

TAKING *the* WORLD *for*
JESUS
The Greatest Story of World History

Kevin Swanson



Generations
PASSING ON THE FAITH

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*This book is dedicated to the Lord Jesus Christ,
who is Lord of all.
He is the Chief Shepherd of His Church.*





Contents

PREFACE7

INTRODUCTION 11



CHAPTER I
The Roman Empire and the Men Who “Turned the World Upside Down”21



CHAPTER II
The Roman Empire Opposes Christ and Falls (AD 70–476) 41



CHAPTER III
The Frontier Age—Taking the British Isles for Jesus..... 77



CHAPTER IV
The Frontier Age—Taking the Continent of Europe for Jesus 117



CHAPTER V
The Rise of Eastern Empires and the Decline of Christian
Faith in the West 165



CHAPTER VI

The Gospel Goes West—First Incursions Into the New World 207



CHAPTER VII

Colonialism, Slavery, and the Missionaries Who Proclaimed the Year of Jubilee 275



CHAPTER VIII

As Empires Crumbled—The Greatest Century of Missions 337



CHAPTER IX

Reaching East Asia for the Lord Jesus Christ 389



CHAPTER X

Reaching the Heart of Africa for Christ 457



CHAPTER XI

Jesus Takes the Western Hemisphere 523



CHAPTER XII

Oceania and Beyond—The Gospel Reaches the Uttermost Parts of the Earth 595



CHAPTER XIII

The 20th and 21st Centuries—How Jesus Took the World by His Gospel 659

CONCLUSION

After Jesus Came—The World Will Never Be the Same 729

NOTES 743

LIST OF IMAGES 763

INDEX 775



Preface

Following the decline of Christian influence upon this world's national institutions, the breakdown of Western civilization, and the rising opposition to the Christian faith at the present, the Christian may be well tempted to take up a pessimistic outlook for the future. Since the decline of the Christian faith in the West, a pessimistic eschatology as to the prospects of Christ's church in the world has become the rule of the day for some. For these reasons, the time has never been better to tell this story. If an accurate picture of the progress of Jesus Christ in the world is to be obtained, *the whole truth must be told*. The entire portrait must be painted, to include the full 2,000 year history of Christ's work in every tribe and nation across the earth.

My hope is that this survey will provide an improved perspective of history for all Christians in every nation — a better sense of the progress of Christ's Church, the relationship of the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of Christ, and a vision for the next generation who will be tasked with the continuation of the mission.

The Lord Jesus Christ is no loser in history. Certainly, any perspective minimizing His contributions in the world would render Him a serious dishonor

and depreciate the work of the Holy Spirit through the ages. Where believers may be cast down and discouraged, this survey is meant to provide encouragement, a long term perspective, and an optimistic outlook. We are too often short-sighted and fail to see beyond the immediate situation. What is there to make of the continual ebb and flow of Gospel work? How does one measure progress of a single ministry in a single lifetime, especially when faced with so many limitations, failings, and sin? As this study opens up the aperture for a worldwide perspective and a 2,000 year view of the progress of Christ in history, I trust it will leave a permanent message of encouragement with the reader.

Of the millions, if not billions of events and facts from which a historian may construct an historical narrative, only a very small percentage would ever end up in the work. Every historian must choose which facts are most essential for the most true and accurate view of history. The relative import of all facts will be determined by a worldview. Where academia is almost completely controlled by a humanist outlook, there is little chance for a Christ-centered view of history to emerge anywhere today. Man's work trumps God's work in the modern mind. Where man's kingdoms and man's works have captured central importance in the humanist histories of the modern day, this treatment is intended to shift focus. After all, history is *His story*. Whether recognized to be so or not, Christ is at the center of history. He appeared at the beginning when He created the world. He appeared in the middle of history when He redeemed the world, and He will return at the end for the final judgment. Nothing could possibly be considered more important in history than what Jesus Christ has already accomplished. Moreover, God is completely sovereign over the kingdoms of men, and the Son of God is building His church in the world. He cannot fail. Indeed, Jesus has already changed the whole world by His Word and Spirit.

With any survey of the last 2,000 years of world history, what could be more important than the appearance, the mission, and the accomplishments of Jesus and His people? As much as His work takes place in the context of other events taking place, such facts must be recognized. He is very much a part of this world's history. He was born in the reign of Caesar Augustus and He was crucified under the governorship of Pontus Pilate. Consideration of the world events surrounding these more central facts are important, rendering even more meaning to the events taking place. These are not two separate histories. World events play out, but then Jesus and His people enter the scene. And everything changes. Every

century marks progress for Christ. Indeed, the empires of this world come and go, but Christ's church presses on.

Relevant Scriptures are carefully integrated into the story such that the reader may rightly interpret the facts of history. The Word of God serves as the eyeglasses by which to rightly understand, prioritize, and evaluate natural revelation observed through science and history. For maximum edification therefore, the student is encouraged to saturate the study in Word and prayer. May this survey of God's work in human history abound even more so for the glory of God, and to more thanksgiving for His wonderful works that He has done among the children of men! And may the power that has transformed individuals and nations through the centuries be witnessed in this generation! How might the Lord Jesus Christ visit this world once more by the preaching of His mighty Gospel and by the outpouring of His Holy Spirit? The potentials for the future are thrilling!

Kevin Swanson
February 1, 2024



Introduction

What is history? What are these human events? What possible significance do they have in the long run, except (as Shakespeare's Macbeth would have put it), 'a whole lot of sound and fury signifying nothing'?¹

Most human beings see little meaning in history, or in their own lives for that matter, except to read it as a story of bare human survival. They grind out a living, hoping not to die too soon, and hoping that the next beer will give them enough satisfaction to provide motivation to work for another beer. They have given up hope for purpose, meaning, and ultimate objective for life and world history. A few may place a bit of confidence and hope in themselves or in governments to build a better life, or bigger kingdoms, better economies (to buy more beer), or provide salvation from death and taxes. But these hopes are soon dashed.

For this reason, many will avoid gaining a wider perspective of history. If there is no central thread working through history or meaningful objectives in history, why study it? They barely remember what happened last year and have scant knowledge of what took place in the last century.

Some percentage of the populace will follow sports and political elections.



Ancient tomb located in the Holy Land—
Christ's resurrection transformed the world.

They watch nations rise and nations fall. Athletes win big games and then they grow old and die. Wealthy investors build big towers and businesses and these too come down. Beyond this, there is little consequence of these world events in the minds of the masses.

**“Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher;
“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.
What profit has a man from all his labor
In which he toils under the sun?” (Ecclesiastes 1:2-3)**

But what may be said for those who follow Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was born in Bethlehem, died on the cross around 33 AD, and rose again from the dead on the third day? How would they view world history? Here is the central reality of all realities, and the core truth of all truths. God's Word reveals that reality by which to interpret all other realities, and immediately unveils ultimate meaning, purpose, and direction for all the human history — the eternal kingdom of God.

The Interpretive Grid for this History

Applying God's revealed truth as the operating grid through which to view history, the following offers a full disclosure of the principles used in this survey.

First and foremost, *the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was the most important event in the history of the world* (Acts 13:26–39). Those who ignore or minimize this pivotal work of God will veer off course in their attempts to interpret history. All of history must center around this great event.

Appropriately, the history of this world is divided by the coming of the Messiah of God. Almost every calendar in the world today is set around the date of Jesus' birth. Attempts to change this dating approach have proven futile. The designation "AD" is an abbreviation of the Latin phrase "anno Domini," translated as "in the year of our Lord." This book is published in AD 2024, for example. A Christian monk living somewhere in modern-day Romania (or Bulgaria) around AD 525, Dionysius the Humble, introduced the designation to replace the calendar years dating from Diocletian (famous for the persecution of Christians) to what many refer to as the "Christian calendar."

After rising from the dead, *Jesus Christ ascended to heaven and sat down on the right hand of the Father*. All history subsequent to this event will be rightly understood in this context. The Son of God is in control of all historical happenings, as Colossians 1 states:

For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. (Colossians 1:16–17)

Further impressing the importance of Christ in the world, the Apostles insists that without Him the world would fall apart. Ecosystems, political systems, and social systems rely upon His sovereign oversight and control for their very existence. Moreover, history bears out the subduing of Christ's enemies and the pillaging of the devil's house (Matt. 12:29).

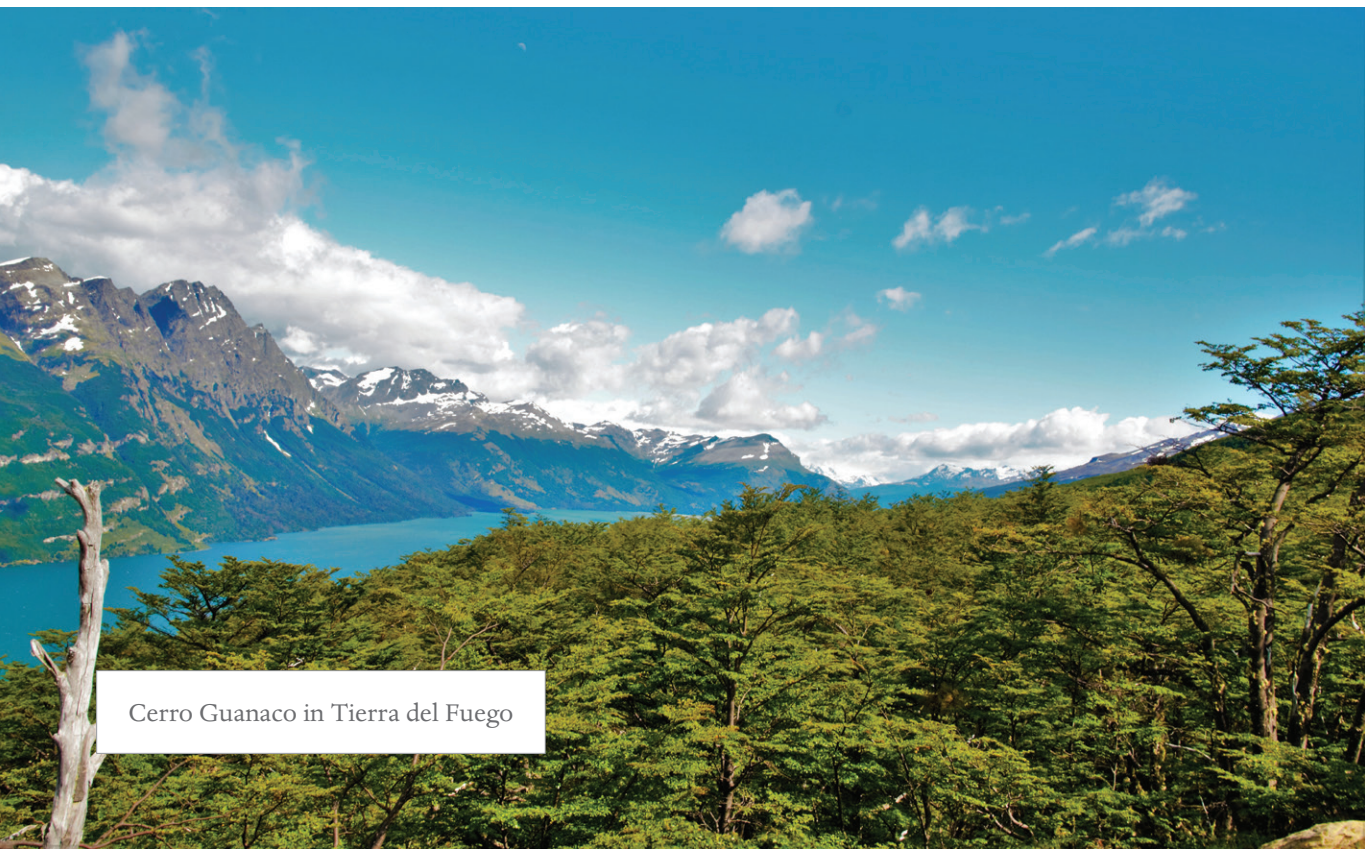
But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool. (Hebrews 10:12–13; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:24–25)

Looking out over the centuries and considering the wars, revolutions, political movements, and the rise and fall of empires, the Christian views all of it as playing out for the benefit of Christ's Church. He is building His Church, and He is subduing His enemies.

Equally important of a principle to bring to bear when studying human history is the centrality of the church in the estimation of God. This is the very people and household of God. Jesus Christ holds the Church at the center of His eternal purpose for history (2 Tim. 1:9). He gave His life to save and sanctify her as His people (Matt. 1:21; Eph. 5:25–26), and following His resurrection and ascension, He is “Head over all things to the Church.”

[God the Father] raised Him [Jesus] from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church. (Ephesians 1:20–22)

In the current state of Christ's exaltation then, He will always act for the benefit of His Church. Whatever events play out in history, whether they be natural disasters



Cerro Guanaco in Tierra del Fuego

or what may seem like bad political decisions, tribulation, peril, or sword, all will work out for the good of the true Church of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:28ff).

What then is the role, the purpose, and objective for the followers of Jesus in this cosmic plan for human history? This remains the Great Commission the Lord left with His disciples upon His ascension, found in Acts 1 and Matthew 28.

Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” And He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:6–8)

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the

Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen. (Matthew 28:18–20)

Jesus has commissioned His people to disciple the nations. This is the major objective for all of history following His resurrection. Contrary to the Islamic and Humanist religions, this kingdom comes primarily by teaching and “preaching the Gospel of the kingdom of God,” and not by military and political force.

The scope of the mission encompasses every nation, all the way to the uttermost ends of the earth, including Mongolia, the South Sea Islands, Madagascar, and the Tierra del Fuego Islands off the tip of Argentina. The content of the discipleship work comprehends everything Jesus commanded in His Word, and the goal must be the observance of these words. Such a project must continue through the generations, and nations will only transform after many centuries of work.

The Progress of the Project

Two parables from Jesus offer insight into the *modus operandi* — the key strategy and progress of this kingdom work.

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.”

Another parable He spoke to them: “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.” (Matthew 13:31–33)

The parable of the mustard seed describes the Kingdom expanding slowly and almost imperceptibly at first, but then turning into a gigantic tree — quite noticeable in the garden of the world. Old Testament prophetic language describes the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires as large trees serving as a lodging-place for birds (Ezek. 31:3–6; Dan. 4:10–12). The Parable of the Leaven points to the influence of Christ’s Kingdom as inconspicuous, pervasive, and far-reaching. Like the tiny mustard seed planted in the ground, this Kingdom’s presence is hardly noticeable and its influence minimal at first. Though the leaven is very much yielding effect throughout the loaf, the world hardly takes notice. The great empires of men with their bureaucracies, histories, and news casts ignore or even denigrate the most important work going on in the world. The Church of Jesus expands slowly and quietly into the nooks and crannies of the earth’s communities. Hence, the only clear and accurate view of Christ’s Kingdom work must take in a full review of the big picture over two thousand years. Here only will an honest student of history encounter the undeniable evidences of Christ’s Kingdom in the world.

Such an outlook still requires eyes of faith to see it, and to appreciate it. While Satan is still active and continues to exercise his rule over his earthly dominion, Christ is pillaging his house (Mark 3:22–27). Despite the apostasies, the scandals, the hypocrisies, the false brethren, the counterfeits and cults, the persecutions, tribulations, and the setbacks, Christ’s kingdom presses on. The most powerful forces in the universe, whether demonic or human in nature, cannot possibly hinder this work. The Kingdom of Jesus is coming on earth as it is in heaven (Matt. 6:10; Luke 11:2).

Looking back over the last twenty centuries, the evidences of this Kingdom’s progress is nothing short of astonishing. The first church assembly recorded in the Acts of the Apostles began with 120 people gathered in the upper room (Acts 1:13–15, 2:1). As of 2023, Christianity was far and above the world’s largest religion in the world, with an estimated 2.5 billion adherents — nearly a third (32

percent) of the world population.¹ That's a growth ratio of 21,000,000 fold over two millennia.

When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" So they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:13-18)



The Asclepion of Pergamon (Bergama) in Turkey







The Roman Empire and the Men Who “Turned the World Upside Down”

World history begins with God’s creation (Gen. 1) and man’s Fall in the Garden (Gen. 3). Without this framework, the study of history, the study of man’s behavior and social systems, would be completely misguided. That is why *secular* social studies and history classes which reject this framework become nothing more than the futile exercise of the blind leading the blind.

Man’s Fall in the Garden resulted in murder, violence, and chaos on a grand scale (Gen. 6:11), as well as murder, violence, and chaos between smaller tribal groups (Gen. 14:1–12). After the Flood and the dispersion at the Tower of Babel, a thick darkness settled over the world, especially on those tribes that were completely cut off from trade routes and access to God’s revelation that came through such men as Abraham and Moses. This is why the most degraded practices were found among the Aztecs in the 16th Century and the isolated Pacific islanders in the 19th Century. Mass-scale murders and gross moral degradations have been perpetrated by the great humanist empires in history (Babylon, Greece, Rome, China, Germany, Russia, and modern-day America), while the decentralized tribes have degraded themselves on smaller scales.

❖ ISSUES IN FOCUS ❖

Christ's Kingdom Trumps All Others

The kingdoms of men going back as far as Nimrod's Babel (Gen. 11) have attempted to give glory to man. They work to solve man's problems by powerful governments, and they always fail. The rise and fall of the greatest empires of the ancient world were prophesied by the prophet Daniel. These include Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon, Cyrus' Persia, Alexander the Great's Greece, and finally Rome under the Caesars—all would be set aside and they would render fealty to the greatest kingdom of all: "And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever" (Daniel 2:44).

Under the sovereignty of Christ, Satan was allowed free rein to govern a fallen world from 4000 BC to AD 30, as "the god of this world" and the "prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience" (Eph. 2:2–3).

Before pronouncing the Curse upon Adam and Eve after their Fall into sin, God graciously promised salvation from their dreadful condition. He proclaimed that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15).

At first, the Lord God made a covenant with one man, who traveled from Ur of the Chaldees into the land of Canaan around 1900 BC. Only one family on earth would maintain a relationship with the true and living God during these early centuries, while the rest of the world lay in darkness. When God communicated His promise to this man Abraham, He was careful to mention that in this family "all nations" would be blessed. Later, the Apostle Paul, commenting on this promise, said:

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed." So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham. (Galatians 3:8–9)

The Gospel preached from AD 30 through the present day was first preached to Abraham. Clearly, this was God’s plan from the beginning. Thus, we find previews of God’s saving grace throughout the Old Testament era, with the inclusion of many Gentiles in the number of those who heard this Gospel and believed. Examples would include Job, Rahab the Harlot, Ruth the Moabitess, Naaman the Syrian, and so forth. The Old Testament prophets also looked forward to a great future missionary outreach to the Gentile world:

It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth. (Isaiah 49:6)

This was fulfilled in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Eternal Son of God who is wholly God became man (Matt. 1:18; John 1:14; Heb. 4:15), in order to save us from sin and the devil (Matt. 1:21; 2 Cor. 4:4–6; 1 John 3:8). He came to save both Jew and Gentile, as the promised Seed who would be a blessing to every nation on earth (1 Cor. 1:24–31; Eph. 2:12–14; 2 Tim. 2:9–11; 1 John 4:14–15). When He died on the cross, Jesus Christ became a sacrifice for sin. He was called the “Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world.” He rose from the dead, and was given complete authority over heaven and earth (Matt. 28:18) and “appointed heir of all things” (Heb. 1:1–3).

At the time of Jesus’ ministry on earth (between AD 30 and 33), “the ruler of this world will be cast out” (John 12:31). He reported seeing Satan fall like lightning (Luke 10:18) and gave His disciples authority to tread on snakes and scorpions (the demonic world). This is the point at which world history radically changed directions.

During Jesus Christ’s three-year ministry to the Jews, some insight into a worldwide outreach is given. We find Jesus commending “great faith” among Gentile converts like the Syrophenician woman (Matt. 15:21–28) and the Roman Centurion (Luke 7:1–10). With the resurrection and ascension of our Lord to the right hand of the Father came the implementation of the plan shared with Abraham 4,000 years earlier. Now, all nations were to be blessed in this Seed of the Woman, this Seed of Abraham—the Lord Jesus Christ. Finally, the middle wall of partition between Jew and Gentile came crashing down, and “now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Eph. 2:12–13).

This Gospel was meant for the world, and this is the story of how the Gospel took the world by storm between AD 33 and the present.

The Roman World

At the time that Jesus Christ was born, sometime between 6 BC and AD 1, the Roman Empire was approaching its zenith in world influence and glory. After multiple attempts to build world empires with Babel, Assyria, Persia, and Greece, finally the world had achieved the greatest empire of all.

Three centuries earlier, Rome was just a dot on the map—a city-state in the ancient world. By the time Augustus established his rule shortly before Jesus the Messiah was born in Bethlehem, the Roman Empire included North Africa, modern Spain, France, Germany, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Israel, Egypt, and the Netherlands. The Roman armies invaded Britain between AD 43 and 84, gradually obtaining a foothold over the southern part of the British Isles. At its peak, the Roman Empire was never much larger than what you see in the map at the end of this chapter.

Octavian—who was given the title “Augustus Caesar” by the Roman Senate—reigned between 27 BC and AD 14 and inaugurated an era known as the “Pax Romana,” or the Peace of Rome. Apart from a few wars in Judea and Parthia and conflicts on the far perimeter of Rome’s reach, the empire enjoyed a season of relative peace for two hundred years. At the introduction of Jesus Christ to the world, human institutions had achieved the highest levels of power, peace, prosperity, and pride. It seemed that man had finally achieved something for himself. It was common at that time for the Caesar to be referred to as “the savior of the world.” The Priene Calendar Inscription of 9 BC introduced the emperor as “Augustus ... filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him *as a savior* [emphasis added] ... that he might end war and arrange all things.”¹

It was at these great heights of human endeavor that another Savior was born in a stable in Bethlehem—a direct rival to Augustus and the great empires of men. His primary reason for coming, however, was not to free Israel from Roman power, but to “save His people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). He was born of a virgin named Mary. This young woman had never been with a man, so it was by the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit of God that the Lord Jesus was conceived in her womb. He came as the Messiah, the Savior of the World. He is the eternal

Son of the living God, and He is also called the Son of Man. This great event occurred during the reign of Caesar Augustus, according to the clear testimony of the Gospel of Luke.

And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city.

Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:1–7)

Roman Government

Five hundred years before Christ, Rome formed as a Republic, with elected leaders serving the people. But powerful nations and empires usually degrade into dictatorships where one man takes control of all (or nearly all) the levers of power. This is what happened to Rome in 27 BC when Octavian was declared “Emperor.” Augustus postured himself as a god-like being, assuming the title of “Pontifex Maximus.” This title may be translated as “the highest priest” or the highest religious person on earth. Because Augustus Caesar controlled the military, his power was virtually unlimited. The central government in Rome would also send out governors to rule in the various provinces around the empire, including Judea where Jesus was born.

Roman Culture: A Low View of Human Life

The Roman culture maintained a very low view of human life. They would routinely abandon infants out in the elements to die. It was not uncommon for fishermen to retrieve babies out of their nets when fishing the rivers around Rome. Roman law also gave fathers a great deal of power, under the Roman tradition of *pater familias*.

AD 33-70



Caesar Augustus (63 BC – 14 AD)

Under this legal doctrine, the father could choose to abort a child or kill the child as soon as he or she was born. Table Four of Rome’s “Law of the Twelve Tables” states that a “dreadfully deformed child shall be quickly killed.”² Sadly, these pagans did not submit to biblical law which offers protection for the lives of children as well as adults.

Pontius Pilate was the Roman prefect in charge of Judea between AD 26 and 36, and he was responsible for sentencing Jesus to the death of the cross. According to some accounts, Pilate committed suicide just a few years after Jesus’ death and resurrection.³ This was very common among the Roman leaders. These kingdoms of men were cruel.

Herod the Great ruled over Judea from 37 BC until shortly after Jesus was born. He thought nothing of killing all of the male babies in Bethlehem — not unusual in the Roman world nor for the king. History records that Herod had one of his ten wives killed, and three of his own sons murdered. Having built the temple

for the Jews, he was immensely popular among the religious leaders. When news came to Jerusalem that the King of the Jews was born in Bethlehem, the Scriptures say, “When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him” (Matt. 2:3). These wicked leaders in Jerusalem would allow no competition with their rulership. Therefore, Herod’s goal was to kill the newborn Messiah of the Jews, and that is why he ordered the murder of the children in Bethlehem.

Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children

who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men. (Matthew 2:16)

Rome AD 14–70

During the early years of the empire, tremendous efforts were expended in building roads — some 250,000 miles of roads, of which 50,000 miles were laid down by stone. To compare, the United States has built 49,000 miles of interstate highways as of 2023. The 1st

and 2nd centuries marked a reduction of military conflicts for Rome, except for an occasional skirmish in Britain to the north and with the Parthians in Armenia to the south. This was the era of increasing prosperity, complacency, and decadence for Rome.

Following Augustus, the Caesars were generally known for extreme sexual immorality, to include Tiberius (ruled AD 14-37) and Caligula (ruled AD 37-41). They would participate in wanton murder and mayhem — Caligula murdered his mother and brothers, Claudius killed thirty-five senators and some 300 knights, and Nero (ruled 54-68) murdered two wives, his mother, and his stepbrother. Such tyranny bordering on anarchy could not possibly keep a stable government together. Nero arranged the first homosexual fake marriages (for himself), burned down Rome, and initiated the first persecution against the Christian church. Upon his committing suicide in AD 68, Nero put



Herod the Great (73-4 BC).



Ancient Roman road from Jerusalem to Beit Guvrin (50 mile segment)

an ignominious end to the dynasty of Julius Caesar — a 120 year attempt to rule the world by the most powerful men on earth. The historian, Tacitus, described the Nero's reign as "a period rich in disasters... even in peace full of horrors." Nonetheless the Pax Romana and the Roman system of roads had already opened the way for quick dissemination of the Gospel for the Apostles of Jesus.

What Was Going On in the Rest of the World at This Time?

China was the other great Empire that got its start around the same time as the Roman Empire (221 BC). The first dynasty lasted only fifteen years, but the second continued until 23 AD. After several thousands of years of smaller confederacies vying for control of China, the warlord, Qin Shi Huang, launched China's imperial age. He collected an army of 600,000 men and consolidated rule over about one third of modern-day China. The nation was governed by a philosophy called "legalism" in which the emperor was endowed with absolute power to make law and dispense with enemies. The philosophy was taught in the schools, and power was continually centralized in the state. Such doctrines laid foundations for the terrible, brutal rule of communism in China that prevailed much later in the 20th Century.

However, the state religion of legalism was replaced by a more moderate confucianism around the time of Christ. This in turn led to an experiment with a socialist form of equalitarianism and state ownership of land. Such ventures never turn out well, and China collapsed in AD 220, introducing the dark age for the far east empire. Civil war resulted in tremendous bloodshed and the loss of as much as 75% of the population. By 280 AD, China's 56,000,000 population had whittled down to 16,000,000. That compares to the Roman Empire's 76,000,000 at its peak around the same time). The "Three Kingdom Period" lasted only 60 years, making way for a relatively unstable "Jin Dynasty" and "Sixteen Kingdom Period" extending to AD 439.

Most of the rest of the world was broken up into many small tribes and villages that would come and go within a few hundred years of time. Ireland offers a good example of the primitive world, located far from the influence of the God of Scripture. The Roman Empire avoided the island country entirely and treated the Irish as "barbarians." From a Christian perspective, the problem with these far-off tribes is that they were completely ignorant of the true and living God.

The more isolated the nations from the influence of Jews and Christians, the more likely they were subjected to the most degrading servitude of the devil. Gross sexual sin, human sacrifice, cannibalism, incessant tribal wars, infanticide, the degradation of women and family life, abject fear of the spirit world, superstition, mass starvation, kidnapping and slavery, and general ignorance would never allow for the development of stable societies and self-sustaining economies.

Jesus Christ and His Men Turn the World Upside Down

But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. (Acts 1:8 KJV)

To this dark world entered the Lord Jesus Christ, the very Son of God born in a stable in Bethlehem (about six miles south of Jerusalem). After He died on the cross for our sins and rose from the dead, He gave His disciples the Great Commission. “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). The Lord charged them to take the message first to Jerusalem, then to Judea, to Samaria, and after that to the uttermost parts of the earth. And that is exactly what happened from AD 30 onward.

Thankfully, we have an entire book of the Bible dedicated to recording the high points of initial missionary work during the 1st Century. As Jesus instructed them in the commission, it was vitally important that the Apostles receive power first, which came by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Here, we find a tremendous transformation that came over the Apostle Peter. Forty-nine days earlier, he had denied Jesus in the face of a servant girl. Now, he stood in the most public location in the Temple and preached the resurrection and Lordship of Jesus Christ in the presence of the people who put Him to death. Thousands were converted, and the Church in Jerusalem was formed (Acts 2:41ff).

It is very important that all Christians carefully follow the Gospel message preached by the Apostles from the beginning. Acts 2, 3, and 4 contain this seminal message, and we would do well not to stray from it. Here is a sample of the first sermon Peter preached:

And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know—Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it....

This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear.

For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.’ Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” (Acts 2:21-24, 32-36)

Not long after these first sermons were preached, Peter and John were imprisoned, but they walked out of the prison twice by supernatural intervention. The ministry continued against tremendous opposition, even as more were converted and baptized. In Acts 10, the first Gentile household was baptized into the Christian Church by the Apostle Peter. This marked the beginning of the outreach to the Gentiles which has continued for the last 2,000 years. Virtually the same pattern can be seen throughout history, witnessed more recently in Korea, Fiji, and elsewhere. The breakout of Holy Spirit revival produces thousands of conversions within days and weeks, followed by mass evangelism and, at times, severe persecution.

The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem began to persecute the first Christians in Judea, which forced the believers to scatter north into Samaria. This “diaspora” is described in Acts 8:1-8. After that, the disciples proceeded to take the Gospel up into the city of Antioch in Syria. Over time, this city became a new center for the Christian faith, as well as a mission-sending “agency” for the Apostle Paul, Barnabas, Silas, and others. Within the 1st Century, the Gospel had covered the Roman world. By the time Paul wrote his epistle to the Church at Colossae, the Gospel had been preached “in all the world” (Col. 1:6).

This pioneering work is not without risk and danger, and it always calls for great faith on the part of all the missionaries involved with it. Truly, these

courageous men are robbing the strong man’s house of his goods (Mark 3:27). They are robbing Satan of his people (whom he has controlled for thousands of years). Satan is never happy to see his house robbed, and there are usually persecuting repercussions that result.

We have the most information on the missionary endeavors of the Apostle Paul in Asia Minor (Turkey), Greece, and Rome, who faced many challenges in his work. He took the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire, and planted many churches. In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul speaks of the various persecutions and troubles that befell him in his journeys:

Are they ministers of Christ?—I speak as a fool—I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. (2 Corinthians 11:23–27)

Few missionaries have ever taken that much abuse, yet Paul was dedicated and persevering. His first missionary journey covered 1,400 miles (taking in Cypress and Turkey). His second missionary journey was twice as long, spanning about 2,800 miles as he traveled through Syria, Turkey, Greece, and Jerusalem. On his third missionary journey, Paul visited Turkey, Greece, Lebanon, and Israel, logging roughly 2,700 miles. The Apostle Paul wrote a large portion of the New Testament, following up with churches to which he had ministered over the years of his service. Finally, he sailed for Rome on his fourth missionary journey while under arrest by the Roman guard. Paul was put to death in Rome by Nero sometime around AD 67, probably by beheading. His final recorded words are found in his second epistle to Timothy, which includes this poignant statement:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the LORD, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing. (2 Timothy 4:7–8)

After His resurrection, the Lord gave Peter forewarning that he would face martyrdom (John 21:18). Peter's ministry included Asia Minor or Turkey (1 Pet. 1:1) and Rome. He is believed to have been killed in Rome under orders of Nero sometime around AD 67 or 68. According to a later Christian writer named Origen, Peter was crucified upside down on his own request. He did not think he was worthy of dying in the manner of his Lord and Savior.

The Apostle John's ministry spanned somewhere between sixty and eighty years. John was active in Asia Minor (Turkey) and is believed to have spent much of his time in Ephesus. He wrote five New Testament books in all, including three epistles and the Gospel of John. He penned his fifth work, the Book of Revelation, while exiled on the Island of Patmos. John died sometime between AD 80 and 100 and was buried at Ephesus.⁴ John's brother James was executed by Herod around AD 44 in Jerusalem (Acts 12:1–2).

Peter's brother Andrew took the Gospel into Scythia (Ukraine and Southern Russia), according to the earliest recorded accounts of his ministry. Later writers assert that he preached the Gospel in Greece, Asia Minor, and the strategic city of Byzantium (later Constantinople and Istanbul). He is believed to have been crucified in Achaia (Southern Greece).

The Apostle Philip is believed to have preached in Syria, Greece, and Phrygia (Central Turkey). An episode passed down concerning his death is memorable. In response to Philip's preaching in the city of Hierapolis (located in southwestern Turkey), the Roman proconsul's wife was converted. Her husband responded in anger, tortured Phillip and his sister (who was ministering with him), and killed them both by crucifixion. In 2011, archaeologists discovered what appears to be Phillip's tomb in ancient Hierapolis.

According to the church historian Eusebius, the Apostle Bartholomew brought Matthew's Gospel to India. Bartholomew, along with Jude (Thaddeus), is also regarded as the first to introduce the Gospel into Armenia in the 1st Century. He preached the Gospel, healed the sick, and cast out demons in what was an explosive environment in Armenia. When the daughter of King Sanadroug was converted, the believers were subjected to beatings. Bartholomew was fatally injured in the beatings, but before he died, he was said to have prayed these words: "Lord God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, do not overlook the entreaties of the apostles who labored for this country. Grant to these people the grace of your mercy and enable them to renounce the worship of their vain idols."⁵

Thomas doubted the Lord’s resurrection at first, but he became a great missionary who took the Gospel far and wide. While he is believed to have shared the good news in ancient Parthia (Northern Iran and Turkmenistan), his most enduring legacy was in India. He reportedly landed at a seaport called Muziris on the southern tip of India in AD 52—less than twenty years after the resurrection of Jesus. According to the Nasrani Christians, Thomas planted seven churches in India, and died circa AD 72, killed by an arrow or a spear.

The earliest accounts of the Apostle Matthew’s labors indicate that he focused his Gospel ministry in and around Jerusalem for about twenty years following Christ’s ascension. After this, there is a great deal of debate about his exploits, yet his missionary work is believed by some to have reached the Persians and Medes (in modern-day Iran) as well as the Ethiopians in Africa.

Jude and Simon the Zealot are believed to have partnered together on a mission throughout the Middle East, including Persia (Iran), Samaria (Israel), Idumaea (near Jordan), Syria, and Libya. According to one tradition, both of them were sawn in pieces, either in Persia or Syria.

These Apostles of Jesus Christ were filled with the Holy Spirit, and with great boldness and faith. They met fierce opposition, but it did not deter them. They steadfastly built the Church everywhere they went. By the time Paul made it to Thessalonica on his second missionary journey, his reputation had preceded him. The people in the city said, “These [are the men] who have turned the world upside down ...” (Acts 17:6).

Christ’s Apostles had gained the attention of the whole Roman Empire, and the Empire would retaliate hard against them.



The oldest church in the world planted by the apostle Thomas in Muziris, India

The Early Church Throughout the Empire

Immediately, spiritual powerhouses of Christian life developed in several key cities. These came to be known as “sees.” According to the writings of the Church Father Tertullian (c. 155 – c. 240), the “thrones of the Apostles were recognized in Corinth, Philippi, Ephesus, and Rome.” Also, influential centers developed in Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Caesarea. Church historical records indicate that the second generation of leaders received discipleship from the Apostles themselves. For example, the Apostle John discipled the well-known pastor and martyr, Ignatius of Antioch as well as pastor and martyr, Polycarp of Smyrna. By the time John recorded the Revelation of the Apocalypse (around AD 68), Smyrna and Philadelphia were the healthiest churches in Asia Minor. Contained in Revelation chapters 2 and 3, Jesus Christ had challenging words for the churches of Ephesus, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, and Laodicea (all in the northwestern portion of modern Turkey).

Upon his arrival in Alexandria, Mark found a cobbler to repair his sandal — a man by the name of Anianus. He invited the missionary to his home, where he received the Gospel and his household was baptized. Eventually, Mark ordained Anianus as pastor with three presbyters and seven deacons.

Dionysius the Areopagite, mentioned in Acts 17:34 as one of Paul’s first Athenian contacts, was ordained as pastor, and spearheaded the first mission trips into Gaul. After serving 30 plus years in the ministry, Dionysius was martyred under Caesar Domitian along with a presbyter, Rusticus, and a deacon by the name of Eleutherius.

Among the first converts of the Church at Rome was Pomponia Grecina, the wife of Aulus Plautius — military conqueror of Britain. She was arraigned for the crime of participating in a “foreign superstition” around AD 57. Two cousins of the Emperor Domitian, husband and wife by the names of Flavius Clemens and Flavia Domitilla were condemned for involvement in “atheism” which was the code word



Martyrdom of James the Just (AD 62)

for the Christian faith. Flavius was executed and his wife was exiled. Excavations in the catacombs dedicated to Domitilla found generations of “Flavians” associated with the Christian faith.

The Fall of Jerusalem

If the spiritual significance of world events were taken into account and then considered through the lens of divine revelation, hardly any event in history would have been of more significance than the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The Babylonian Exile lasted seventy years. The disruption of the Jews that came by the AD 70 event would be felt for millennia.

Regrettably, the Jews had rejected the Gospel message. They had fallen down, and the “casting away of them” was for the “reconciling of the world” as Paul put it in Romans 11:15. Nonetheless, the Apostle still held out for their final reception, which he said would be as miraculous as “life from the dead.”

After the resurrection of Jesus, the Jewish leaders killed Stephen (Acts 7). They consented to the death of James (the brother of John). Then, they killed James the Just, the brother of Jesus — a true hero and stalwart man of faith who ministered in the worst place on earth from AD 33 until his death in AD 62. Sentenced to death by Ananus the son of the well-known Annas (the corrupt high priest operating during the early years of Jesus), James was pushed off the pinnacle of the temple and then stoned to death. This was the beginning of troubles between the Roman government and the Jews in Jerusalem. Taking advantage of the absence of a procurator of Judea (after Festus and Felix), just prior to the arrival of the new procurator, Albinus, Ananus convened the Sanhedrin for this killing and others, but was deposed by Albinus upon his arrival to Jerusalem.

Jewish historian Josephus writes extensively on this cataclysmic event in language that has convinced scores of Christian theologians and historians that the event was the fulfillment of apocalyptic prophecies contained in John’s Revelation.

The deposed priest, Ananus formed a provisional government during the subsequent rebellion, but was himself killed in the ensuing infighting in Jerusalem. The zealot factions were determined to kill the moderates who wished to negotiate with the Romans. And so, the city was fraught with civil wars and anarchical factions, before the Roman general, Titus, breached the walls in August of AD 70. Josephus recorded in detail the entire wretched ordeal, ending his treatise with these

words: “Now as soon as the army had no more people to slay or to plunder, because there remained none to be the objects of their fury (for they would not have spared any, had there remained any other work to be done), [Titus] Caesar gave orders that they should now demolish the entire city and Temple...”

The Jews did not leave off persecuting Christians however, and they initiated the martyrdom of Symeon, pastor in the Jerusalem church around AD 107. Another rebel leader, Bar Kokhba emerged out of the ashes in AD 132, and assembled an armed force to face off with the Romans. He murdered Christians who did not support his cause, but then was finally defeated by Caesar Hadrian’s general in AD 135. The Jewish wars reduced the population by around 1.5 million people and turned the remnant of Jews into a dispersed minority scattered throughout the world. Without question, the Jews had fallen down as a reserve of spiritual life, as a national identity, and as a political force in the world. The Roman retribution came as the judgment of God upon a disobedient people. For the Christian church however, the Roman persecutions came as means of strengthening and solidifying a faith in Europe and beyond. Rejecting the Messiah

and opposing His body, the Church did no good for the Jews. Had the prophecies of Isaiah failed concerning the success of the Messiah? Or, had the prophetic warnings for the Jewish people left by Christ come true?





Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said to them, “Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down.” ... Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place. (Mark 13:1-2, 30)



The Spreading Influence of Christianity
AD 70

■ Roman Empire ■ Spread of Christianity

