

c. 263–339

Eusebius of Caesarea, a Christian writer and historian

303–311

The Great Persecution under the western emperors Diocletian and Galerius

312

Constantine I becomes emperor of the Western Empire after the Battle of Milvian Bridge.

313

The **Edict of Milan**, issued by co-emperors Constantine and Licinius, promises religious freedom and reparations to Christians.

324

Constantine conquers the East, temporarily unifying the Roman Empire.

337

Constantine is baptized by Eusebius of Nicomedia shortly before dying.

d. 342

Eusebius of Nicomedia, a bishop who promoted the teaching of Arius; spiritual advisor to Constantine

380

The **Edict of Thessalonica**, championed by Emperor Theodosius, declares Nicene Christianity to be the state religion of the whole empire.

CHAPTER 4

From Persecution to Privilege

Flavius Constantius was a Roman military officer who gained favor under Emperor Diocletian. When Diocletian reorganized the Roman empire under four emperors—called the *tetrarchy*, or “rule of four”—he chose Constantius as his successor in the West.

Shortly after becoming an emperor, Constantius died quelling a rebellion in Scotland. His son Constantine—also a well-educated officer—had himself declared emperor in his father’s stead, with the enthusiastic support of his father’s armies. By this point, the tetrarchy had devolved to infighting, but Constantine spent the next few years in Europe, viciously putting down tribes that resisted Roman authority.

In 310, while battling the Franks, Constantine narrowly escaped an assassination plot by his father-in-law, Maximian. Constantine likely had Maximian killed—leaving Maximian’s son, Maxentius, the burden to avenge his father’s death.

Maxentius also claimed the title of emperor, but unlike Constantine, he ruled from the city of Rome itself. He sent his forces to kill Constantine, but they were defeated. Constantine then mobilized his armies to march on Rome. In October of 312, he pushed Maxentius’ troops back to the banks of the Tiber River, their last defensible position.

Later, Constantine said that during the battle, he looked up into the noonday sun and saw a strange symbol, along with the words, “By this, conquer.” The following night, during a lull in the fighting, he dreamed that Jesus appeared to him, telling him to paint the same symbol on all the shields and banners of his army. Constantine believed that this sign would protect them in battle.



The *chi-rho*, a symbol that Constantine associated with Christ; derived from the first two letters in the Greek word *ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ* (*Kristos*)

The next morning, Constantine acted on his vision. His advisor Lactantius recorded the story a few years later:

Having this sign, [Constantine's] troops stood to arms. The enemies advanced, but without [Maxentius], and they crossed the [Milvian Bridge]. The armies met, and fought with the utmost exertions of valor, and firmly maintained their ground.

In the meantime, a murmur of dissent arose within Rome, and Maxentius was reviled as one who had abandoned all concern for the [safety and good of the public]; and suddenly, while he presented the Circensian games to celebrate the [sixth] anniversary of his reign, the people cried with one voice, "Constantine cannot be overcome!"

Dismayed at this, Maxentius burst from the assembly, and having called some senators together, ordered the Sibylline [fortune-telling] books to be searched. In them it was found that "on the same day the enemy of the Romans should perish."

Led by this response to the hopes of victory, he went to the field. The boat-bridge broke apart behind him. At sight of that, the battle grew hotter. The hand of the Lord prevailed, and the forces of Maxentius were routed. He fled toward the broken bridge; but the multitude, pressing on him, drove him headlong into the Tiber.

—Lactantius, *The Deaths of Persecutors*¹⁴

With Maxentius dead, Constantine marched into Rome, appeared before the Senate, and established himself as emperor of the Western Empire. The new ruler of Rome, to everyone's confusion, now marched behind a blood-stained imperial flag with a symbol of Jesus Christ.

Many point to this event as the moment Christianity changed from a persecuted sect to the favored religion of an empire. How would the church handle this privileged position?

The Sovereignty of God

The world's most powerful empire persecuted Christians on and off for three centuries. But instead of crushing this sect, Roman officials saw the number of believers increase. Rather than falter, the movement spread, affirming the truth of their message and the power of their Lord.

Scripture reminds us often that God rules over the powers of this world. He reigns supreme, and their might doesn't compare. The prophet Daniel, as an advisor to kings, observed God's power firsthand. He saw God humiliate Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, by reducing the ruler's mind to that of a cow (Dan. 4:28–37). More dramatically, Belshazzar lost his kingdom and life in a single night—right after God made it clear what would happen (Dan. 5:22–31).

Read Daniel 2:19–23. Here Daniel praises God for helping him advise the king on a troubling dream.

- According to verse 20, what two things belong to God?
- How does He use these things to shape history?

Rightly, then, [the one with true understanding] is not disturbed by anything which happens; nor does he suspect those things, which, through divine arrangement, take place for good.

—Clement of Alexandria¹⁵

The mountains and valleys of history do not surprise God. He stands above them, turning every event toward a firm conclusion. The New Testament reveals this end—the ultimate revelation of God's glory, which every person must acknowledge.

- Read Philippians 2:9–11 and 1 Corinthians 15:24–28. In your own words, describe what every human authority will one day do.

The Benefits of Privilege

. . . we thought to arrange that no one whatsoever should be denied the opportunity to give his heart to the observance of the Christian religion, or of that religion which he should think best for himself, so that the supreme Deity, to whose worship we freely yield our hearts, may show in all things His usual favor and benevolence. . . .

. . . Now any one of these [Christians] who wishes to observe the Christian religion may do so freely and openly, without any disturbance . . .

Moreover, in the case of the Christians especially, we esteemed it best to order that . . . those places where they were previously accustomed to assemble . . . shall be restored to the Christians without payment or any claim of recompense and without any kind of fraud or deception.

—From the Edict of Milan, as recorded by Lactantius¹⁶

In February 313, just a few months after the victory at the Milvian Bridge, Constantine and the eastern emperor Licinius issued the Edict of Milan. This decree established freedom of religion across the empire, and it specifically mentioned Christians, unlike the edict of tolerance that ended the Great Persecution.

The decree also required Roman officials to restore to Christians any property confiscated during the last persecution. And since Christians could now assemble and worship publicly, they used some of their restored property to fund the earliest church buildings. Instead of meeting in caves or catacombs, Christians brought their worship into the public sphere, standing face to face with Roman temples and colosseums.

Their newfound freedom also helped church leaders from across the empire talk together. These meetings, often called *ecumenical councils*, gave believers the chance to debate doctrine publicly and then publish the results of their discussion. With free access to the teaching of many leaders, Christians could better discern truth from heresy. We'll note some of these discussions in the next chapter.

The Dangers of Privilege

Our fallen world can twist any of God's gifts into something evil. So with the freedom to worship and evangelize also came the seeds for dangerous practice. Let's look at two such problems.

Appeasing the World

The Roman government chose to tolerate Christianity—but that doesn't mean the world switched sides in the spiritual war. The fallen system, subject to the flesh and guided by Satan, remained anti-God. Throughout history, no matter what status the world grants Christianity, the ways of the world point toward a different direction than the ways of God.

Read 1 John 2:15–17, where John warns believers about the allure of the world.

- If we choose to love the world system, what kind of love do we *not* have (v. 15)?
- What three things does John say the world offers (v. 16)?
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- How does John contrast the fate of the world and the fate of people who obey God (v. 17)?

The world system continually changes—it grows, withers, and consumes itself again and again. To keep ourselves in its good favor, we'd have to shift our beliefs along with it. But whenever the world grants Christianity the slightest bit of approval, many Christians scramble to make concessions. They ignore or even reject long-held Christian teaching, just to stay ideologically fashionable.

Pursuing Wealth and Power

During persecution, the Christian faith could cost people their lives. Few people viewed conversion or baptism as a way to improve their social position. But with Christianity's privileged status under Constantine, the faith suddenly seemed safe and even profitable.

We can find a clear example in Eusebius of Nicomedia, a bishop who used his friendship with Constantine's half-sister, Constantia, to maintain influence in the imperial court. Eusebius was the man Constantine called to administer his baptism—a rite the busy emperor put off until just before his death.

Arianism—Within Christianity, the belief that Jesus is somehow *less than* or *essentially different from* God the Father; distinguishable from trinitarian theology, which holds that the Father, Son, and Spirit are separate persons, yet one God

Under both Constantine and his heir, Constantius II, Eusebius carefully spread the teachings of Arius, who held that God the Son did not exist eternally with God the Father. To promote this false teaching, Eusebius called several councils and deposed his theological rivals. By the end of his life, he was Patriarch of Constantinople, the highest position in the newly politicized church leadership. It took forty years for the church to finally reverse Eusebius's work at the First Council of Constantinople in 381.

Scripture includes many examples of people who used religion for their own purposes. Look up the following passages and note how each group or person twisted faith for personal gain.

- The Pharisees in Matthew 6:16—
- Simon in Acts 8:14–21—
- Divisive Teachers in Romans 16:17–18—

Many Christians in the world today can relate more to stories of persecution than to stories of privilege. But if you live in the West, you likely enjoy some degree of religious freedom. Take a few moments to consider your situation.

- In what ways can you use your freedom for good?

You say that you are wealthy and rich, and you think that you should use those things which God has willed you to possess. Use them, certainly, but for the things of salvation; use them, but for good purposes; use them, but for things which God has commanded . . . Let the poor feel that you are wealthy; let the needy feel that you are rich. Lend your estate to God; give food to Christ.

—Cyprian¹⁷

- What are some dangers or temptations that come with your freedom?

- What do you think the writers meant by the last point in this edict?