

# Rise of Christianity and the Fall of Rome

## Rise of Christianity

### The Life and Teachings of Jesus

Roman power spread to Israel around 63 B.C. At first the Jewish kingdom remained independent, at least in name. Rome then took control of the Jewish kingdom in and made it part of the empire. Jews, however, believed that they would once again be free. According to biblical tradition, God had promised that a savior known as the Messiah would arrive and restore the kingdom of the Jews.

At the age of 30, Jesus began his public ministry. For the next three years, he preached, taught, did good works, and reportedly performed miracles. Jesus emphasized God's personal relationship to each human being. He stressed the importance of people's love for God, their neighbors, their enemies, and even themselves. He also taught that God would end wickedness in the world and would establish an eternal kingdom after death for people who sincerely repented their sins.

When Jesus visited Jerusalem about A.D. 29, enthusiastic crowds greeted him as the Messiah, or king—the one whom the Bible had said would come to rescue the Jews. The chief priests of the Jews, however, denied that Jesus was the Messiah. They said his teachings were blasphemy, or contempt for God. The Roman governor Pontius Pilate accused Jesus of defying the authority of Rome. Pilate arrested Jesus and sentenced him to be crucified, or nailed to a large wooden cross to die.

After Jesus' death, his body was placed in a tomb. According to the Christian Bible, three days later his body was gone, and a living Jesus began appearing to his followers. It goes on to say that then he ascended into heaven. It was from this belief that Jesus came to be referred to as Jesus Christ. Christos is a Greek word meaning "messiah" or "savior." The name Christianity was derived from "Christ."

### Christianity Spreads through the Empire

Strengthened by their conviction that he had triumphed over death, the followers of Jesus continued to spread his ideas. Jesus' first followers were Jews. Soon, however, these followers began to create a new religion based on his messages. Despite opposition, the new religion of Christianity spread slowly but steadily throughout the Roman Empire.

The Pax Romana, which made travel and the exchange of ideas fairly safe, provided the ideal conditions for Christianity to spread. Common languages—Latin and Greek—allowed the message to be easily understood. The apostles also declared that Christianity should welcome all converts, Jew or non-Jew.

Christians also posed a problem for Roman rulers. The main reason was that they refused to worship Roman gods. This refusal was seen as opposition to Roman rule. Some Roman rulers also used Christians as scapegoats for political and economic troubles. Romans exiled, imprisoned, or executed Christians for refusing to worship Roman deities. Thousands were crucified, burned, or killed by wild animals in the circus arenas.

Despite persecution, Christianity became a powerful force. By the late third century A.D., there were millions of Christians in the Roman Empire and beyond. The widespread appeal of Christianity was due to a variety of reasons. Christianity grew because it: embraced all people—men and women, enslaved persons, the poor, and nobles; gave hope to the powerless; offered a personal relationship with a loving God; and promised eternal life after death.

### Constantine Accepts Christianity

A critical moment in Christianity occurred in A.D. 312, when Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. In the next year, A.D. 313, Constantine announced an end to the persecution of Christians. He declared Christianity to be one of the religions approved by the emperor. Christianity continued to gain strength. In 380, the emperor Theodosius made it the empire's official religion.



# Fall of Rome

## Constantine Moves the Capital

In A.D. 330, Emperor Constantine took a step that would have great consequence for the empire. He moved the capital from Rome to the Greek city of Byzantium (bih•ZAN•tshee•uhm). The new capital was strategically located for trade and defense purposes on a crossroads between Europe and Asia. With Byzantium as its capital, the center of power in the empire shifted from Rome to the east. Soon the new capital stood protected by massive walls and filled with imperial buildings modeled after those in Rome. The city eventually took a new name—Constantinople. After Constantine's death, the empire would again be divided. The East would survive; the West would fall.

## The Immediate Cause of the Fall of Rome

Germanic peoples had gathered on the northern borders of the empire and coexisted in relative peace with Rome. Around A.D. 370, all that changed when a fierce group of Mongol nomads from central Asia, the Huns, moved into the region and began destroying all in their path. In an effort to flee from the Huns, the various Germanic people pushed into Roman lands. (Romans called all invaders "barbarians," a term that they used to refer to non-Romans.) They kept moving through the Roman provinces of Gaul, Spain, and North Africa. The Western Empire was unable to field an army to stop them. The last Roman emperor was ousted by German forces in **476 (this is the year that Rome fell)**. After that, no emperor even pretended to rule Rome and its western provinces. Roman power in the western half of the empire had disappeared.

