mary" was a later development.
 2. Their unbelief is understandable: what if *your* oldest brother claimed to be the Son of God?"
 3. He approved Paul's ministry, presided at the Apostolic Council, and gratefully received the collection from the Gentile churches that Paul delivered (Acts 21:17 ff.)
 5. He was the *only* bishop in the West. The East had divided authority with four major bishops.
 6. It spread rapidly. Luke is not exaggerating with his statistics, which are indirectly supported by the pagan author, Tacitus (*Annals* 15.44), and other ancient sources.

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5.
 1. Apparently John was the only apostle *not* martyred.
 2. The creeds offer a clear and brief statement of what Christians believe.
 4. Marcus Aurelius's son Commodus (180-192) was a degenerate. Septimius Severus (193-211) was a persecutor.

6.
 1. Time and again it was local complaints from citizens, pagans priests, Jews, and others that demanded government action against the Christians.
 3. Certainly.
 4. Yes, the prophecy preachers and authors in some evangelical circles, as well as books like *The Late, Great, Planet Earth* and the *Left Behind* series.
 5. Yes, some of today's cultists accord their founders near-divine honor and respect.
 6. One doubts. The celebration is what counts, not when or where it takes place.

7.
 1. The apparent prohibition in the commandment against graven images (Exodus 20:4-5).
 2. The target of this commandment is idolatry, not sculpture, painting, or other art forms.
 3. Jesus' statue would probably be worshiped, had it survived.
 4. Fleeing persecution or any other mortal danger is certainly no sin.
 7. Today, Christians are restricted in many countries, particularly in the eastern hemisphere, and are persecuted in some Islamic nations in the Middle East and Africa, as well as in such Far Eastern countries as India and China. While the governments involved do not necessarily inaugurate the persecutions, mobs representing the majority religions often lead the attacks.

8.
 1. *All* options listed are reasons for the Roman persecutions.
 2. Had the degenerate emperor Maxentius won the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, the subsequent history of the West would have been drastically different.
 5. Christianity did *not* cause the fall of the Roman Empire, as the historian Edward Gibbon famously assumed. There is, however, some truth to the statement that Rome's fall enhanced the rise of Christianity, since people looked to the church for security when the state failed them.

For further detail on early Christian history, please see Paul L. Maier's *Eusebius - The Church History* (Kregel, 1999), available at your local Christian bookstore, or order from Tobias Communications.

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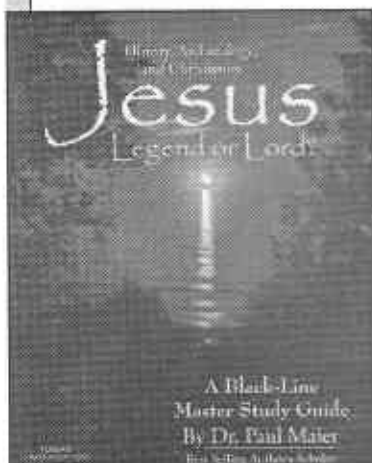
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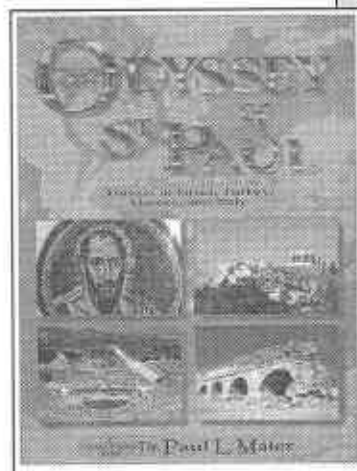


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