

18. CONSTANTINE THE GREAT

Rome, the ancient capital of the mighty Roman empire, is full of uneasy suspense. Thousands of soldiers march through the city streets, past white marble palaces and temples. Soldiers are everywhere! It is clear to the general population that something important is about to happen. Nobody is working. The people stand in groups on the streets, excitedly talking together as they watch the passing troops. Something is about to happen! We can tell by the nervous way the people bustle around on the streets. We hear someone say:

"He is close to Rome with his army."

Another predicts:

"He will surely lose because we are much stronger. You mark my words!"

"I don't know about that. I'm not so sure," a third man remarks, thoughtfully shaking his head.

What is everyone talking about? Who is close to Rome?

All the people in Rome have but *one* name on their lips. All the people are talking about him, big and small, old and young, noble and peasant.

We notice that some of them are scared, nervous and agitated. Others walk around cheerfully, and

we sense a secret delight in them. A smile hovers around their lips. When another detachment of soldiers marches past, the conversations hush, only to continue a little later.

"He's coming! He's coming to Rome! He's very close!"

But who is that 'he'?

Oh, anyone in Rome can tell you that. In the most beautiful palaces, in the houses of the poor, on the streets and squares of Rome, yes, everywhere people are talking about Constantine the Great!

A DANGEROUS JOURNEY

Not far from the city of Rome lies the camp of an invading Roman army. The soldiers have just completed a long and arduous march. They came from Gaul, which is now called France. Their commander, a tall, robust man with sparkling eyes and a commanding look, has led them over the high, impassable Alps into Italy. That march over those proud Alps, with their snow-covered peaks, had been difficult and dangerous. He had led his men along gaping chasms from where death lurked if you took one wrong step; over cold,



'Thousands of soldiers march through the city...' World history encyclopedia

steep rocky mountain slopes, to warm and sunny Italy.

Rome, Rome was the object of their perilous march!

Whenever the dangers seemed too great, whenever the thousands of soldiers became discouraged, whenever they despaired of ever reaching their goal, their brave commander inspired and encouraged them. Then his command was:

"Forward, men!"

And then they *went* forward. Many soldiers became afraid, but their brave commander never was. He encouraged and urged them on. He showed his soldiers how to act in dangerous places. When they hesitated, he removed their hesitation. When they reached the end of their strength, he inspired them with new courage.

And now?

Now they are close to Rome. Far in the distance, they see the immense ancient metropolis. But they all realise that although they are *close* to Rome, they are not *in* Rome yet! They must still fight a fierce battle, and how will that end? The commander of the army does not know that either. Oh, outwardly, his men see no nervousness. He does not permit his men to notice anything.

But inwardly, he is far from calm.

The next day the battle will begin. The result will be victory or . . . defeat. Then he will win all, or he will lose all. He takes the possibility of losing into account.

Look, there he rides in the evening light. The sun is setting in a golden glow. The sun's last rays beautifully colour the heavens.

His commanders and soldiers follow him with their eyes full of respect and admiration. They love their commander. Who is that commander? Just ask the most common soldier in the army. He will answer: "Our commander? Oh, that's Constantine the Great!"

WHO IS CONSTANTINE?

Constantine the Great! Who is he?

Why have he and his army marched to Rome?

What does he want to do there?

Why has he faced such great dangers to get there?

We know that Diocletian (previous chapter) had appointed extra emperors to help him rule the enormous Roman empire.

Galerius, the cruel

Christian persecutor, was one of those assistant

emperors. Constantius,

who ruled the Western part, was another.

Diocletian had died. Galerius had continued the violent persecution in the East until he became mortally ill. Immediately after the death of Diocletian, Constantius had stopped the persecutions in the West.



Constantine the Great 272-337

Constantius had a son called Constantine.

His father had him educated at the imperial palace in Nicomedia, the court of the chief emperor Diocletian. Already as a youth, Constantine marched with the army to distant countries. Then he marched to war against the enemies who attacked the Roman borders. But



Gian Lorenzo Bernini's statue of the Roman Emperor Constantine



Reconstruction of the imperial palace in Nicomedia. Wikipedia

even though he was young, Constantine was not afraid. Without any fear of death, he threw himself into the thick of the battle. He would incite his soldiers to stand firm in the most dangerous places. It was not surprising that Constantine became an excellent general. However, when they finished the campaign, Constantine returned to the imperial palace at Nicomedia. Even after the death of Diocletian, Constantine remained with Galerius in the imperial court. Galerius was secretly jealous and afraid of the brave Constantine and secretly plotted to murder him.

Constantine became aware of that. One night, he escaped from the imperial palace, secretly left Nicomedia, and hastened to his father, Constantius. There he will be safe. When Constantine finally reached his father, Constantius was on his deathbed and soon breathed his last. Constantine had arrived just in time, and he closed his father's eyes.

A GLORIOUS VICTORY

The Roman army in the West now proclaims Constantine as emperor. When Galerius becomes aware of Constantine's escape, he is furious, and that rage climaxes when he learns that Constantine has been proclaimed emperor of the West. But it is powerless rage, for he can't do anything about it. However, as we learned in the previous chapter, Galerius soon dies a terrible death.

Then comes a time of great confusion. Various emperors rule simultaneously. In Rome itself, they proclaim a certain Maxentius as emperor.

Maxentius wanted to de-throne Constantine, but when Constantine heard that, he and his army marched to Rome. He defied the almost insurmountable difficulties, and with his brave soldiers, he crossed the Alps.

Now he is camping close to Rome. Soon the battle between Constantine and Maxentius will begin. However, the army of Maxentius is three times stronger than the army of Constantine. Therefore it's not surprising that Constantine is very concerned.

How will that unequal battle end?

Who will win?

Who will lose?

So much depends on the outcome!

That's why Constantine rode away, seeking solitude. While the sun sets in a golden glow, the brave Constantine thoughtfully gazes in the direction of Rome. Oh, who shall help him in that fearful struggle? Not the idols! Constantine knows



Constantine sees a vision.

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/monkeymind/202>

that very well. He has no respect for the gods and no longer believes they have any power. In his anxiety, he calls on the God of the Christians. Only *that* God can help him. Only *that* God can give him the victory.

And then?

Then Constantine sees a vision! In the light of the setting sun, he sees a shining cross in the golden heavens. There are words written around that cross. In our language, those words mean:

"By this sign, you will conquer."

That cross did not actually appear in the sky, but Constantine saw it in a vision. That sight made an enormous impression on him.

To him, it was real.

Returning to his brave soldiers, he orders them to place a picture of that cross on his banners. His soldiers also attach a symbol of a cross to their helmets.

The next day the battle breaks out. The fighting is fierce, and then? The three times stronger army of Maxentius wavers! They flee in disorder! In the crush, Maxentius' soldiers drag their emperor along. They must cross the Tiber, the river that flows through Rome. In that desperate jostling, Maxentius falls from the bridge, plunges into the Tiber River and drowns.

Constantine gained a glorious victory. In the year 312, he triumphantly enters Rome at the head of his victorious army. He is now emperor of the Western part of the Roman Empire.



Emperor Licinius
Valerianus (200-?)
[https://steemit.com/
history](https://steemit.com/history)

LICINIUS

In the East, another emperor now rules in Galerius' place: Licinius.

He is Constantine's brother-in-law. Constantine makes a treaty with Licinius, which ends the war. The results of this change are enormous, especially for God's church.

Persecution stops, and the Christians receive freedom of religion. When Licinius breaks his promise some years later and starts cruelly persecuting the Christians in the East again, Constantine marches to battle against him. Constantine takes Licinius prisoner and later has him put to death. The Lord grants Constantine the victory.

CONSTANTINE AS EMPEROR OF THE WHOLE EMPIRE



Constantine the Great Statue in New York.
Constantine was born in 277 and ruled as emperor of various parts of the Roman Empire from 306 until his death in 337

Now Constantine rules the entire Roman empire.

One of Constantine's first laws was allowing Christians to rebuild their destroyed church buildings. They received all their properties back again, which Diocletian and especially Galerius had taken from them. Understandably, this brought great joy to the faithful believers! They were finally free after such terrible oppression! Now they could freely meet together to serve the Lord! Undisturbed, they could listen to the faithful preaching of God's Word again without fear and the threat of persecution or death.

The Christians had suffered persecution for almost three hundred years! Satan had tried to uproot and destroy the church of God for so long! But he was not successful. God preserved His church!

God Himself had given them strength to remain standing in the hour of danger. Now the Lord gave them rest. How joyfully those Christians must

have rebuilt their destroyed church buildings. We may be sure they thanked God from the bottom of their hearts for His marvellous deliverance! Peace and rest were theirs at last after so many years of fearsome adversity!

Soon the emperor sent out a second imperial command.

Emperor Constantine the Great decreed in that law that the Christians could again participate in the empire's government. And soon, there were Christian governors again, Christian officers; in short, *all* positions were again made available for the Christians.

The emperor admitted them to all those offices and supported the Christians wherever possible. He gave the bishops large incomes. He had the most beautiful churches built.

To begin with, Christianity was on par with paganism. But when the Christians obtained access to all offices, and since Constantine helped the Christians in all things, Christianity quickly expanded.

A NEW CITY AND THE CLOSING OF PAGAN TEMPLES

Constantine did not feel at home in Rome. Too many pagans still lived there. That's why he had a

new city built close to Nicomedia. He called that city Constantinople. That means "the city of Constantine".

As Christianity grew in power, Constantine finally closed various pagan temples. Hardly anyone ever went there to bring sacrifices to the gods anyway.

We shall hear more about Constantine the Great later. Now was fulfilled what Daniel already foretold ages ago would happen. The stone, which had such a small, insignificant beginning, had become a great mountain. Just before his death, Constantine was baptised, and he died in the year 337 A. D. They buried him in the cathedral at Constantinople. There, his bones lie until the last day.

The Lord was pleased to use Constantine to free His Church from severe persecution and allow rest for His people. The Lord inclines the hearts of kings and princes.

Not long after that, the successors of Constantine the Great prohibited paganism. They ordered pagan temples to be closed and imposed the death penalty on anyone sacrificing to pagan gods. That large Roman empire had become a Christian empire! Who would ever have imagined that?



Baptism of Constantine. By students of Raphael. www.biographyonline

Here we see again: What is impossible with man is possible with God!

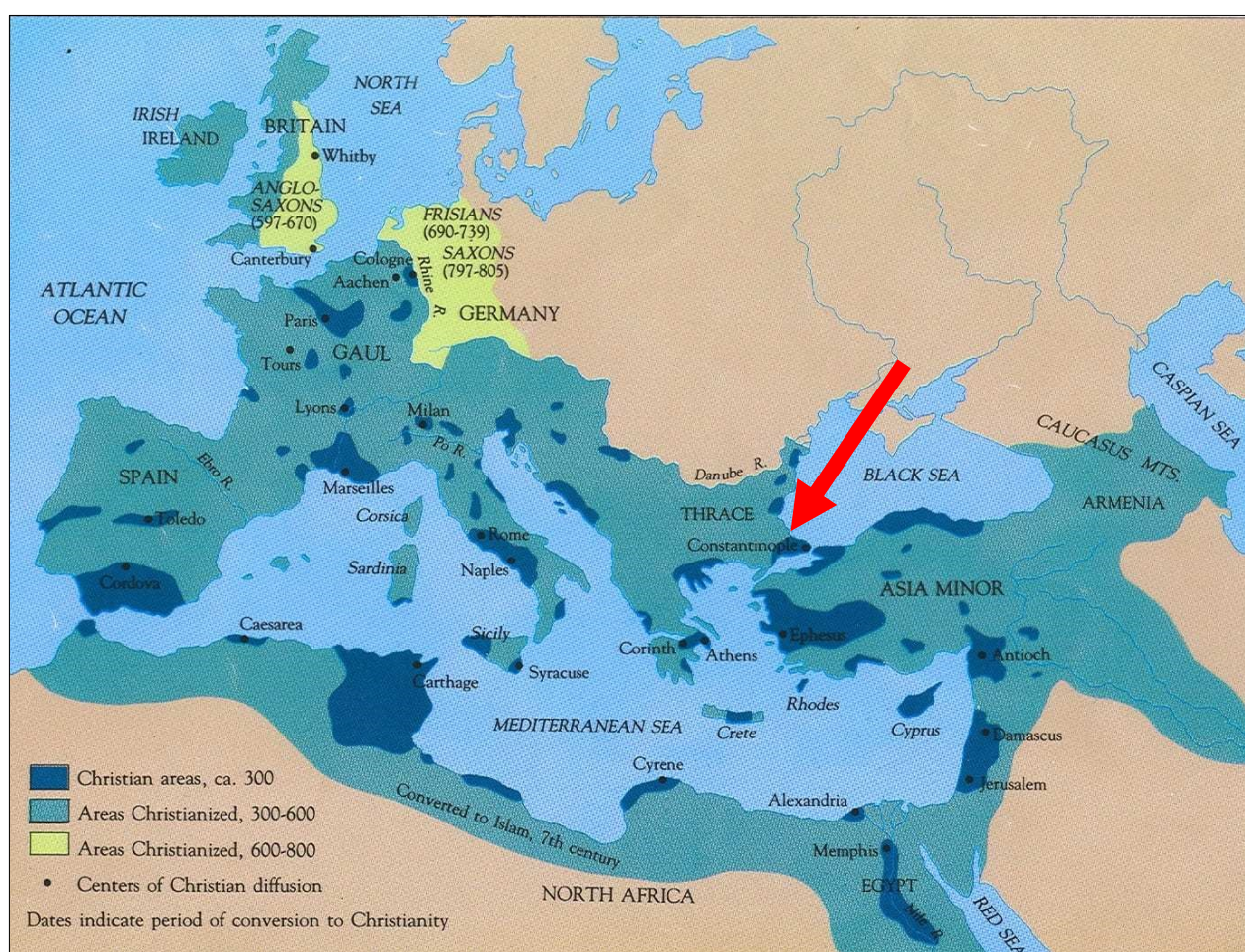
QUESTIONS

1. State the background of Constantine before he became emperor.
2. Identify Maxentius.
3. Why did Constantine seek solitude before the battle?
4. What is a vision?
5. What did Constantine see in a vision?
6. Did placing a cross on the banner give Constantine the victory? Explain.
7. What immediate result did Constantine's victory have for the church?
8. What is an absolute monarch?
9. What further changes did Constantine make which directly affected Christians?
10. Explain the prophecy of Daniel concerning the stone, which became a great mountain.

11. What other laws did Constantine's successors put into effect?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Give two examples from God's Word of generals, captains, or leaders of nations who cried to God for deliverance before entering the battle. What was the outcome in each case?
2. Why do some reject the cross or crucifix as a symbol of Christianity?
3. How should we regard visions and dreams? Explain your answer.



Map of the Roman Empire from 300 AD till 600 AD illustrating the gradual Christianization of the Empire.
<https://www.thecollector.com/byzantine-empire>