CHRISTIAN HISTORY

JESUS TO 100 C.E.

March 11, 2026

Key Dates:
ca. 6 BCE, Jesus' birth
ca. 30 CE, Jesus' death & resurrection
64 CE, Nero's persecution of Christians
70 CE, Jerusalem temple destroyed
81-96 CE, Domitian's rule, including some persecution of Christians

SUMMARY OF THIS CENTURY

Key Dates: ca. 6 BCE, Jesus born • ca. 30 CE, Jesus' death & resurrection • 64 CE, Nero's persecution of Christians • 70 CE, Jerusalem temple destroyed • 81-96 CE, Domitian's rule, including some persecution of Christians

General Development: ministry of Jesus; growth, expansion, and decentralization of the church; early, localized persecution

Key Questions: How could a man who was crucified be the Son of God? • Docetism

Key Places: Jerusalem (Christianity started there)
- Antioch (outreach to Gentiles thrived there; see Acts 11:19-26, 13:1-3)
- Ephesus (Paul ministered there, John spent his later years there)
- Rome (Paul and Peter were both martyred there; key location from which Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire and beyond)

Church Leadership: congregations were typically led by elders, with deacons serving under the elders

1) JESUS — ca. 6 BCE to ca. 30 CE

• born 6-4 BCE, shortly before the death of Herod the Great in 4 BCE
• crucified & raised ca. 30 CE
• mentioned in enough first- and second-century non-Christian writings that today there is no question about whether he actually lived, even among non-Christian historians

2) CLAUDIUS'S DECREE EXPELLING JEWS FROM JERUSALEM — 49 CE

• **Acts 18:1-4** — Aquila (a Jew) and his wife Priscilla had left Italy and come to Corinth because the emperor Claudius (ruled 41-54 CE) had ordered all Jews to leave Rome.
• Seutonius (Roman historian & biographer, ca. 69-122) writes, *"Because the Jews constantly made trouble, which was instigated by Chrestus, he expelled them from the city."* — Lives of the 12 Caesars, Book 5 ("Claudius") 25.4
  • Seutonius may have been confusing "Chrestus" with "Christos", the Greek spelling of "Christ". If so, Claudius's order may have been given in response to conflicts between Christian and non-Christian Jews.
  • This order is usually dated to 49 CE.
• This order was cancelled when Claudius died. Jews, including Christian Jews, returned to Rome. Apparently their return caused some disruption in the (now Gentile) churches in Rome, because in his letter to the Romans (56 or 57 CE) Paul stresses the need for mutual understanding and acceptance between Jewish and non-Jewish Christians there.
• The fact that Christian Jews like Aquila were expelled from Rome along with non-Christian Jews tells us that at this time the Roman government did not yet see any clear distinction between Jews and Christians.

3) NERO'S PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS — 64 CE

- This persecution is the first clear indication of a recognition by the Roman government that there was a difference between Christians and Jews.
- "The Great Fire of Rome: Background" (PBS) — https://www.pbs.org/wnet/secrets/great-fire-rome-background/1446/

  One of [Nero's] grandest plans was to tear down a third of Rome so that he could build an elaborate series of palaces that would be known as Neropolis. The senate, however, objected ardently to this proposal. Exactly what happened next has remained a mystery for nearly 2,000 years.

  On the night of July 19, 64 A.D., a fire broke out among the shops lining the Circus Maximus, Rome's mammoth chariot stadium. In a city of two million, there was nothing unusual about such a fire — the sweltering summer heat kindled conflagrations around Rome on a regular basis, particularly in the slums that covered much of the city. Knowing this, Nero himself was miles away in the cooler coastal resort of Antium. Yet this was no ordinary fire. The flames raged for six days before coming under control; then the fire reignited and burned for another three. When the smoke cleared, 10 of Rome's 14 districts were in ruin… Two thirds of Rome had been destroyed.

  History has blamed Nero for the disaster, implying that he started the fire so that he could bypass the senate and rebuild Rome to his liking. Much of what is known about the great fire of Rome comes from the aristocrat and historian Tacitus, who claimed that Nero watched Rome burn while merrily playing his fiddle. Gangs of thugs prevented citizens from fighting the fire with threats of torture, Tacitus wrote. There is some support for the theory that Nero leveled the city on purpose: the Domus Aurea, Nero's majestic series of villas and pavilions set upon a landscaped park and a man-made lake, was built in the wake of the fire.
- Someone had to be blamed for the fire. Nero blamed Christians:

  But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiations of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order. Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a deadly superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the source of the evil, but also in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world meet and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who confessed; then , upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of arson, as of hatred of the human race. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames. These served to illuminate the night when daylight failed. Nero had thrown open his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or drove about in a chariot. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed. – Tacitus (Roman historian and politician), *The Annals* 15.44.2-8
- This was the first major persecution of Christians in Rome or by the Roman emperor. It was around this time, or not long after, that Peter and Paul were both martyred under Nero in Rome.

4) DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM & GOD'S TEMPLE — 70 CE

- Jews in the Jewish homeland revolted against Rome in 66 CE. War ensued until 73 CE, though most of the fighting ended when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70 CE.
- The Roman army captured Jerusalem in August of 70 and destroyed God's temple. Since this time, Judaism has had no temple for sacrifices and worship. Christians saw the destruction of the temple as a sign from God that the new covenant through Jesus was in full force; a physical temple was no longer needed.

• Jesus had foretold this destruction some four decades earlier:

> Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, "As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down"…
>
> "When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written… Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled." — **Luke 21:5-6, 20-24**

• Christians, recalling Jesus' prophecy, fled the war before Jerusalem was captured:

> …the people of the church in Jerusalem were commanded by an oracle given by revelation before the war to those in the city who were worthy of it to depart and dwell in one of the cities of Perea which they called Pella. To it those who believed on Christ migrated from Jerusalem, that when holy men had altogether deserted the royal capital of the Jews and the whole land of Judaea, the judgement of God might at last overtake them for all their crimes against the Christ and his Apostles… — Eusebius, Church History 3.5.3

5) DOCETISM

• One of the most difficult issues for the church near the end of the first century was this question:
How could a man who was crucified be the Son of God?

• Cerinthus (ca. 90) — lived in Asia Minor, is reputed to have been an opponent of the apostle John
  • thought the Christ descended on Jesus at Jesus' baptism, then left him at the cross; thus God did not die, and the body in Jesus' tomb was "Jesus" but not "the Christ"

• This view is called *Docetism*, from the Greek word *dokeo,* meaning "to think" or, as here, "to seem" — It claimed that the Christ only *seemed* to die on the cross.

• Docetism was an early form of Christian Gnosticism, a broader movement that combined pagan, Jewish, and Christian views. Gnostics especially believed in a strong separation between the spiritual (which is good) and the physical (which is evil).

• John in reply to Docetism:

- Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a person is the antichrist—denying the Father and the Son. — **1 John 2:22**

- Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world. — **1 John 4:1-3**

- If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. — **1 John 4:15**

- Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. — **1 John 5:1**

- This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. — **1 John 5:6** (Notice the allusion to the idea that the Christ came on Jesus at his baptism (in water).)

- I say this because many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. — **2 John 7**

6) DOMITIAN'S PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS — 80s-90s CE

- Domitian was Roman emperor 81-96 CE.
- He required his subjects to call him *"Dominus et Deus,"* "Lord and God".
- Revelation, written in his time, challenges his authority by claiming, "Jesus (not the emperor) is Lord":
  - *…but the Lamb will triumph over them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings…* — **Revelation 17:14**
  - *I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True… He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God… On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.* — **Revelation 19:11-16**
- Domitian has a reputation for persecuting Christians, and he may have done so a little bit, but mostly he fostered an atmosphere in which the emperor was expected to be worshiped as a god. People who refused could be pressured, treated as outcasts, kicked out of business organizations, threatened, or even executed. This was especially true in the Roman province of Asia (western Asia Minor), where there were temples dedicated to the worship of the emperors. Revelation was written to the churches in this region.
- Story of Domitian questioning the grandsons of Jesus' brother Jude [Judas] — Domitian was worried about Jews revolting against him:

  There still survived of the family of the Lord the grandsons of Jude, his brother after the flesh, as he was called. These they informed against, as being of the family of David; and the officer brought them before Domitian Caesar. For he feared the coming of the Christ, as did also Herod. And he asked them if they were of David's line, and they acknowledged it. Then he asked them what possessions they had or what fortune they owned. And they said that between the two of them they had only nine thousand denarii, half belonging to each of them; and this they asserted they had not in money, but only in thirty-nine plethora of land, so valued, from which by their own labors they both paid the taxes and supported themselves. They then showed him their hands, adducing as testimony of their labor the hardness of their bodies and the tough skin which had been calloused on their hands from their incessant work. They were asked concerning the Christ and his kingdom, its nature, origin, and time of appearance, and explained that it was neither of the world nor earthly, but heavenly and angelic, and it would be at the end of the world, when he would come in glory to judge the living and the dead and to reward every man according to his deeds. At this Domitian did not condemn them at all, but despised them as simple folk, released them, and decreed an end to the persecution against the church. — Eusebius, *Church History* 3.20, quoting Hegesippus