The Rise of Christianity

BEFORE YOU READ
In the last section, you read about the Pax Romana.
In this section, you will read about the development of Christianity.

AS YOU READ
Use the chart below to take notes on the beginnings and the spread of Christianity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEADER</th>
<th>RELIGIOUS INFLUENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jesus</td>
<td>spread message of love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>believed by some to be Messiah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constantine</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The Life and Teachings of Jesus
(pages 168–169)

Why did people believe Jesus was the savior?

One group of people that lost its land to the Romans was the Jews. Many Jews wanted the Romans to leave their land.

Others hoped for the coming of the Messiah—the savior. According to Jewish tradition, God promised that the Messiah would restore the kingdom of the Jews.

Jesus was born in Judea. At about age 30, Jesus began to preach. His message included many ideas from Jewish traditions, such as the principles of the Ten Commandments and the belief in one God. According to close followers, who were later called apostles, Jesus performed many miracles. His fame grew. Some believed him to be the long-awaited Messiah.

Jewish leaders did not believe that his teachings were those of God. Roman leaders feared he would incite the people. The Romans arrested Jesus and put him to death.
After his death, Jesus's followers said that he appeared to them again and then went to heaven. They said this proved he was the Messiah. They called him Christ. This is the Greek word for savior. His followers came to be called Christians. Led by Peter, the first apostle, they spread his teachings throughout Palestine and Syria.

1. Why was Jesus put to death?

2. What did the Romans do to the Jews?

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A World Religion (pages 170–172)

Why did Christianity spread?

Christianity spread for several reasons. First, it accepted all believers: rich or poor, male or female. Second, it gave hope to the powerless. Third, it appealed to those who were troubled by the lack of morality in Rome. Fourth, it offered a personal relationship with God. Fifth, it offered the promise of life after death.

As the church grew, it became more organized. Priests were in charge of small churches. Bishops were in charge of all the churches in one area. The pope was in charge of all. The pope was the head of the Christian Church.

In A.D. 313, Christianity entered a new era. The Roman emperor Constantine said that Christians would no longer be persecuted. He gave his official approval to Christianity. A few decades later, Christianity became the empire's official religion.

While Christianity grew in power, it went through changes. Church leaders sometimes disagreed over basic beliefs and argued about them. Church leaders called any belief that appeared to contradict the basic teachings a heresy. From time to time, councils met to end disagreements and define beliefs.

3. How was the church organized?
Chapter 6  Viewpoint Activity

The Roman empire was generally tolerant of minority religions but, as you read in this chapter, this did not extend to the new religion of Christianity. As governor of the Roman province of Bithynia (modern Turkey), the writer Pliny the Younger (Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus) had to deal with the problem of punishing Christians. Pliny, well-known for his letter-writing, asked advice from his boss—the emperor Trajan. ♦ As you read their letters, written about A.D. 110, consider what they show about official Roman policy at the time. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.

What To Do About the Christians?

Pliny to Trajan the Emperor... I have never been present when Christians have been put on trial. So I do not know how they are usually punished. I am also not sure what efforts I have to make to go out and find them...

This is what I have done with those who were named to me as Christians. I had them brought in and asked them face-to-face if they were Christians. If they said “Yes,” I asked them a second time. If they still said “Yes,” I asked them a third time. And this time I threatened them with punishment. If they still said “Yes,” I ordered them to be beheaded...

...There are some people who say that they are not Christians. They also say they have never been Christians. When I get these in court, they repeat after me Roman prayers to Roman gods and to your statue. I have your statue brought in with the statues of the gods. They then burn incense and offer wine to the gods... There are some people who say they were once Christian.

I have put off any more trials and I have run to you for help. I must have your advice because there are so many people who are at risk...

Trajan to Pliny You did the right thing, my friend Secundus, in “shaking out” the cases of those who were named to you as Christians. There is no rule which will cover everything. The matter is so complex. But the Christians must not be hunted out. If they are named and proved Christians, they must be punished. If someone says he is not a Christian and shows it by praying to our Roman gods, then grant him a pardon. He has repented and that will do. Do this even to those who may be suspected of having been Christians in the past.

Do not take any notice of lists of names that have no significance. They must not be used as evidence in a court of law. That sort of thing is a very poor example to others. It is not the sort of thing I want to be remembered for as Emperor.


Questions to Discuss

1. What punishment did Pliny impose on those who insisted they were Christians? Was he thinking about being more or less severe toward them?
2. What test did Trajan approve for giving accused Christians a pardon?
3. Identifying Assumptions (a) What can you tell from these two letters about the attitudes of Roman officials toward Christianity? Do you think they opposed its beliefs or simply found it a threat to the unity of the empire? (b) Why was Trajan opposed to actively “hunting out” Christians?