

## CHAPTER 28

# Christianity: The Life of Jesus

Christianity has spread all around the world during the past 2,000 years. Unlike the founders of the other world religions, whose lives were longer, Jesus taught publicly for only three years and died a criminal's death at the age of 33. Jesus did not leave any written works, and we have only a vague idea of what he looked like. Yet the Western calendar starts from the year of his birth, and people around the world, even those who are not his followers, celebrate his birthday every year.

Who was this person who affected the world so profoundly?

Many years after Jesus died, accounts of his life and teachings were compiled for posterity. These are called "gospels," meaning "good news." The earliest of these is thought to have been written about 50 AD, although some scholars date them much later. These gospels are the only sources that we have from which to learn about Jesus' life.

### Background

The land into which Jesus was born was seething with expectation. In 63 BC the Roman Emperor Pompey entered Jerusalem, annexed Palestine and ended the Jews' short-lived political independence. From that time, a garrison of Roman soldiers was permanently stationed in Jerusalem. The Romans couldn't understand the Jewish religion, which seemed to them to be superstitious and primitive. They tried to replace it with Hellenistic culture, many aspects of which were deeply offensive to Jews. As a result, many Jews hated the Romans and there were often violent revolts.

In 40 BC Rome appointed Herod the Great, a cruel man of Jewish descent, king of the country. He continued the Hellenization of Palestine. Afraid that he would lose power, Herod filled the land with secret police and severely punished any Jew who aroused the least suspicion of political disloyalty. Suspecting treachery even at home, he murdered his mother-in-law, two sons and favorite wife. He tried to control the Jews by pitting different parties against each other. After he died, the country was divided among his sons, who were as unpopular as their father.

In 6 AD Jerusalem and Judea came under direct Roman rule. A series of procurators, or governors, was sent from Rome. These appointees were not of the caliber normally associated with Roman administration. They could not understand the Jews' stubborn resistance to Hellenistic religion and their loyalty to their faith. As a result, the Roman procurators needlessly provoked conflict and disturbances. The procurator Pontius Pilate, for example, took money set aside for sacrifices from the Temple treasury to finance the building of a new aqueduct. He also caused a riot by bringing military insignia bearing the emperor's image into the city of Jerusalem.

As time went on, more and more Jews were drawn into a group called the Zealots, who favored armed rebellion. They were fiercely nationalistic and opposed even the

payment of taxes to the Romans. From time to time revolutionary figures appeared who attempted to lead the people in winning their release from Roman rule. This rebelliousness culminated in a revolt against Rome in 70 AD, which led to the destruction of the Jewish state.

This was also a period of intense religious ferment. One group prominent in the New Testament is the Pharisees, a lay (non-priestly) movement which was creative, progressive and full of zeal and piety. Their leaders were called “rabbis,” or teachers. They had many new ideas such as belief in life after death, in angels and demons, and that there was a divine plan in history. They sought new ways to apply the Torah to the changing needs of the people. Their efforts, however, led to the endless multiplication of rules that few could follow and the accusation that the Pharisees were legalistic. Although they are often attacked in the New Testament, they are also portrayed as being sympathetic to the early Christians. After the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, the party of the Pharisees became the basis for the Judaism that has continued until today.

Another important group was the Sadducees. They were the conservative, aristocratic, and priestly party which controlled the bureaucracy. The Sadducees were politically and religiously opposed to the views of the reform-minded Pharisees. They interpreted the Mosaic law literally and probably did not believe in life after death. After the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple, they lost their influence and power.

In addition, there were many spiritual groups, the best known being the Essenes. They were a very strict religious community that lived in the desert. They rejected what they saw as the corruption of the Jewish faith by the priests who controlled the Temple. Instead of animal sacrifices, they offered a community meal. They considered themselves to be preparing for the coming Messiah, who would lead them not only in throwing off the Roman yoke but also in restoring the Kingdom of Israel.

## Jesus' birth and youth

Living in an oppressive political environment that was also full of religious ferment, many Jews developed a strong expectation that God would do something to save them as He had in the past. They believed that another Moses would be raised up to lead them. This was to be the Messiah, which means “Anointed One.” The Messiah would free them from foreign oppression and would revitalize their religion. He would root out idolatry and sin and establish the kingdom of God worldwide. In this way political order, ethical perfection, economic prosperity and eternal peace would come to all humankind. The last prophet, Malachi, had spoken about the coming of the Messiah. However, he also had warned the people that if they were not sufficiently prepared for that day, they would be destroyed.

The Gospel of Luke opens with the story of an old priest, Zachariah, who was told by an angel that his childless wife, Elizabeth, was to have a son. One day when he was serving in the Temple, the angel Gabriel appeared to Zachariah and told him that his son would have a special mission. The old priest was dumbfounded and couldn't believe the angel. Nevertheless, in due course, his wife became pregnant and eventually gave birth to a son they called John. When he was born, Zachariah prophesied:

And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him.

— Lk. 1:76

While Elizabeth was pregnant, her cousin Mary was also visited by the angel. Gabriel told her that she was to give birth to a son, Jesus, who would be called the Son of God, and who would sit on the throne of Israel and establish an everlasting kingdom. Mary was surprised because she was not yet even married. However, the angel told her what had happened to Elizabeth and assured her that God would fulfill his promise.

Mary was engaged to a carpenter, Joseph. When he discovered that she had become pregnant, he wanted to break off the engagement. However, an angel appeared and told him that the baby would save people from their sins and that God was behind what had happened. Joseph believed the angel and took Mary to be his wife.



Mary gave birth to Jesus in a stable in Bethlehem because there was no other place for Joseph's family to stay. Still, guided by revelation about the birth of an unusual baby, three wise men came and brought gifts to the newborn "king." King Herod, though, hearing about the birth of a "king," feared a new uprising and ordered all the baby boys in the area to be killed. Joseph and Mary were warned of Herod's intentions in a dream, and they escaped to Egypt with the baby. After the death of Herod, they returned and settled in Nazareth in Galilee, Joseph's home.

We know almost nothing about Jesus' childhood. We know that he spoke Aramaic, could read Hebrew and possibly learned Greek, as there was a large Greek city, Sephoris, not far from Nazareth. When he was twelve years old, the gospels record, his parents took him to Jerusalem for a religious festival. When they were already on their way home after the celebrations, they realized Jesus was missing. They went back to Jerusalem and three days later found him in the Temple talking with the religious teachers, who were astonished by the boy's wisdom.

A few years later, the Emperor Augustus, who considered himself to be a living god, died, and the throne was inherited by the suspicious and gloomy Tiberius. He appointed Pontius Pilate to be the sixth procurator of Judea.

At this time a young and fiery preacher, John, the son of Zachariah, was becoming more and more known in Palestine. John was an ascetic who lived in the desert fasting and praying, ate only locusts and wild honey and wore the most simple clothes. When he was thirty, he gave his first public sermon. Filled with righteous determination to bring his people back to God, he spoke about the necessity of repentance and about the Judgment that was to come soon: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Mt. 3:2). From all around the country, religious leaders and ordinary people came to listen to John and be baptized by him in the Jordan River. Baptism represented the cleansing of sins and a new start in life; as water cleanses the body, so repentance purifies the soul. John, who by this time was called "the Baptist," told the people they should confess their wrongdoings and prepare themselves because the Messiah was coming very soon.

One day Jesus himself came to the river to be baptized. During the baptism, God revealed to John that this person from Galilee was the Son of God. John told those gathered around him about Jesus' identity, and immediately two of John's disciples

followed Jesus. John himself, however, continued to preach and baptize at the Jordan. Not long afterward, John was arrested and imprisoned by King Herod Antipas because he had criticized the king's adulterous behavior. John was later beheaded.

### *Jesus' early ministry*

After being baptized, Jesus went into the desert to fast and pray for forty days before beginning his own ministry. From the desert he went to Judea and started to preach the gospel, the Good News — that the kingdom of heaven was at hand (Mt. 4:17). This was the same message as John's. With a few disciples, Jesus also started to



baptize in the Jordan River, and many people went to him. When more people were being baptized by Jesus than were going to John, Jesus left Judea and went home to Galilee. He went through the towns and villages preaching in the synagogues and on the hills.

Having come back to his hometown, Nazareth, Jesus went to the synagogue to preach. All the people were amazed that the carpenter's son could speak so eloquently. However, they also were shocked by what he said, and they even tried to throw him off a cliff (Lk. 4:16-30).

Undaunted, Jesus traveled throughout Galilee preaching the good news of the kingdom. He preached in the synagogues, and the people were astonished by his righteous spirit and the power of his words. Crowds followed him wherever he went. He healed the sick and drove out demons (Mt. 8:28-33). Thousands of people gathered to listen to him, captivated by his words and marveling at his miracles. They recognized that, unlike other religious teachers, Jesus spoke with great spiritual authority and that even evil spirits had to obey him. A person couldn't simply listen to his words, since Jesus was calling on people to change their lives drastically. Jesus' message was very controversial. He preached a radical

obedience to God and the coming kingdom. His disciples had to give up everything — wealth, family, and friends — to follow him. He told the Jews to love their enemies, the Romans; he encouraged respect for the despised Samaritans; he elevated the role of women; and he challenged the religious, social and political orthodoxy of his day.

As Jesus traveled he gathered disciples. The first four were fishermen, the brothers Simon Peter and Andrew, and James and John, the sons of Zebedee. Later the tax collector Matthew joined them. Some Pharisees, however, were surprised that Jesus, a religious leader, associated with such sinners. Jesus told them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." (Lk. 5:31). Some time later, after spending a night in prayer, Jesus chose the others who were to be among the twelve disciples. They were Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon, Judas (the son of James) and Judas Iscariot.

### *The message of Jesus*

Jesus spent a lot of time with his disciples. He taught them how to pray, how to love, how to deal with different situations and people. All this he taught through his

## Sermon on the Mount

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

— Mt. 5:3-12

living example. Many times he withdrew from the hustle and bustle of his ministry to go to the mountains to pray. In response to his disciples' request, he taught them what we now call the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,  
Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

— Mt. 6:9-13

Jesus gave them a new commandment which was to be the basis of their community: "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (Jn. 13:34-35).

He taught them that they should serve each other and not try to dominate one another. "The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Mt. 23:11-12).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus expressed the core of his teaching, which was to bring people love, harmony and the joy of oneness with God.

Jesus taught that true happiness is not brought about by power or money, and it's not the possession of the rulers of this world. Only those who open their hearts to love can inherit the kingdom of heaven.

## Crowds come to Jesus

During the Galilean springtime all kinds of people came to Jesus. Apart from the crowds of common people, a centurion came and asked him to heal his servant, and Jairus, the ruler of

a synagogue, asked Jesus to bring his daughter back to life. Pharisees attended his meetings and invited him to their houses, listening to what he said attentively. Jesus had followers in every part of society. In fact, there were so many that he was worried. He could not look after and guide them all himself, and he still did not have enough disciples who could fully understand his teaching.

After a while he sent the disciples out two by two to preach the gospel. He warned them that they were to expect persecution but that God would always be with them to protect them. The apostles went through all the towns and villages, preaching and teaching the good news that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. Like Jesus, they healed the sick and cast out demons.

## Confusion around Jesus

People everywhere were talking and arguing about Jesus. People heatedly debated whether he was a prophet or even the Christ (the Greek word for Messiah). Despite the fact that during the first year of his preaching hundreds of people had come to listen to his sermons and be healed, little by little opposition began to grow.

One day when Jesus was teaching, a paralyzed man was brought to him to be healed. Jesus said to the man, "Your sins are forgiven." When the other religious teachers who were listening to him heard what he said, they were shocked. They



thought that only God could forgive sins. Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,” and to prove it he healed the man (Mk. 2:10).

The company that Jesus kept also scandalized the religious leaders. He associated with sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes. Some Pharisees accused Jesus because he healed people on the Sabbath, since for Jews any type of work on the Sabbath was forbidden. After a while, feeling jealous of the power Jesus had over people, they began to challenge his authority more and more. Trying to discredit Jesus’ work, they accused him of breaking the Mosaic Law. However, he always answered their questions and defeated them in argument. Many of the things Jesus said, though, were deeply

disturbing to the religious leaders of his time. When he said, “I and the Father are one,” they were so angry that they wanted to stone him. They said, “We are ... stoning you for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.” (Jn. 10:33). Jesus realized it was difficult for them to accept his teaching because it was so radical and challenging. But he pleaded with them to at least recognize that the good works and miracles he was doing were evidence that he had been sent by God.

As time went by, the confusion around Jesus increased. Crowds of people followed him and considered him to be their new Teacher. Some of his followers even hoped to make him their leader in the overthrow of the Romans. They started to proclaim him as the Messiah, although he had told them to keep this a secret.

The whole situation seemed to be getting out of control. Together with some of the Pharisees, the chief priests called a meeting of the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish court. There they discussed what to do about Jesus. They were worried that if everyone came to believe in Jesus, the Roman authorities would be alarmed, treat it as a rebellion and crush the people once more. They decided that it would be better for Jesus to die than for the whole nation to suffer.

### *Followers leave*

It was also becoming difficult for many of Jesus’ disciples to accept what he was saying, because it seemed to contradict the laws and traditions to which they were accustomed. One by one his followers left (Jn. 6:53-66). Even those who remained loyal found it difficult to understand what he was saying. Again and again Jesus tried to teach his disciples through parables, but it was difficult for the apostles to understand their hidden meaning. The crowds, who had been enthusiastic, started to drift away and abandon him. The heart of Jesus was filled with pain. He had come to tell people about love which they had not known before, love that could change their whole lives, but they didn’t understand. Filled with sorrow, he wept over Jerusalem and the sad destiny of his people, who didn’t know who he was.

Despite this, Jesus still continued to teach. However, the content of his sermons changed.

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

— Matt. 16:21

The first time he told this to his disciples, they were very surprised, because up until then they had only talked about building the kingdom of heaven together (Lk. 24:21).

## Passion week

Jesus now set his face toward Jerusalem. It was one week before Passover, the Jewish feast celebrating the Exodus, the escape of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. Jerusalem was crowded with pilgrims.

When Jesus, accompanied by a throng of his disciples, entered Jerusalem, many people welcomed him warmly.

As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road. When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

— Lk. 19:36-38

The city was stirred up by such a triumphal entry, and people were talking about Jesus. Many followed him, while others were in violent disagreement. The Roman authorities and the chief priests were more and more afraid of a possible disturbance.

The next day Jesus went down to the courts around the Temple. When he saw that the area was full of merchants changing money and selling doves for sacrifices in the Temple, Jesus angrily drove them out. The next day Jesus went once more to the Temple, where he taught and disputed with the Pharisees and Sadducees. Again and again they tried to trick him into blaspheming, but each time he answered their questions so cleverly that they fell into angry silence. They tried to find a way to arrest Jesus, but they couldn't do it openly because many people supported the prophet from Galilee. Fearing a revolt, they sought to seize him secretly.

Such an opportunity soon appeared. One of Jesus' disciples, Judas Iscariot, had had some resentment against his teacher for some time. When the circumstances around Jesus became more difficult, he decided to betray him. He went to the chief priests and told them how they could seize Jesus when he was away from the crowds. For this they gave him thirty silver coins. But betrayal didn't liberate Judas from his resentment. Later, realizing what he had done, Judas hanged himself.

## The Last Supper

The next day, Thursday, Jesus and his disciples celebrated a Passover meal, now called by Christians the Last Supper. All twelve disciples were there. Before the meal, Jesus took a bowl of water and washed the feet of his disciples. They were embarrassed, feeling that they could not accept such service from their teacher. But even during the last evening Jesus was teaching them — not only with words but with his own life — how they should care for, serve and love one another.



He then shared the meal with his disciples in what became the basis for the Christian communion service.

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

— Mt. 26:26-28

During the Last Supper Jesus for the first time talked openly about his imminent betrayal and death. About the one who was to betray him, Jesus said, "It would be better for him if he had not been born." (Matt. 26: 24)

### *Jesus' prayer and arrest*

After the meal, Jesus and his disciples went to the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives overlooking Jerusalem. He told the disciples to wait for him while he prayed.

He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here

and keep watch." Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

— Mk. 14:33-36

But when he returned, he found his disciples sleeping. He woke them up, and at that moment the garden filled with voices and was lit up with lamps. Judas entered the garden with some armed guards. He went up to Jesus and kissed him to point him out to the authorities. Jesus was arrested, and the disciples fled.

Jesus was brought to the high priest Caiaphas. At a meeting of the Sanhedrin, which had gathered so as to find a reason to have Jesus put to death, nobody tried to defend him. He too was silent.

The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."

"Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied.

— Matt. 26:63-64

When they heard this, the chief priests were very angry and determined that Jesus should die. However, the Sanhedrin did not have the authority to execute anyone; only the Romans could do this. The Sanhedrin sent Jesus to be tried by the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate. Pilate examined Jesus but could find no reason to have him executed. He wanted to release him, but the religious leaders pushed for his death.



## The Crucifixion and Resurrection

Jesus was flogged by the Roman soldiers and given a crown of thorns to wear. He was mocked as “the king of the Jews” and led out to a place called Golgotha. While carrying his cross, he was mocked and insulted. Weakened by the flogging, Jesus was unable to carry the cross, and a man in the crowd called Simon was pressed into carrying it. At the top of Golgotha, a hill just outside the city walls, Jesus was crucified between two robbers. Pilate had fastened to the cross a sign that read: *Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews*. Only his mother, Mary, and beloved disciple John were at the cross when he died.

Even when he was dying, Jesus didn’t condemn those who were killing him. Until the last moment of his life he loved the people, and he asked God to forgive them.

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.”

— Lk. 23:34

When evening came, a follower of Jesus’ known as Joseph of Arimathea took Jesus’ body, placed it in the tomb he had prepared for himself, and rolled a large stone across the entrance.

Early on Sunday morning some of the women who had followed Jesus went to the tomb, but found it empty. An angel told them that Jesus had risen from the dead (Mk. 16:5). They were very excited and ran to tell the disciples, who did not believe them. That evening, while ten of the disciples were gathered together behind locked doors, Jesus appeared in the room (Jn. 20:19). Over the next forty days Jesus appeared to up to 500 of his followers (I Cor. 15:6). Each time he spoke to them, encouraged them and strengthened them in their faith. He taught them about their mission.

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

— Mt. 28:19-20

After forty days Jesus ascended into heaven. Ten days later, when a large group of disciples had gathered together, they were suddenly filled with the Spirit of God, and what appeared to be “tongues of fire” rested on their heads. From then on, the previously frightened, timid and cowed disciples had the courage to boldly and fearlessly proclaim the gospel. They went out to fulfill the commission Jesus had given them. Many were put to death, but they feared neither death nor any other threat. This was the foundation of Christianity.

Although it originated in Palestine, Christianity spread rapidly in all directions. In 988 missionaries were invited by the Russian ruler Vladimir I to Christianize Russia. Today there are three main forms of Christianity in the world, each with its own distinctive character. Although they had been growing apart for several centuries, in 1054 Eastern Orthodoxy formally split from Roman Catholicism. In 1517 the Reformation, initiated by Martin Luther in Germany, led to the development of Protestantism.



## For Your Journal



Imagine it is the year 27 AD in Palestine. You are walking along a wide road, the sun is burning, the wind lifts clouds of dust. You are dressed in gray rags with a rope instead of a belt. A purse with a few jingling coins is hanging from your waist. You are walking with head hanging, watching your bruised and dirty feet wearily step along the road. Things are bad. You will have to spend your last few coins on candles, and at home there will be another argument. The quarrel you had in the morning with your neighbor and the insults he shouted are still resounding in your ears. You are full of resentment and anger, and there is no person in the whole world who will listen to you, understand you and accept you with all your sufferings, woes, and daily complaints. The Lord, the God of Israel, where is He, the promised and the long-awaited King, the Liberator? When will that morning come when you will be free of resentment, suffering and loneliness? When will all the dreams come true? No, you are not losing faith, but your people have been waiting for centuries.

At last you see the market on your left. A cart has passed you, loaded with olives and pots, then another one with watermelons; and here is a man riding an old mule. At last you approach the market. It is noisy and crowded, market-men are shouting, people are pushing. In a many-colored crowd you see the white garments of Pharisees hurrying to the synagogue. Roman soldiers pass by. You come to a little shop and push through the crowd of idlers who have gathered at the door. You have come here to buy some candles. And you are so sick at heart, you don't lift your head.

Attracted by a group of shabbily dressed people who are walking through the market, you turn your head to look at them. From their speech you recognize that some of them are fishermen from the seashore. They are talking together quietly. One of the fishermen addresses a man in their midst who seems lost in thought: "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Even seven times?"

You notice the thoughtful man lift his eyes. His face is rather clear, and he looks at the crowd and for a moment his gaze rests on you. A ray of light suddenly seems to pierce your heart through the clouds of resentment. The man they are calling Teacher begins to speak. He speaks softly, but the force of his words makes everybody quiet. This wandering preacher seems to touch every heart. "Not seven but seventy times seven," he replies.

Intrigued, you listen as he tells a parable, and you feel your resentment and anger no longer. You would stay and listen to this Teacher, but the crowd that has assembled is dissipating.

Imagine you live at the time of Jesus and have a chance to meet him. How would you respond to him and his teachings?

Describe your encounter and your impressions of it.