

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_ Class \_\_\_\_\_

# CHRISTIANITY FROM JESUS TO CONSTANTINE

**Directions:** Read the summaries of events, followed by the documents, and then answer the questions.

**Jesus** was a Jewish religious teacher and prophet from a poor town in Galilee, Northern Judea. Most of what we know about Jesus comes from the **New Testament** of the Bible, a compilation of early Christian writings. According to Christian belief, his birth was a miracle, as his mother Mary was a virgin. He was very knowledgeable in the teachings of the Torah, and had his own interpretations that challenged what many Jewish scholars were teaching at the time. He gathered a group of followers, referred to as the disciples, who believed he was the Messiah (or Christ, from the Greek *Xristos*) meaning anointed one or chosen one, who would save the Jews and lead them into an age of peace.

*One of the [Jewish] scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that [Jesus] answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first (most important) of all?" Jesus answered [quoting the Torah], "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."*  
**-Gospel according to Mark 12:28-31 (part of the New Testament of the Bible)**

Then [Jesus] looked up at his disciples (students/followers) and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh."

**-Gospel according to Luke 6:20-21 (part of the New Testament of the Bible)**

*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.*

**-Gospel according to Matthew 5:17 (part of the New Testament of the Bible)**

1. According to the Biblical account, did Jesus value the teachings of the Torah? Explain.
2. According to the Biblical account, what did Jesus teach would happen to those who suffer in this life?
3. Examine the first commandment mentioned by Jesus. What belief does it represent?

At this time, there were many Jews calling for a revolution against the Romans, who had occupied their land. Some of the disciples were even members of a revolutionary group called the Zealots. Some historians, therefore, believe that the Romans viewed Jesus as a political threat, worried that he was planning to lead a rebellion against Rome. According to Christian teachings, Jesus was arrested, tried, and condemned to death by crucifixion, the typical punishment for rebels. However, Christians believe that he came back to life three days later, visited the disciples, and then ascended to heaven. This event is called the **Resurrection**, and it became central to Christian faith. Soon the message of Jesus spread and many accepted him as the Messiah. However, the early Christians were still a **sect** (subgroup) of the Jewish religion, so **Gentiles** (non-Jews) had to convert to Judaism to become Christian. This meant they had to follow Jewish Law, which for men included circumcision. This changed with a man named Paul, a Jew from Asia Minor, who never met Jesus in life but claimed to have seen him in a vision. As a Roman citizen, Paul had access to the wider Roman world, and spread his interpretation of the teachings of Jesus to Asia Minor, Greece, and even Italy. He was influenced by Greek philosophy, and he put less emphasis on the Old Testament Law, so his teachings appealed to the Gentiles to whom he preached. His letters to different cities became part of the New Testament.

*...God has done what the Law... could not do: by sending his own Son in the appearance of sinful flesh as a sacrificial offering for sin*

**-Paul's Epistle to the Romans 3:25 (part of the New Testament of the Bible)**

*...a person is considered righteous not by [following] the Law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be considered righteous by faith in Christ, and not by [following] the Law, because no one will be considered righteous by [following] the Law.*

**-Paul's Epistle to the Galatians 2:16 (part of the New Testament of the Bible)**

4. According to Paul, why did God send Jesus?
5. Did Paul believe that Christians were required to follow the Torah Law? Why or why not?

In the first centuries after Jesus, Early Christians were persecuted in the Roman Empire. They were seen as denying the gods and abandoning the tradition. Christians often practiced in secret, which only led to more suspicion. Those who were killed for practicing Christianity were called **martyrs**, people who die for beliefs.

*[Emperor] Nero [inflicted] the most fearful punishments on those popularly called Christians, a group hated because of their outrageous practices. The founder of this sect, Christus, was executed in the reign of Tiberius by the procurator Pontius Pilatus. Thus the [harmful] superstition was suppressed for the while, but it broke out again not only in Judaea, where this evil had its origin, but even in Rome, to which all obnoxious and disgraceful elements from everywhere in the world and receive a large following... A vast multitude (large number) was convicted... Their executions were made into a sport in that they were covered with skins of wild beasts and torn to pieces by dogs, or they were fastened to crosses or wrapped with flammable materials so that... they could be burned to serve as torches in the night...*

**-Roman historian Tacitus describing the aftermath of the Great Fire of Rome in 64 CE**

6. How did Nero treat the Christians?
7. How does the historian Tacitus feel about Christianity?

This all changed with Emperor **Constantine**, who legalized Christianity in 313 CE. He saw Christianity as a way to bring unity to the Roman Empire, and even brought together a large group of Christian leaders together for the **Council of Nicaea** to discuss and debate issues of Christian belief on which they differed. At that time, there were many Christian groups with different beliefs, and Constantine wanted them to come to an agreement.

*...We have [tried] to bring all things into conformity with the ancient laws and public order of the Romans. We have been especially anxious that even the Christians, who have abandoned the religion of their ancestors, should return to reason... Nevertheless, since many of them have continued to persist in their opinions...we, with our [usual mercy], have judged it is wise to extend a pardon even to these men and permit them... to be Christians and reestablish their places of meeting...*

**-Edict of Milan, 313 CE, issued by Emperor Constantine**

*We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father [the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God], Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father...*

**-Nicene Creed, declaration of Christian faith, agreed upon at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE**

8. What did Constantine originally want, and what did he eventually decide to do?
9. The Council of Nicaea had been debating whether (a) Jesus was part of God and equal to God, or (b) whether Jesus was created by God and subordinate (lower than) God. On which did they decide?

In 380 CE, Christianity was made the official religion of the Roman Empire. As it gained strength and spread through the empire, Christianity reshaped Roman beliefs. When the Roman Empire fell, the Christian Church took over much of its role, becoming the central institution of Western civilization for nearly 1,000 years.