

## **The Early Middle Ages**

We are now at lesson 19—the early Middle Ages, the second 500 years. So far I have covered the first 500 years of the history of Christianity. Now I am going to cover the second 500 years, though more briefly. Even though this was not an unimportant time, it was not nearly as important as the history of the early church. I will use a prayer that comes from around the year 500. It is from the *Gelasian Sacramentary*, named for the pope Gelasius, who died in 496. He wrote liturgies for the church including the following prayer.

Let us pray. “*Thou who has taught us that we are most truly free when we lose our wills in Thine, help us to gain that liberty by continual surrender unto Thee, that we may walk in the way which Thou has prepared for us, and in doing Thy will may find our life, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*”

This lesson provide a wide angle picture. I want to talk about the whole period of the second 500 years of Christianity, which itself is the first 500 of 1,000 years that we can call the Middle Ages. The first 500 years of Christianity we usually call the early church. The next 1,000 years are known as the Middle Ages. Today I want to focus more specifically on the first 500 of that 1,000-year period. Later I will lecture on the third 500 years of Christianity, which will bring us to the end of this course. The fourth 500 years is the whole of the Reformation and modern church history, which brings us to the present.

The expression “Middle Ages” became common during the time of the Renaissance to refer to the period between the ancient world and the modern world. Of course, the people of the Middle Ages were not aware that they were living in the Middle Ages. They thought they were living in the modern world. As we look back on it, however, most people think of that long period of time as the Middle Ages. There was the classical world, or the Christian world, of Greece and Rome, and then there was the modern world that came out of the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment. Between those two worlds there was the world of the Middle Ages.

Sometimes people have called the period the “Dark Ages.” I do not think that is the best term for it. One reason is because, while there were times of comparative darkness, there were also great times of light, progress, and learning. It is not accurate or appropriate to label the whole period the Dark Ages, even though there were some dark times during that 1,000-year period. If we want to use the expression “Dark Ages” for any part of that 1,000 years, we might use it for the last century before the year 1,000. That might be the true period of the Dark Ages, the tenth century. People began to worry about the idea that they were coming to the year 1,000. They wondered what was going to happen. It seemed to them there was something ominous about the year 1,000. That year came and went, however, without much difference in the lives of people. There were the same sins, turmoil, and controversies in the new millennium as in the old millennium.

I will come to the tenth century later in the course. For now I will begin covering the 500-year period between the end of the early church and the real “Dark Ages.” In that period there was a new map of Europe that emerged. It was no longer a map of the Roman Empire. Europe was divided among many barbarian tribes—Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Franks, Saxons, and many others. As we know, Rome finally fell. It took a long time, and it was a gradual fall. Most people during the time that Rome was falling did not know that Rome was falling, although they knew there were some serious problems. Throughout the fifth century, Rome gradually collapsed. The great writing of Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, tried to put that great, cataclysmic event in perspective for Christians.

While the Roman Empire no longer existed, modern Europe had not yet emerged either. England, Italy, France, and Germany were not on the map yet. Europe was divided into barbarian kingdoms. The barbarians were nomads. As they moved, they encroached on someone else's territory and in turn forced those people to move. Generally those people were forced down into the Roman Empire. That was sometimes attractive to people, because Rome had great buildings, schools, learning, and books. The barbarians coveted those interesting things. They did not want to destroy Rome. They simply wanted to gather for themselves some of the benefits that Rome had produced.

All of those movements were prompted by the movement of a great Asiatic tribe called the Huns. They were a very warlike people. The Huns pressed into Europe and upset everybody there, who then began to move and migrate around Europe. Most of the mass migrations throughout Europe at the time were prompted by the Huns. The most famous of the leaders of the barbarians was Attila the Hun. He was somebody who got things done, but with a rather strong hand. Some time ago a book came out called *The Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun*. It is not a book I particularly recommend, at least not for pastors. You would do better to get your leadership secrets from the Bible. Attila moved his people into Europe and conquered vast areas of central Europe.

Within the larger areas controlled by various barbarian peoples, smaller units gradually developed. This is described as the time of feudalism. Larger tribal areas were subdivided into small areas, and even smaller areas, with a lord and his vassals. A great estate and the land surrounding it would be occupied by servants loyal to a particular lord. The most important figures of that system of feudalism were farmers and soldiers. Scholars were not as important. The period of scholarship was hindered for a while. Although, as I will describe later, scholarship still existed, but it was in the Celtic fringe, in the monasteries of Ireland, and in other places, but it was not much in the central life of the people. It was a period of farmers and soldiers. It was the period of King Arthur and his famous knights of the round table. Knights went out to fight for their lord. They went to win honor and glory for themselves, but also to protect themselves from the neighboring kingdom. Farmers were needed to provide food. Soldiers were needed for protection. There was not much time left for scholarship or learning. For some time, there would not arise any great names such as Augustine, Jerome, or Chrysostom.

In all of this, after the fall of Rome, there was one unifying factor. There were then many competing tribes and feudal units. The only thing that held society together was Christianity. Christianity had spread beyond the cultural bounds of the Roman Empire into barbarian Europe just in time so that when Rome fell, Christianity did not fall with it. Christianity was already the religion of many of the barbarians who were invading the Roman Empire. Kenneth Clark said in his book *Civilization*, "If you had asked the average man of the time to what country he belonged, he would not have understood you. But he would have known what bishopric he belonged to." The idea of belonging to England or France or Germany would not have been a thought of someone of that time. The unifying factor in all of the confusion of the Middle Ages was Christianity.

There were some great popes during the period, although not all of the popes of the period were great. You can know which popes were great because they are called "the Great," like Leo the Great and Gregory the Great. Not every pope is called "the Great"; only a few are. If you have a pope with "the Great" after his name, you know there is something significant about that pope. A pope did not call himself that, but either a contemporary or, more often successors, noted the greatness of his achievement.

As we look at the second 500 years of the history of Christianity, we can begin to talk about the Roman Catholic Church. Up until this point, I have resisted precisely identifying the first 500 year period with

the Roman Catholic Church. There were some factors during that period that led to Roman Catholicism. Yet there were some things that could have led a different way. By the time of the year 500, however, we can accurately speak of the Roman Catholic Church.

The bishops in Rome by that time were popes in the modern sense of the word. They believed they were successors of Peter. They believed that the Lord gave His authority to Peter to plant the church. They believed that the keys of the kingdom were given to Peter and that the pope represented Peter and speaks for, not only Peter, but also for God Himself, in both what the pope says and does. Leo the Great was a great pope of the fifth century. It was he who made the connection between the office of the pope and the authority of Peter. In Leo we see a very strong statement of Roman Catholicism. Leo the Great concentrated, elevated, and glorified the power of the Roman Catholic Church. Gregory the Great was of the sixth century.

If Leo elevated the power of the Roman Catholic Church, Gregory was concerned to extend the limits of the church. He was the great missionary pope. When a new pope takes office he takes a new name. That name always signals something of what he hopes to do during his pontificate. When later popes took the name Gregory, that usually meant that pope was going to put an emphasis on missions and the extension of the church. That is because Gregory the Great was the great missionary pope. He was one of the first examples since the days of Paul of someone who had a carefully planned and calculated mission. He was a missionary strategist. He sent Saint Augustine to England. That is not Saint Augustine of Hippo, but rather Saint Augustine of Canterbury. Gregory promoted the spread of Christianity in the continent of Europe.

Rome was a great center of Christianity during this second 500-year period. The other great center of Christianity was Constantinople. It became known as the “second Rome.” Constantinople became a great city when the emperor Constantine moved the capital to that city in the fourth century. Eventually the Roman Empire was divided into an eastern part and a western part, although both parts were ruled by an emperor in Constantinople. There were other great centers of Christianity, but at that time no other cities could compete with Rome in the West and Constantinople in the East.

The patriarch in Constantinople was the counterpart to the pope in Rome. I will describe in a later lecture that the two parts of the church gradually pulled apart and finally broke in 1054. The division was partly over who would have more control, the pope or the patriarch. There were other issues, too. During this 500-year period, even though there were strains and stresses, the two parts of the church in the East and West were still united.

In the East it was not so much the patriarchs who were great as some of the emperors. One of the great emperors was Justinian. He lived in the sixth century. He was a great emperor because he tried to reconquer some of the areas in the West that had been lost to the barbarians. He succeeded in doing that, at least temporarily. He extended again the boundaries of the Roman Empire. He was a great emperor because he was a man who set forth laws. In the Princeton University chapel there is a window devoted to the great lawyers, the great lawmakers, of history, and Justinian is one of those. Justinian was also great because he built many great buildings. He beautified and expanded the city of Constantinople. The greatest of the buildings was the great Church of Holy Wisdom, *Santa Sofia*. For many years, until the Muslim invasion and conquest, it was the greatest of the churches of the Eastern empire, and perhaps the greatest Christian church of all. The church was dedicated in the year 537. According to tradition, when Justinian walked into the church and saw the final product, that great soaring church with its huge circular sanctuary, he supposedly said, “O Solomon, I have outdone you.” He meant that the church was greater than the temple of Israel.

This second 500 years that I have been talking about was also a time of the expansion of Christianity. There was great expansion in Europe with Gregory's mission. Gregory sent Saint Augustine of Canterbury to the pagan English. Earlier than that, there was the expansion of Christianity beyond the limits of the old Roman Empire into Ireland. Then there was expansion from Ireland into Scotland through the mission of Saint Patrick. There had been expansion from England to Ireland through Saint Columba.

Later, around the year 1,000, a very significant event in the history of the Christian church was the expansion of the faith into Russia. The spread of Christianity occurred not in its Western form but in its Eastern form into Russia. Even today, the Russian Orthodox Church is by far the largest of the Orthodox churches in the world.

As we think of that second 500-year period, it is appropriate to say that two men affected the course of that history more than anybody else. One was Charlemagne, and the other was Mohammed. Charlemagne was the first great political leader in the West since the collapse of Rome. Popes had been great, but they were not political leaders in the West. The emperors were in the East in Constantinople. Charlemagne, in central Europe, was able to put together a great kingdom. It was nominally a Christian kingdom, which meant that Europe was almost completely Christianized eventually through the efforts of people like Charlemagne and the missionaries whom I will describe later.

On Christmas day in 800, Charlemagne was crowned by the pope as "Holy Roman Emperor." That was the beginning of the Holy Roman Empire, which lasted almost 1,000 years in one form or another. Somebody has said that the only problem with the name "Holy Roman Empire" is that it was not holy, not Roman, and it was not an empire. It was certainly not holy in the sense of consistent godly living. Many brutal and awful things took place under the name of the Holy Roman Empire, and even under the name of Christianity. It is also true that it was not really Roman. It was German. But it was an empire. It was not as big as the Roman Empire, but it was certainly a significant kingdom that embraced part of France, part of Germany, and part of northern Italy. Charlemagne's court was a center of learning and evangelism. It was there on the continent that Christianity not only survived but was also able to spread to surrounding kingdoms, just as Christianity survived and spread from the monasteries of distant Ireland.

While the northern part of the Western world was struggling to get over the fall of the Roman Empire and to organize and preserve itself, a new anti-Christian force was arising in the south. That force was Islam. It was the strongest and most determined enemy that Christianity would have for the next 500 years, and the 500 years after that, and perhaps even the 500 years after that. Mohammed died in 632. In the 100 years after the death of Mohammed, Islam, as his religion was called, spread with great force and speed. It spread all the way across North Africa, wiping out the Christian centers that were the strongest concentration of Christians in the world except for the part of Asia that is modern-day Turkey. In a few generations, those Christian centers were gone, except for the church in Egypt. Islam also quickly wiped out and controlled the areas of Christianity's birthplace, the land of Palestine and the old Roman province of Asia, which is modern-day Europe.

Islam was finally defeated in Europe. If Islam had not been defeated in Europe, the second 500 years of Europe would have been the story of Islam and not the story of Christianity. In 732, Muslims were finally turned back when they were defeated at the Battle of Tours in France. They already controlled Spain at the time, and they were driven back into Spain, which remained Muslim, or Moorish, for several more centuries, almost to the time of the Reformation. The Muslims were also defeated in the

East. They were not able to conquer Constantinople and were defeated in 718. There had been almost 100 years of fast and vigorous movement, and then there was a temporary setback. Constantinople eventually did fall to the Turks and then to the Muslims. Islam then moved up into eastern Europe. Muslims controlled areas from the borders of Spain, across North Africa, and up to the Black Sea. Christians controlled areas from Scotland down through Italy and east, west, and central Europe.

During this rapid survey of the second 500 years of Christianity, it is also important to consider Asia and Africa. I do not want to leave out what happened in those two great continents. Roman Asia was lost to Islam. Those were the Asian lands around the Mediterranean, the lands of the old Roman Empire. There was already a strong church in Persia at the time. It was a Nestorian church, which did not accept the Council of Chalcedon, although as I said before, it may have been more of a matter of theological misunderstanding. It was a church outside the bounds of the old Roman Empire that centered in Persia. It was a church that was greatly persecuted, and it produced many martyrs during its history. When the Muslims entered Persia, the modern countries of Iraq and Iran, Islam began to dominate that area. But Christianity was not wiped out. It survived in Persia. In the second 500 years, Christianity not only survived in Persia, but it also spread vigorously all the way from Persia to China. By 635 Persian missionaries had reached the capital of the T'ang dynasty in China, which they considered the end of the world. We need to be aware that Christianity, and churches, were in China—and great churches were built there—before the days of the modern missionary movement.

The other significant place in Asia that Christianity existed in the first 500 years was India. It was founded perhaps by Thomas. It also received the Alexandrian scholar and missionary Pantaenus. The Mar Thoma Church in India, which is still there today, was able to survive in the second 500 years as a tiny community in a vast non-Christian sea. It was surrounded by Hindus, Buddhists, and eventually Muslims as well.

By the end of the second 500-year period, in the ninth and tenth centuries, Christianity experienced some drastic setbacks in Asia. By the year 800 it looked as though Christianity would spread throughout Asia, and that many people in Asia would become Christians even as people in Europe were becoming Christians. Dr. John M. L. Young, a missionary to Japan, wrote in his book *By Foot to China* that “by the year 800 there were more Christians east of Damascus than west of that city.” That is a remarkable thought. The first time I read that I thought it was preposterous. I wondered if it was true then why have we not heard of all those Christians. I have found there are two answers to that question. First, most church histories that we study are written by Westerners, and they take a Western orientation and mainly ignore developments in Asia. There has been a provincialism in the writing of church history that has described the flow of events in the movement of Christianity from the Roman Empire up into Europe, then to England, then to Scotland, then to New England, and that becomes the end of the story. Church history, however, is much broader than that, and we need to have a global perspective on the history of the church. The best answer to a narrow focus on church history is to read about Christianity in Asia. Some of the best resources are Dr. Samuel Moffett's books, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, volumes one and two. The other reason we do not know much about Christianity in Asia is that it practically disappeared during the second 500-year period. The church was growing, and then suddenly it was gone. It was not like Europe where there was a continuity of Christianity from the apostolic period down to the present. By the year 850, Dr. Moffett said, “The church was wounded, perhaps fatally, and declining.”

Why did Christianity suffer such a great setback in Asia? Was it persecution? Was it oppression? It is certain that Christians in Asia suffered more persecution, or suffered persecution longer, than Christians in any other part of the world. Persecution can take its toll. The Bible teaches us, however, that there is no force in the world that can destroy the church. The church has survived through persecution in other

times and places. Dr. Moffett believes that persecution alone cannot be the answer to why the church in Asia disappeared. There were many complex factors involved. One idea is that the church in some places became too closely identified with the state. Christianity in China became identified with the T'ang dynasty, and when the T'ang dynasty fell, the church fell with it. The church had not penetrated beyond the power and support of the T'ang dynasty as it had penetrated beyond the power and support of the old Roman Empire in the West. Dr. Moffett also suggests that the comment of a Persian Christian from the ninth century is another factor to explain the turn of events in Asia. That ninth century Persian Christian said, "The monks are no longer missionaries." The church began to retreat into monastic mode, into survival mode, and it was not reaching out as it had for so long.

There is also a history of Christianity in Africa in the second 500 years. I already explained how Christianity was destroyed in North Africa, in the old Roman Africa. North Africa today is solidly Muslim and fiercely anti-Christian. Until this second 500 years, many of the prominent figures of early Christianity came from North Africa, like Augustine and Tertullian. Today, however, there are very few Christians in North Africa. There may not be any place in the world that is more fiercely anti-Christian than the Islamic countries of North Africa. The only exception was Egypt. Egypt had a strong Christian church. Even though Islam dominated Egypt, as it did the rest of North Africa, it did not completely obliterate the Coptic Church. The Coptic Church is the Egyptian church that was there long before Islam was there, and it continues today as a vigorous Christian community. In Nubia, the land south of Egypt, which is modern-day Sudan, Christianity not only survived, but it also grew vigorously during the second 500-year period. Unfortunately, during the third 500-year period, Christianity practically disappeared from Nubia, and it was not to return until the modern missionary movement. During the second 500-year period, however, Christianity continued to grow there. Then in Ethiopia, which is further south near the present-day country of Ethiopia, was the most vital expression of African Christianity. It is important to stress this because Ethiopian Christianity was there long before Islam. There are some who say that Christianity is a Western importation into Africa. Those people need to be reminded that before Islam reached Africa there was a vigorous, strong Christian church in Ethiopia. That church continued during the second 500-year period, and also during the third 500-year period, and down to the present. The church in Ethiopia remained a vigorous expression of Christianity.

I have presented an overview of this 500-year period. In the following lessons I am going to concentrate on some of the themes I have mentioned. I hope this gave you a wide-angle picture of some of the important things that happened during that time.

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever" (Isaiah 40:8).