

Early Christianity Growth & Persecution

AD 1–100

Why on earth does history matter, anyway? History matters because it's the story of how God works among his people in his world!

In the first century AD, two specific historical events—a fire in Rome and the fall of Jerusalem—caused Christians to be seen as a separate and dangerous sect. Roman governors and emperors mocked Christians, threw them to the beasts, and burned them at the stake. Yet, no matter what anyone did, God remained present among his people, working at every turn to cause the gospel to spread through the testimony of the church.





Outline

1. History matters because:
 - a. The gospel matters. The gospel is rooted in historical events.
 - b. God's Word matters. The better we understand history, the better we can apply God's Word.
 - c. God's work matters. History reminds us that God's work includes more than our own generation.
2. What happened after Acts 28?
 - a. Persecution after the fire in Rome, AD 64 (Nero)
 - b. Division after the fall of Jerusalem, AD 70 (Vespasian, Titus)
 - c. Deification of emperors in their lifetimes, AD 81–96 (Domitian)
 - d. Deepening persecution of Christians; Ignatius, Polycarp, and Blandina martyred.

Roman Emperors

Emperor	Reign	Description	Death
Nero	AD 54–68	The first part of his reign was peaceful, but in the second part he ordered the deaths of his chief advisors, many wealthy nobles, and even his own mother. When a massive fire in Rome struck in AD 64, he avoided culpability by blaming the Christians for it and ruthlessly persecuting them. Paul and Peter are believed to have been martyred during Nero's persecution.	Committed suicide
Vespasian	AD 69–79	Ruler after Nero who was instrumental in quelling a Jewish uprising in Jerusalem and eventually ordering his son Titus to destroy Jerusalem and the temple.	Died of illness
Titus	AD 79–81	One of Vespasian's sons, who as a military leader before becoming emperor, destroyed the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70.	Died of illness
Domitian	AD 81–96	Vespasian's youngest son, he is known for being the first emperor to demand the title "lord and god" of himself. (Traditionally, emperors were deified after their death.) He severely persecuted Christians in the later part of his reign.	Assassinated

Before the Gathering

- Print out a *Early Christianity Growth & Persecution* Participant Guide for each class member.
- Preview the *Early Christianity Growth & Persecution* video.
- Study Hebrews 11:1–12:2 and Revelation 22:13. Incorporate in your notes and discussion a few facts that you learned from this study.
- Complete the lesson in the Participant Guide for this session.
- If you will be using the video, ensure that components are connected and tested beforehand.
- Pray for guidance as you lead this session.

Goals for the Gathering

Through this session, participants will be able to:

- Articulate the importance of learning about great individuals and historical movements that have brought Christians to their present place in history.
- Gain a new understanding of the “great cloud of witnesses” as this “cloud” continues to grow to include all who follow Jesus Christ.
- Examine their own lives and consider their role in the present church and how they will one day be identified among “the great cloud of witnesses.”

Get Them Talking (10 minutes)

Read Hebrews 11:1–12:2 and Revelation 22:13. Since the passage from Hebrews is lengthy, consider creative ways of looking at this text together, such as (1) organize your group into smaller groups of two or three and have each group read a small section of the passage; each group can then summarize for the whole group; (2) print the passage and read it aloud—responsively or in unison—as a group. Focus attention on Hebrews 12:1–2.

Take a Closer Look (30 to 60 minutes)

Watch the *Early Christianity Growth & Persecution* video. (30 minutes)

Seek the Central Truth (15 minutes)

The “great cloud of witnesses”! Who can be found in this number? After those included in the list of witnesses found in Hebrews 11, many other Christ-followers have been added. According to one tradition, Simon Peter felt unworthy of the honor of a death identical to that of Christ, and said, “I beg you executioners, crucify me thus, with the head downward and not otherwise.” His famous request to be crucified upside down was heard and represents an example of true humility and great love for his Savior.

Paul likewise died for the sake of Christ. Though his Roman citizenship likely kept him from death by crucifixion, he was martyred nonetheless. Paul, like Peter and many who have come after him, gave his life so the gospel could go forward. Their refusal to renounce Christ resulted in their death, but God used their faithfulness to expand the reach of the gospel.

Consider the following statements from history about Peter and Paul: “Peter, because of others’ unrighteous envy, endured not one or two, but numerous labors; and when he had at length suffered martyrdom, departed to the place of glory due to him.... Paul also obtained the reward of patient endurance, after being seven times thrown into captivity, compelled to flee, and stoned. After preaching both in the east and west, he gained the illustrious reputation due to his faith, having taught righteousness to the whole world, and come to the extreme limit of the west, and suffered martyrdom under the prefects” (Clement, *To the Corinthians*, 5).

Peter and Paul are only two examples of Christ-followers who now stand among the “great cloud of witnesses.” Their great love for Christ drove them to great sacrifice. And great as their sacrifices were, they were still incomparable to the greatest sacrifice of all, given by Jesus Christ.

Wrap It Up (5 minutes)

End your time together with a prayer similar to this one: “God, we thank you for the men and women of history who make up the great cloud of witnesses. Thank you for leaving to us a record of their example. Help us to examine our own lives and to respond faithfully to the goodness you have shown us in Jesus Christ. Work in us to press the gospel forward in our everyday lives, as so many have done who have come before us. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.”

Strongly encourage class members to complete the Participant Guide activities for this week.

Optional: Obtain a prayer update from ministries that serve persecuted Christians, for example, Voice of the Martyrs www.persecution.com or Open Doors www.opendoorsusa.org. Remind participants that Christianity is not Western, Eastern, or American—it’s a global faith. Praying for persecuted Christians is one of the most powerful things we can do for our brothers and sisters around the world—and it’s the number one thing persecuted believers ask for! Pray together as a group or, if time is short, ask participants to commit to praying at least once in the coming week for a specific region or country where Christians face persecution.

Work Together

Sacrificial living and giving is a common thread that runs throughout Scripture and church history. Sacrifice your time and energy this week by serving as a group in your church or community to honor those who have gone on before. Take time to walk through your church or community cemetery, cleaning and straightening as needed. Select one or more graves of individuals with living relatives that are still part of your church or community to decorate with flowers or plants. Discuss the spiritual heritage that the individual has left to your community. Reach out to the individual’s living relatives, and communicate to them how that person has impacted you, your church, or your community.

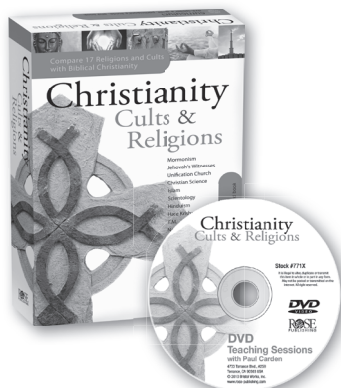
Other DVD-Based Studies For Individuals or Group Use

Christianity, Cults & Religions

Know what you believe and why!

Christians need to know what they believe. This excellent six-session DVD small group study teaches what the Bible says about God, Jesus, salvation, and more. It compares it to the teachings of other religions and cults. Covers Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and more. Sessions led by Paul Carden, Director of The Centers for Apologetics Research and former co-host of "Bible Answer Man" radio program.

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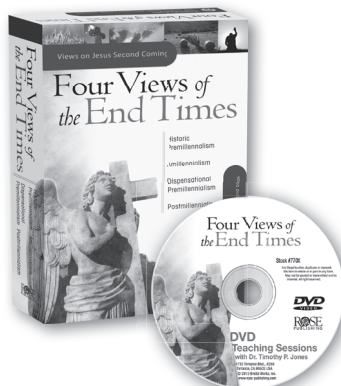


Four Views of the End Times

Cut through the confusion about the *Book of Revelation*

What does the Bible actually say about the end times that lead to the return of Jesus Christ? The differing ideas that divide believers into four major points-of-view are examined in this Four Views of the End Times DVD-based small group study. This new six-session study shows four different Revelation time lines and tackles Dispensational Premillennialism, Postmillennialism, Historic Premillennialism, and Amillennialism. For each view, the objective study includes simple definitions, explanation and discussion of supporting Scriptures, an overview of the view's popularity, and a focus on what we can gain from studying this perspective, and common questions and answers.

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783X Participants Guide: Four Views.....	9781596364264
350X Four Views of the End Times pamphlet.....	9781596360891



Feasts of the Bible

Connect the Hebrew roots of Christianity and the symbolism within each feast

Some Christians miss the importance of the biblical feasts, seeing them as merely "Jewish" holidays, but Scripture says these are the Feasts of the Lord God, established for all people for all time. Now you can connect the Hebrew roots of Christianity and the symbolism within each feast that points to Jesus Christ. The Feasts and Holidays of the Bible will also show you how to conduct your own Christian Passover Seder, where you will learn how all the Old Testament Passover activities point symbolically to Jesus.

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