

WHAT IS CHRISTIANITY?

“BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS:
FOR THEY SHALL BE CALLED
THE CHILDREN OF GOD.”
MATTHEW 5:9

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Forward

Jesus used parables to explain that although Christianity had very small beginnings, it would grow into a worldwide community of believers.

When you feel alone in your stand for Christ, realize that God is building a worldwide kingdom.

He has faithful followers in every part of the world, and your faith, no matter how small, can join with that of others to accomplish great things.

Throughout this study, we will look into the problems faced by the early Christian believers, as well as problem that Christians sometimes face today.

May you find your place in God's kingdom.

Chapter 1



Examine Christianity

John 3:1-3

After dark one evening, a Jewish religious leader named Nicodemus, a Pharisee, came to speak with Jesus.

"Teacher," he said, "we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are proof enough that God is with you."

Jesus replied, "I assure you, unless you are born again, you can never see the Kingdom of God."

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the ruling council (called the Sanhedrin). The Pharisees were a group of religious leaders whom Jesus and John the Baptist often criticized for being hypocrites

Most Pharisees were intensely jealous of Jesus because he undermined their authority and challenged their views.

But Nicodemus was searching, and he believed that Jesus had some answers. A learned teacher himself, he came to Jesus to be taught. No matter how intelligent and well educated you are, you must come to

Jesus with an open mind and heart so he can teach you the truth about God.

Nicodemus came to Jesus personally, although he could have sent one of his assistants. He wanted to examine Jesus for himself to separate fact from rumor. Perhaps Nicodemus was afraid of what his peers, the Pharisees, would say about his visit, so he came after dark.

Later, when he understood that Jesus was truly the Messiah, he spoke up boldly in his defense (John 7:50-51). Like Nicodemus, we must examine Jesus for ourselves—others cannot do it for us. Then, if we believe he is whom he says, we will want to speak up for him.

What did Nicodemus know about the kingdom? From the Bible he knew it would be ruled by God, it would be restored on earth, and it would incorporate God's people.

Jesus revealed to this devout Pharisee that the kingdom would come to the whole world (John 3:16), not just the Jews, and that Nicodemus wouldn't be a part of it unless he was personally born again (John 3:5).

This was a revolutionary concept: the kingdom is personal, not national or ethnic, and its entrance requirements are repentance and spiritual rebirth. Jesus later taught that God's kingdom has *already begun* in the hearts of believers (Luke 17:21).

It will be fully realized when Jesus returns again to judge the world and abolish evil forever (Rev. 21; Rev. 22).

The Beatitudes describe Christianity

Matthew 5:3-12

"God blesses those who realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is given to them.

God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

God blesses those who are gentle and lowly, for the whole earth will belong to them.

God blesses those who are hungry and thirsty for justice, for they will receive it in full.

God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God.

God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God.

God blesses those who are persecuted because they live for God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

"God blesses you when you are mocked and persecuted and lied about because you are my followers.

Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted, too.

Jesus began his sermon with words that seem to contradict each other. But God's way of living usually contradicts the world's. If you want to live for God you must be ready to say and do what seems strange to the world.

You must be willing to give when others take, to love when others hate, to help when others abuse.

By giving up your own rights in order to serve others, you will one day receive everything God has in store for you.

There are at least four ways to understand the Beatitudes.

- (1) They are a code of ethics for the disciples and a standard of conduct for all believers.
- (2) They contrast kingdom values (what is eternal) with worldly values (what is temporary).
- (3) They contrast the superficial “faith” of the Pharisees with the real faith Christ wants.
- (4) They show how the Old Testament expectations will be fulfilled in the new kingdom. These beatitudes are not multiple choices—pick what you like and leave the rest.

They must be taken as a whole. They describe what we should be like as Christ’s followers.

Each beatitude tells how to be *blessed*. “Blessed” means more than happiness. It implies the fortunate or enviable state of those who are in God’s kingdom.

The Beatitudes don’t promise laughter, pleasure, or earthly prosperity.

To Jesus, “blessed” means the experience of hope and joy, independent of outward circumstances. To find hope and joy, the deepest form of happiness, follow Jesus no matter what the cost.

With Jesus’ announcement that the kingdom was near (Matthew 4:17), people were naturally asking, “How do I qualify to be in God’s kingdom?” Jesus said that God’s kingdom is organized differently from worldly kingdoms. In the kingdom of heaven, wealth and power and authority are unimportant.

Kingdom people seek different blessings and benefits, and they have different attitudes. Are your attitudes a carbon copy of the world’s selfishness, pride, and lust for power, or do they reflect the humility and self-sacrifice of Jesus, your King?

Jesus said to rejoice when we’re persecuted. Persecution can be good because

- (1) It takes our eyes off earthly rewards,
- (2) It strips away superficial belief,

It strengthens the faith of those who endure, and our attitude through it serves as an example to others who follow.

We can be comforted to know that God’s greatest prophets were persecuted (Elijah, Jeremiah, Daniel). The fact that we are being persecuted proves that we have been faithful; faithless people would be unnoticed.

In the future God will reward the faithful by receiving them into his eternal kingdom where there is no more persecution.

Not all who talk about heaven belong there.

Matthew 7:21

"Not all people who sound religious are really godly. They may refer to me as 'Lord,' but they still won't enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The decisive issue is whether they obey my Father in heaven.

Some self-professed athletes can “talk” a great game, but that tells you nothing about their athletic skills. And not everyone who talks about heaven belongs to God’s kingdom. Jesus is more concerned about our *walk* than our *talk*. He wants us to *do* right, not just *say* the right words.

Your house (which represents your life, Matthew 7:24) will withstand the storms of life only if you do what is right instead of just talking about it. What you do cannot be separated from what you believe.

Jesus exposed those people who sounded religious but had no personal relationship with him. On “that day” (the day of judgment), only our relationship with Christ—our acceptance of him as Savior and our obedience to him—will matter.

Many people think that if they are “good” people and say religious things, they will be rewarded with eternal life. In reality, faith in Christ is what will count at the judgment.

Christianity may separate friends or loved ones.

Matthew 10:34-39

"Don't imagine that I came to bring peace to the earth! No, I came to bring a sword.

I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.

Your enemies will be right in your own household! If you love your father or mother more than you love me, you are not worthy of being mine; or if you love your son or daughter more than me, you are not worthy of being mine.

If you refuse to take up your cross and follow me, you are not worthy of being mine. If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give it up for me, you will find it.

Jesus did not come to bring the kind of peace that glosses over deep differences just for the sake of superficial harmony.

Conflict and disagreement will arise between those who choose to follow Christ and those who don't. Yet we can look forward to the day when all conflict will be resolved.

Christian commitment may separate friends and loved ones. In saying this, Jesus was not encouraging disobedience to parents or conflict at home. Rather, he was showing that his presence demands a decision.

Because some will follow Christ and some won't, conflict will inevitably arise.

As we take our cross and follow him, our different values, morals, goals, and purposes will set us apart from others. Don't neglect your family, but remember that your commitment to God is even more important than they are. God should be your first priority.

Chapter 2



Christianity's growth from small beginnings

Mark 4:30-32

Jesus asked, "How can I describe the Kingdom of God? What story should I use to illustrate it?"

It is like a tiny mustard seed. Though this is one of the smallest of seeds, it grows to become one of the largest of plants, with long branches where birds can come and find shelter."

Jesus used this parable to explain that although Christianity had very small beginnings, it would grow into a worldwide community of believers. When you feel alone in your stand for Christ, realize that God is building a worldwide kingdom. He has faithful followers in every part of the world, and your faith, no matter how small, can join with that of others to accomplish great things.

Jesus adapted his methods to his audience's ability and desire to understand. He didn't speak in parables to confuse people, but to challenge sincere seekers to discover the meaning of his words. Much of Jesus' teaching was against hypocrisy and impure motives—

characteristics of the religious leaders. Had Jesus spoken against the leaders directly, his public ministry would have been hampered. Those who listened carefully to Jesus knew what he was talking about.

Christianity is ridiculed

Matthew 27:29

They made a crown of long, sharp thorns and put it on his head, and they placed a stick in his right hand as a scepter. Then they knelt before him in mockery, yelling, "Hail! King of the Jews!"

The teachers of the law (religious scholars) often cited traditions and quoted authorities to support their arguments and interpretations. But Jesus spoke with a new authority—his own. He didn't need to quote anyone because he was the original Word (John 1:1).

Why some may resist Christianity

John 3:19-21

Their judgment is based on this fact: The light from heaven came into the world, but they loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil.

They hate the light because they want to sin in the darkness. They stay away from the light for fear their sins will be exposed and they will be punished.

But those who do what is right come to the light gladly, so everyone can see that they are doing what God wants."

Many people don't want their lives exposed to God's light because they are afraid of what will be revealed. They don't want to be changed.

Don't be surprised when these same people are threatened by your desire to obey God and do what is right, because they are afraid that the light in you may expose some of the darkness in their lives. Rather than giving in to discouragement, keep praying that they will come to see how much better it is to live in light than in darkness.

Jesus' resurrection is key to Christianity

Luke 24:6-7

He isn't here! He has risen from the dead! Don't you remember what he told you back in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be betrayed into the hands of sinful men and be crucified, and that he would rise again the third day?"

The angels reminded the women that Jesus had accurately predicted all that had happened to him (Luke 9:22, 44; Luke 18:31-33).

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the central fact of Christian history. On it, the church is built; without it, there would be no Christian church today.

Jesus' resurrection is unique. Other religions have strong ethical systems, concepts about paradise and afterlife, and various Holy Scriptures. Only Christianity has a God who became human, literally died for his people, and was raised again in power and glory to rule his church forever.

Why is the resurrection so important?

- (1) Because Christ was raised from the dead, we know that the kingdom of heaven has broken into earth's history. Our world is now headed for redemption, not disaster. God's mighty power is at work destroying sin, creating new lives, and preparing us for Jesus' second coming.
- (2) Because of the resurrection, we know that death has been conquered, and we too will be raised from the dead to live forever with Christ.
- (3) The resurrection gives authority to the church's witness in the world. Look at the early evangelistic sermons in the book of Acts: the apostles' most important message was the proclamation that Jesus Christ had been raised from the dead!
- (4) The resurrection gives meaning to the church's regular feast, the Lord's Supper. Like the disciples on the Emmaus Road, we break bread with our risen Lord, who comes in power to save us.
- (5) The resurrection helps us find meaning even in great tragedy. No matter what happens to us as we walk with the Lord, the resurrection gives us hope for the future.
- (6) The resurrection assures us that Christ is alive and ruling his kingdom. He is not legend; he is alive and real.
- (7) God's power that brought Jesus back from the dead is available to us so that we can live for him in an evil world.

Christians can look very different from one another, and they can hold widely varying beliefs about politics, life-style, and even theology. But

one central belief unites and inspires all true Christians—Jesus Christ rose from the dead

John 20:9

For until then they hadn't realized that the Scriptures said he would rise from the dead.

As further proof that the disciples did not fabricate this story, we find that Peter and John were surprised that Jesus was not in the tomb. When John saw the grave clothes looking like an empty cocoon from which Jesus had emerged, he believed that Jesus had risen. It wasn't until after they had seen the empty tomb that they remembered what the Scriptures and Jesus had said—he would die, but he would also rise again!

Jesus' resurrection is the key to the Christian faith. Why?

- (1) Just as he said, Jesus rose from the dead. We can be confident, therefore, that he will accomplish all he has promised.
- (2) Jesus' bodily resurrection shows us that the living Christ, not a false prophet or imposter, is ruler of God's eternal kingdom.
- (3) We can be certain of our own resurrection because Jesus was resurrected. Death is not the end—there is future life.
- (4) The divine power that brought Jesus back to life is now available to us to bring our spiritually dead selves back to life.
- (5) The resurrection is the basis for the church's witness to the world.

Chapter 3



The first converts to Christianity

Acts 2:1

On the day of Pentecost, seven weeks after Jesus' resurrection, the believers were meeting together in one place.

Held 50 days after Passover, Pentecost was also called the Feast of Weeks. It was one of three major annual feasts (Deut. 16:16), a festival of thanksgiving for the harvested crops. Jesus was crucified at Passover time, and he ascended 40 days after his resurrection. The Holy Spirit came 50 days after the resurrection, ten days after the ascension. Jews of many nations gathered in Jerusalem for this festival. Thus Peter's speech (Acts 2:14ff) was given to an international audience, and it resulted in a worldwide harvest of new believers—the first converts to Christianity.

Christianity is for all people.

Acts 2:7-8

They were beside themselves with wonder. "How can this be?" they exclaimed. "These people are all from Galilee, and yet we hear them speaking the languages of the lands where we were born!"

Christianity is not limited to any race or group of people. Christ offers salvation to all people without regard to nationality.

Visitors in Jerusalem were surprised to hear the apostles and other believers speaking in languages other than their own, the languages of other nationalities, but they need not have been.

God works all kinds of miracles to spread the gospel, using many languages as he calls all kinds of people to become his followers. No matter what your race, color, nationality, or language, God speaks to you. Are you listening?

Christianity's early relationship to Judaism

Acts 2:46

They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—

A common misconception about the first Christians (who were Jews) was that they rejected the Jewish religion. But these believers saw Jesus' message and resurrection as the fulfillment of everything they knew and believed from the Old Testament.

The Jewish believers at first did not separate from the rest of the Jewish community.

They still went to the temple and synagogues for worship and instruction in the Scriptures. But their belief in Jesus created great friction with Jews who didn't believe that Jesus was the Messiah.

Thus, believing Jews were forced to meet in private homes for communion, prayer, and teaching about Christ.

By the end of the first century, many of these Jewish believers were excommunicated from their synagogues.

Christianity can't have benefits of while clinging to sin.

Acts 3:19

Now turn from your sins and turn to God, so you can be cleansed of your sins.

John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus by preaching repentance. The apostles' message of salvation also included the call to repentance—acknowledging personal sin and turning away from it.

Many people want the benefits of being identified with Christ without admitting their own disobedience and turning from sin. The key to forgiveness is confessing your sin and turning from it (see Acts 2:38).

When we repent, God promises not only to wipe out our sins, but to bring spiritual refreshment. Repentance may at first seem painful because it is hard to give up certain sins.

But God will give you a better way. As Hosea promised, "Let us acknowledge the LORD; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth" (Hosea 6:3). Do you feel a need to be refreshed?

Acts 5:14

And more and more people believed and were brought to the Lord—crowds of both men and women.

What makes Christianity attractive? It is easy to be drawn to churches because of programs, good speakers, size, beautiful facilities, or fellowship.

People were attracted to the early church by expressions of God's power at work, the generosity, sincerity, honesty, and unity of the members, and the character of the leaders. Have our standards slipped?

God wants to add believers to his *church*, not just newer and better programs or larger and fancier facilities.

Converts of Christianity increased in Jerusalem.

Acts 6:7

God's message was preached in ever-widening circles. The number of believers greatly increased in Jerusalem, and many of the Jewish priests were converted, too.

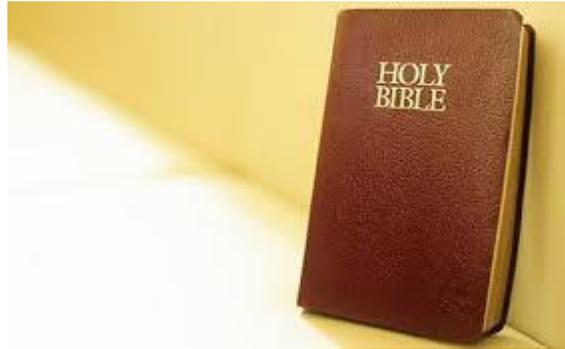
Jesus had told the apostles that they were to witness first in Jerusalem (Acts 1:8).

In a short time, their message had infiltrated the entire city and all levels of society. Even some priests were being converted, an obvious violation of the wishes of the council that would endanger their position.

The word of God spread like ripples on a pond where, from a single center, each wave touches the next, spreading wider and farther.

The gospel still spreads this way today. You don't have to change the world single-handedly—it is enough just to be part of the wave, touching those around you, who in turn will touch others until all have felt the movement. Don't ever feel that your part is insignificant or unimportant.

Chapter 4



Why Romans felt threatened by Christianity

Acts 28:22

But we want to hear what you believe, for the only thing we know about these Christians is that they are denounced everywhere."

Christians were denounced everywhere by the Romans because they were seen as a threat to the Roman establishment. They believed in one God, whereas the Romans had many gods, including Caesar. The Christians were committed to an authority higher than Caesar.

Paul used the Old Testament to teach the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah, the fulfillment of God's promises. The book of Romans, written ten years earlier, reveals the ongoing dialogue that Paul had with the Jews in Rome.

The two sides of the Christian life

Romans 5:1-5

Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us.

Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of highest privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory.

We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they are good for us—they help us learn to endure. And endurance develops strength of character in us, and character strengthens our confident expectation of salvation.

And this expectation will not disappoint us. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.

We now have peace *with God*, which may differ from peaceful feelings such as calmness and tranquility. Peace with God means that we have been reconciled with him. There is no more hostility between us, no sin blocking our relationship with him. Peace with God is possible only because Jesus paid the price for our sins through his death on the cross.

These verses introduce a section that contains some difficult concepts. To understand the next four chapters, it helps to keep in mind the two-sided reality of the Christian life. On the one hand, we are complete in Christ (our acceptance with him is secure). On the other hand, we are growing in Christ (we are becoming more and more like him). At one and the same time we have the status of kings and the duties of slaves. We feel both the presence of Christ and the pressure of sin. We enjoy the

peace that comes from being made right with God, but we still face daily problems that often help us grow. If we remember these two sides of the Christian life, we will not grow discouraged as we face temptations and problems. Instead, we will learn to depend on the power available to us from Christ, who lives in us by the Holy Spirit.

Paul states that, as believers, we now stand in a place of highest privilege (“this grace in which we now stand”). Not only has God declared us not guilty; he has drawn us close to himself. Instead of being enemies, we have become his friends—in fact, his own children (John 15:15; Galatians 4:5).

As Paul states clearly in 1 Cor. 13:13, faith, hope, and love are at the heart of the Christian life. Our relationship with God begins with *faith*, which helps us realize that we are delivered from our past by Christ’s death. *Hope* grows as we learn all that God has in mind for us; it gives us the promise of the future. And God’s *love* fills our lives and gives us the ability to reach out to others.

For first-century Christians, suffering was the rule rather than the exception. Paul tells us that in the future we will *become*, but until then we must *overcome*.

This means we will experience difficulties that help us grow. We rejoice in suffering not because we like pain or deny its tragedy, but because we know God is using life’s difficulties and Satan’s attacks to build our character.

The problems that we run into will develop our perseverance—which in turn will strengthen our character, deepen our trust in God, and give us greater confidence about the future.

You probably find your patience tested in some way every day. Thank God for those opportunities to grow, and deal with them in his strength

How to know if you're a believer

Romans 8:9

But you are not controlled by your sinful nature. The Spirit controls you if you have the Spirit of God living in you.

(And remember that those who do not have the Spirit of Christ living in them are not Christians at all.)

A Christian is anyone who has the Spirit of God living in him or her. If you have sincerely trusted Christ for your salvation and acknowledged him as Lord, then the Holy Spirit has come into your life, and you are a Christian.

You won't know that the Holy Spirit has come if you are waiting for a certain feeling; you will know he has come because Jesus promised he would.

When the Holy Spirit is working within you, you will believe that Jesus Christ is God's Son and that eternal life comes through him (1 John 5:5);

You will begin to act as Christ directs (Romans 8:5; Galatians 5:22-23); you will find help in your daily problems and in your praying (Romans 8:26-27);

You will be empowered to serve God and do his will (Acts 1:8; Romans 12:6ff); and you will become part of God's plan to build up his church (Ephes. 4:12-13).

Christianity's relationship to government

Romans 13:1

Obey the government, for God is the one who put it there. God has placed all governments in power.

Are there times when we should not submit to the government? We should never allow the government to force us to disobey God.

Jesus and his apostles never disobeyed the government for personal reasons; when they disobeyed, it was in order to follow their higher loyalty to God.

Their disobedience was not cheap: they were threatened, beaten, thrown into jail, tortured, and executed for their convictions. Like them, if we are compelled to disobey, we must be ready to accept the consequences.

Christians understand Romans 13 in different ways. All Christians agree that we are to live at peace with the state as long as the state allows us to live by our religious convictions. For hundreds of years, however, there have been at least three interpretations of how we are to do this.

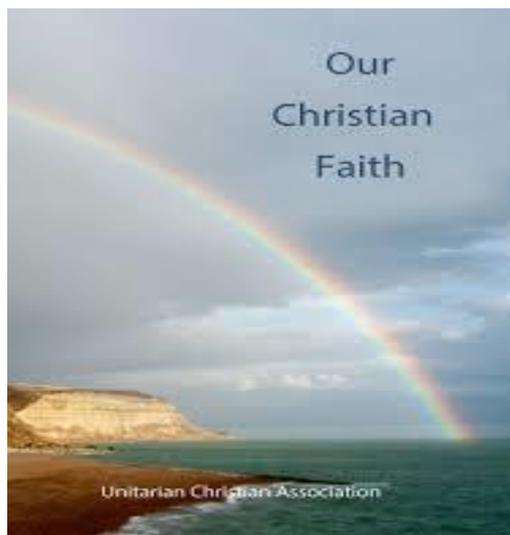
- (1) Some Christians believe that the state is so corrupt that Christians should have as little to do with it as possible. Although they should be good citizens as long as they can do so without compromising their beliefs, they should not work for the government, vote in elections, or serve in the military.
- (2) Others believe that God has given the state authority in certain areas and the church authority in others. Christians can be loyal to both and can work for either. They should not, however, confuse the two. In this view, church and state are concerned with two totally different spheres—the spiritual and the physical—and thus complement each other but do not work together.

- (3) Still others believe that Christians have a responsibility to make the state better. They can do this politically, by electing Christian or other high-principled leaders.

They can also do this morally, by serving as an influence for good in society. In this view, church and state ideally work together for the good of all.

None of these views advocate rebelling against or refusing to obey the government's laws or regulations unless those laws clearly require you to violate the moral standards revealed by God. Wherever we find ourselves, we must be responsible citizens, as well as responsible Christians.

Chapter 5



Christianity impacts is both physical and spiritual

1 Cor. 6:12-13

You may say, "I am allowed to do anything." But I reply, "Not everything is good for you." And even though "I am allowed to do anything," I must not become a slave to anything.

You say, "Food is for the stomach, and the stomach is for food." This is true, though someday God will do away with both of them. But our bodies were not made for sexual immorality. They were made for the Lord, and the Lord cares about our bodies.

“Count yourselves dead to sin” means that we should regard our old sinful nature as dead and unresponsive to sin. Because of our union and identification with Christ, we are no longer obligated to carry out those old motives, desires, and goals.

So let us consider ourselves to be what God has in fact made us. We have a new start, and the Holy Spirit will help us become in our daily experience what Christ has declared us to be.

Christianity may bring few earthly benefits.

1 Cor. 15:19

And if we have hope in Christ only for this life, we are the most miserable people in the world.

Why does Paul say believers should be pitied if there were only earthly value to Christianity?

In Paul's day, Christianity often brought a person persecution, ostracism from family, and, in many cases, poverty. There were few tangible benefits from being a Christian in that society.

It was certainly not a step up the social or career ladder. Even more important, however, is the fact that if Christ had not been resurrected from death, Christians could not be forgiven for their sins and would have no hope of eternal life.

1 Thes. 2:15-16

For some of the Jews had killed their own prophets, and some even killed the Lord Jesus. Now they have persecuted us and driven us out. They displease God and oppose everyone [16] by trying to keep us from preaching the Good News to the Gentiles, for fear some might be saved. By doing this, they continue to pile up their sins. But the anger of God has caught up with them at last.

Why were so many Jews opposed to Christianity?

- (1) Although the Jewish religion had been declared legal by the Roman government, it still had a tenuous relationship with the

government. At this time, Christianity was viewed as a sect of Judaism. The Jews were afraid that reprisals leveled against the Christians might be expanded to include them.

- (2) The Jewish leaders thought Jesus was a false prophet, and they didn't want his teachings to spread.
- (3) They feared that if many Jews were drawn away, their own political position might be weakened.
- (4) They were proud of their special status as God's chosen people, and they resented the fact that Gentiles could be full members within the Christian church.

Throughout this study, we have seen many of the struggles of the early church as well as struggles many Christians face today.

Be faithful and you will receive a crown of life.

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Additional comments and charts are taken from:

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