



Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **SG#23: Imperial Crises and the Rise of Christianity**

**The Crises of the A.D. 200s.** In A.D. 180, Marcus Aurelius chose his son Commodus as his successor. He was incompetent and was eventually assassinated, which triggered a series of civil wars. Military threats forced Rome to enlarge its army, draining the empire's resources and causing an economic crisis. Germanic tribes tested the western defenses, and after A.D. 226 the Persian Empire threatened the east. The Roman Empire became a military dictatorship, with the legions as the center of power. Between A.D. 235 and 284, 20 emperors reigned; all but one died violently. In A.D. 212 the emperor Caracalla granted citizenship to all free people of the empire, in an effort to collect more taxes. However, the value of money declined, resulting in growing **inflation**, or a dramatic rise in prices. Invasions and economic problems led many people to look to new religions. In the A.D. 200s Mithraism, a cult that developed out of Zoroastrianism, became popular among soldiers. It stressed fellowship and bravery. Other religious groups evolved as well, notably one that had developed out of late Hellenistic Judaism—Christianity.

**The Rise of Christianity.** Roman emperors generally allowed the Jews religious freedom as long as they maintained civic order. However, one Jewish group, the Zealots, were vocal about overthrowing Roman rule and in A.D. 6 formed pockets of armed resistance. After a series of uprisings, in A.D. 135 the Romans banned all Jews from Jerusalem. During this turmoil a spiritual leader named Jesus emerged in Judaea. He taught that people needed to seek forgiveness for their sins in preparation for God's Judgment Day, to love God above all else, and to love others as they loved themselves. According to the biblical account, Jesus performed miracles of healing, creating a great deal of excitement. He also attacked many Jewish practices, and the leading priests of the Temple found him a threat to their authority. They convinced Roman authorities to put him to death. His followers believed that he was the Messiah and the Son of God, and they called him Jesus Christ, from the Greek *Christos*, or Messiah. His disciples began teaching that, because of Christ's sacrifice, all people could attain salvation and the promise of everlasting life. Largely because of the disciple Paul, Christianity began to attract followers among non-Jews, or Gentiles. Paul transformed Christianity into a universal religion, as opposed to a branch of Judaism, and he established Christian churches throughout the eastern Mediterranean.

**The Spread of Christianity.** As the appeal of Hellenistic philosophy declined, Christianity was spread by missionaries. Its emphasis on emotional needs, and its message of love on earth and eternal life after death appealed to the poor, the oppressed, and the enslaved. Since official persecution was rare, and the

Romans were fairly tolerant of different religious groups, Christianity continued to spread. Some early Christians developed Jesus' teachings into a **theology**, or a formulation of knowledge about the nature of God, God's laws, and God's requirements of human beings. The addition of this intellectual component to Christianity made it more compatible with Greek rational thought, and made it easier for people believing in Greek philosophies to accept Christianity. This is often called the Hellenization of Christianity.

**Answer the questions below in your own words and in complete sentence. Highlight your evidence.**

**1.** What problems led many people in the A.D. 200s to turn to new religions?

---

---

---

**2.** What was the message that Jesus taught the people of Judaea?

---

---

---

**3.** What was the main message Jesus' disciples taught?

---

---

---

**4.** What other new religion besides Christianity gained popularity in the Roman empire in the A.D. 200s?

---

---

---

**5.** Who transformed Christianity into a universal religion?

---

---

---

**6.** How did the Romans contribute to the spread of Christianity?

---

---

---