

A HISTORY OF  

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CHRISTIANITY



*From St Paul to the  
Late Middle Ages*

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BOOK ONE

# *BEGINNINGS*

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# ST PAUL AND THE GROWTH OF THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

*St Paul is one of the most important saints in Christianity. His teachings, and what he wrote about Jesus and his message, are still read and studied today. St Paul did not meet Jesus. In fact, when he first found out about what the followers of Jesus were teaching, he was very much against them. Paul was an educated man, a Pharisee – that is a Jewish scholar. He was also a citizen of Rome, something that was considered an important honour. Palestine, the place where Paul lived, was under the control of the Roman Empire, one of the greatest empires of the ancient world.*

*Eventually Paul was converted to the teachings of Jesus and he preached throughout much of the Roman Empire.*

*He died a martyr.*

## THE CHRISTIAN STORY – THE BEGINNING

The Christian story began in Palestine, a country smaller than Tasmania. At the time Jesus was born, Palestine was under the control of the Romans.

The government of the Roman Empire did not consider Palestine a very important or particularly valuable province. Rather, Palestine and its Jewish population were regarded as more trouble than they were worth. The Jews were always trying to gain their freedom; they were, as far as the Romans were concerned, obsessed with the worship of One God, putting them at odds with the religions of the Empire which worshipped many gods, including the Emperor.

### WHY THE ROMANS WERE MASTERS OF PALESTINE

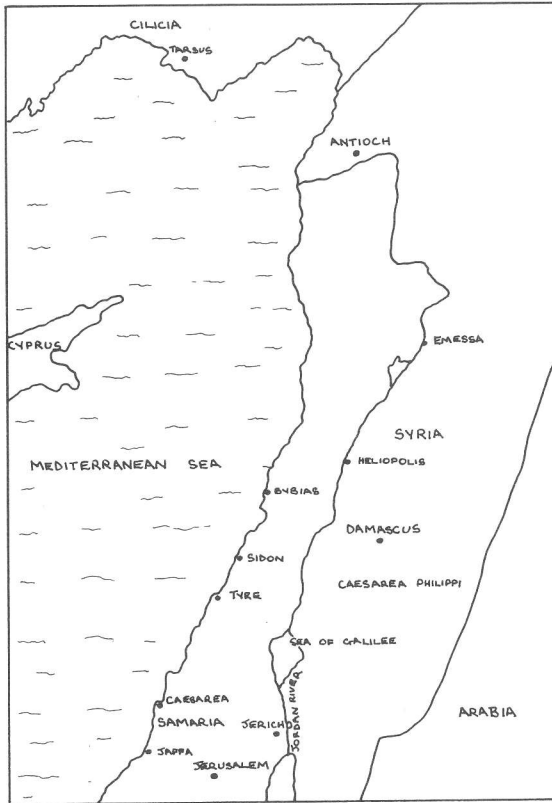
Over many years and after many battles, the Romans acquired a vast Empire. They controlled this Empire

with a strong and efficient army. The Romans were also well organised. They had laws to control everything and they had people who saw to it that trade and commerce were well run and that the roads were maintained.

One of the reasons some historians believe that Jesus was put to death was that his teachings were dangerous and could have led to outbreaks of rebellion.

If there was one thing the Roman authorities could not tolerate it was a movement that might threaten the peace and order of the Empire. The punishment for sedition, (crimes against the government), was always gruesome, to show people who might have similar ideas how they would end up.

Of course, rebellions did occur, but right up until the fourth century after Christ's death, the Roman authorities had always been able to crush them. They sometimes slaughtered hundreds or even thousands of people for their part in the rebellion.



*Palestine and the Northern Mediterranean region at the time of St Paul*  
 On the map identify this area within the Roman Empire

In Palestine, there were a number of groups in the Jewish community who had organised to try to fight against Roman rule. Other groups tried to work with the Romans to safeguard their religion and society. Still others thought the only way to survive was to drop out of society altogether and just concentrate on a life of solitude and prayer.

To the Roman authorities, Jesus and his disciples were only a minor annoyance. Jesus' death was barely reported, as were those of others who were executed for similar crimes.

**THE FIRST FOLLOWERS OF JESUS**

Those who were most affected by Jesus' death were the people closest to him – his followers and his family. For them, the events of his arrest, trial and execution were frightening and confusing.

Only a short time earlier Jesus had been welcomed into Jerusalem as a great man. It was incomprehensible to his followers that he should now be treated like a dangerous criminal. His followers scattered and hid, afraid that they too might be arrested and put to death for being associated with a condemned man.

As the days after Jesus' death passed, the Apostles slowly came to believe that Jesus was risen from the dead. He had been seen by the women three days after his death, and he had appeared among them when they were praying together.

With this knowledge they were able to gain more courage and begin to understand Jesus' mission on earth and the part that they were to play in it.

This is how it is explained in the Gospel of St Matthew:

The eleven disciples went to the hill in Galilee where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him, even though some of them doubted.

Jesus drew near and said to them, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptise them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And I will be with you always, to the end of the age." (*Matthew 28: 16-20.*)

**THE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS BEGIN THEIR PREACHING**

At first, the followers of Jesus (they were not called Christians until they were established in Antioch some years later) were allowed to preach in the synagogues. They lived like good Jews, they prayed in the Temple, observed the rules about diet and practised circumcision of male children. What was different about them was that they baptised their followers in the name of Jesus, they broke bread together and gathered to hear the preaching of the Apostles.

They soon became known as Nazarenes (after Jesus of Nazareth). The Jewish religious leaders regarded them like other sects or groups in the



Map of the Roman Empire during St Paul's lifetime

Jewish religion such as the Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, and Zealots.

The Nazarenes attracted a lot of attention. Many wanted to hear about what Jesus had taught and what he had done during his ministry. Word about this new group quickly spread to the neighbouring areas outside Palestine.

The growing popularity of the new sect led to suspicions and arguments involving the Christians, Roman authorities and Jewish religious leaders. There were also arguments within the Christian communities themselves about beliefs and practices. Some believed that only Jews could be Christians and that they should follow strictly the teachings and practices of the Jewish religion. Others, including St Peter, believed that all people, including Gentiles (non-Jews), should be permitted to learn about the teachings of Jesus.

Eventually the Jewish religious authorities became bitterly opposed to the Christians. They believed that the Christian teachings and practices

were heretical (contrary to the accepted doctrines) and that they should be stamped out.

One of the strongest opponents of the followers of Jesus was a man called Saul.

### SAUL'S OPPOSITION TO THE CHRISTIANS

Saul was about 24 when Jesus was crucified. It was in Jerusalem where Saul first heard the disciples preach and he was greatly alarmed by what he heard. He thought that their claims about Jesus being the Messiah were blasphemous (speaking against God). With authority from the chief priests he was determined to destroy what he believed to be a dangerous and heretical group.

However, on the road to Damascus in about 34 C.E. he saw a vision of the risen Lord and he himself became a follower of Jesus. (C.E. is the abbreviation for the term Christian Era, or Common Era. This is to distinguish the current calendar from the time before Christ.)

Some fifteen years later, in a letter to the Galatian Christians, Paul, as he then called himself, wrote this:

The fact is, brothers, and I want you to realise this, the Good News I preached is not a human message that I was given by men, it is something I learned only through a revelation of Jesus Christ. You must have heard of my career as a practising Jew, how merciless I was in persecuting the Church of God, how much damage I did to it, how I stood out among other Jews of my generation, and how enthusiastic I was for the tradition of my ancestors.

Then God, who had specially chosen me while I was still in my mother's womb, called me through his grace and chose to reveal his Son in me, so that I might preach the Good News about him to the pagans. I did not stop to discuss this with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were already Apostles before me, but I went off to Arabia at once and later went straight back from there to Damascus. Even when after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas (Peter) and stayed with him for fifteen days, I did not see any of the other Apostles; I only saw James, the brother of the Lord, and I swear before God that what I have just written is the literal truth. After that I went to Syria and Cilicia, and was still not known by sight to the churches of Christ in Judaea, who had heard nothing except that their one time persecutor was now preaching the faith he had previously tried to destroy; and they gave glory to God for me. (*Galatians* 1:11-24)

### PAUL'S MISSION

For the next thirty-five years Paul travelled throughout the Roman Empire setting up Christian communities. At first, he preached only in the

synagogues but, as more people began to listen to his words, the Jewish authorities refused him permission to teach. Paul then turned to the Gentiles and preached the message of Jesus to them.

He set up Christian communities on the Greek mainland and islands; in Cyprus, Syria, Turkey and Yugoslavia. He kept in touch with them by letters and return visits. His teachings concentrated on the message of Jesus' Resurrection and its meaning for all people of the world. He tried to set up Christian groups that could survive by helping each other, allowing him to continue his mission to spread the Good News. His letters to these communities helped them to build on the doctrines he had taught them and to give them a sense of belonging to a wider community of believers throughout the Empire.

### THE COUNCIL OF JERUSALEM

As Paul began to convert large numbers of Gentiles to the new faith, problems arose about the relationship between Christian teachings and Jewish teachings. Did these Gentile converts have to observe Jewish religious rules? Did the Gentile Christians have to be circumcised? Did they have to follow dietary restrictions?

It was difficult for the Christian communities to come to a satisfactory decision on these questions. So, in 49C.E. Paul went from the Antioch community to Jerusalem to meet with Peter and James and other leaders to discuss these questions. As in other Christian communities, the Christians in Antioch had been divided on these issues and Paul went to the Council of Jerusalem to ask the advice of the Jerusalem Church which was considered to be the leading Christian church community.

The debates that followed were often fierce. The people involved felt strongly about these issues and did not pull any punches.

This is a record from *The Acts of the Apostles* that summarises the main points of the debate and the conclusion that was finally reached by the Council:

Then some men came down from Judaea and taught the brothers, "Unless you have yourselves been circumcised in the tradition of Moses you cannot be saved." This led to disagreement, and after Paul and Barnabas had a long argument with these men, it was arranged that Paul and Barnabas and others of the church should go up to Jerusalem and discuss the problem with the Apostles and Elders.

All the members of the church saw them off, and as they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria they told how the pagans had been converted and this news was received with the greatest satisfaction by the brothers. When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and by the Apostles and Elders, and gave an account of all that God had done with them. But certain members of the Pharisees' party who had become believers objected, insisting that the pagans should be circumcised and instructed to keep the Law of Moses. The Apostles and Elders met to look into the matter, and after the discussion had gone on a long time, Peter stood up and addressed them. "My brothers," he said, "you know perfectly well that in the early days God made his choice among you: the pagans were to learn the Good News from me and so become believers. In fact, God, who can read everyone's heart, showed his approval of them by giving the Holy Spirit to them just as he had to us. God made no distinction between them and us, since he purified their hearts by faith. It would only provoke God's anger now, surely, if you imposed on the disciples the very burden that neither we nor our ancestors were strong enough to support? Remember, we believe that we are saved in the same way as they are: through the grace of the Lord Jesus."

This silenced the entire assembly, and they

listened to Barnabas and Paul describing all the signs and wonders God had worked through them among the pagans.

When they had finished, it was James who spoke. "My brothers," he said, "listen to me. Simeon has described how God first arranged to enlist a people for his name out of the pagans. This is entirely in harmony with the words of the prophets, since the scriptures say: 'After that I shall return and rebuild the fallen House of David; I shall rebuild it from its ruins and restore it. Then the rest of mankind, all the pagans who are consecrated to my name, will look for the Lord.' . . . I rule, then, that instead of making things more difficult for pagans who turn to God, we send them a letter telling them merely to abstain from anything polluted by idols, from fornication, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For Moses has always had his preachers in every town, and is read aloud in the synagogues every Sabbath."

Then the Apostles and Elders decided to choose delegates to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; the whole church concurred with this. They chose Judas known as Barsabbas and Silas, both leading men in the brotherhood, and gave them this letter to take with them: "The Apostles and Elders, your brothers, send greetings to the brothers of pagan birth in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. We hear that some of our members have disturbed you with their demands and have unsettled your minds. They acted without any authority from us, and so we have decided unanimously to elect delegates and to send them to you with Barnabas and Paul, men we highly respect who have dedicated their lives to the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accordingly, we are sending you Judas and Silas, who will confirm by word of mouth what we have written in this letter. It has been

decided by the Holy Spirit and by ourselves not to saddle you with any burden beyond these essentials: you are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from fornication. Avoid these, and you will do what is right. Farewell."

The party left and went down to Antioch, where they summoned the whole community and delivered the letter. The community read it and were delighted with the encouragement it gave them. (*Acts* 15:1-17; 19-31)

Of course, the Council did not settle all the problems facing the Christian communities, nor was everyone happy with the decision. However, what was now clear was that the followers of Jesus were no longer bound by the Jewish law.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF PAUL'S ROLE IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE EARLY CHURCH

St Paul is known as the Apostle to the Gentiles. Before St Paul, the teachings about Jesus spoke of him as a Jewish Messiah. But Paul believed that Jesus was the saviour of all peoples and it was this doctrine that he taught on his journeys.

St Paul's ideas did not suddenly come to him. He spent many hours thinking about Jesus and his meaning for the world. Paul developed his theology (system of beliefs) in response to the challenges made to his message as he travelled through the Empire, meeting people from different cultures and backgrounds. St Paul's understanding of the meaning of Jesus for the lives of Christians was an important influence in helping the early Church to realise that it was more than a Jewish sect. This is summed up in the letter to the Christian Community at Ephesus:

Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ. Before the world was made, he chose us, chose us in Christ, to be holy and spotless, and to live through love in his presence, determining that we should become his adopted sons, through Jesus Christ for his own kind purposes, to make us praise the glory of his grace, his free gift to us in the Beloved, in whom, through his blood, we gain our freedom, the forgiveness of our sins. He has let us know the mystery of his purpose, the hidden plan he so kindly made in Christ from the beginning to act upon when the times had run their course to the end: that he would bring everything together under Christ, as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth. Now you too, in him, have heard the message of the truth and the Good News of your salvation, and have believed it; and you too have been stamped with the seal of the Holy Spirit of the Promise, the pledge of our inheritance which brings freedom for those whom God has taken for His own, to make His glory praised. We are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it.

(*Ephesians* 1:3-7, 9-10, 13-14; 2:10)

### ST PAUL'S JOURNEYS

Even by modern standards, St Paul's journeys were remarkable. His life was in danger many times as he explained in his second letter to the Christian community in Corinth.

Five times I received thirty-nine lashes from the Jewish authorities. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I suffered shipwreck; a night and a day



*The martyrdom of St Paul*

I have been in the deep. In journeyings often, in perils from waters, in perils from robbers, in perils from my own countrymen, in perils from the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren. In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. (II Corinthians 11:24-27)

In the mid-60s C.E., St Paul journeyed to Rome to visit and preach to the small community of Christians. It was there in about 67 C.E. that he was arrested for being a Christian, which was a crime. After a short time in prison he was sentenced to death. Because he was a citizen of Rome, he was given the privilege of an honourable execution and was beheaded by the authorities. (Non-Roman criminals were often crucified.)

### GLOSSARY

**Blaspheme:** speaking against God; saying things which were offensive to people's beliefs about God.

**Heresy:** beliefs and teachings which were



*An old Florentine painting of St Paul*

contrary to official religious views; religious authorities would determine which teachings were not true to their religion and would label these as heresy.

**Sect:** a sub-group within a religion, usually with some distinguishing beliefs and/or religious practices.

**Gentiles:** *the collective name given to all non-Jewish peoples.*

**Messiah:** *one "Sent by God to save the Jewish People". There were writings about the coming of the Messiah in the Hebrew Bible; Jews had different ideas about what the Messiah would do when he came. In the time of Jesus, some expected the Messiah to lead an armed rebellion against the Romans.*

**Theology:** *the organisation of beliefs into a system, together with reflection on the meaning of those beliefs.*

### Review Questions

1. Where did the Apostles first preach?
2. What distinguished the followers of Jesus from other Jewish groups/sects?
3. Why did Saul condemn the followers of Jesus?
4. What event changed Saul's life?
5. Why is St Paul called the Apostle to the Gentiles?
6. Why did the Apostles and Christian leaders meet in Jerusalem in 49 C.E.?
7. What was St Paul's main teaching about Jesus?

8. Why is St Paul considered the first important theologian of the Church?

9. Why was the Council of Jerusalem important for the early Christian Church?

### ACTIVITIES

1. Draw a cartoon strip about the life of Saul until his conversion on the road to Damascus.
2. Draw a map of Paul's journeys; then choose one journey and list the places he visited.
3. Give an outline of 2 or 3 of Paul's letters that you think are interesting and explain why, in your own words.
4. You are a reporter for the *Antioch Times*; you are sent to cover the Council of Jerusalem. Describe what you see.
5. Examine the photograph of an old Florentine painting of St Paul.
  - (a) Why do you think St Paul has a sword in one hand and a book in the other?
  - (b) Why do you think St Paul is so large and the figures at the bottom of the painting so small?
  - (c) Who do you think the small figures might be representing?
  - (d) What impression of St Paul do you think the painter might have wanted you to have?