

The Fall of Jerusalem (AD 70)

The day Roman legions burned the Temple — and Christianity was pushed out on its own.

By Shane Gunn • Following Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points*, ch. 1

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Where this fits: Lesson 3 of the Pleasant Springs *Church History* series, and the first of Noll's twelve turning points. For the apostolic generation immediately before the fall, see **Lesson 1 — The Apostles and the Writing of the New Testament**. The **Series Timeline** shows where this lesson sits in the full sweep.

WHY THIS LESSON MATTERS

For forty years after Jesus' resurrection, a Christian in Jerusalem could still hear trumpets from the Temple, still smell the smoke of morning sacrifice, still see the priests in their courses. The first Christians were Jews worshipping the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and they did so at the place where he had told Israel to meet him. Peter and John went up to the Temple at the hour of prayer (Acts 3:1). Paul returned to Jerusalem to complete a Nazirite vow (Acts 21:26). It was entirely possible, in AD 64, to see the church as a movement *within* Judaism.

Then in the summer of AD 70 the Roman army under Titus breached the walls, slaughtered tens of thousands, and burned the Temple to the ground. It was never rebuilt. Sacrifices have not been offered there since. The day the Temple fell is the day two religions — *rabbinic Judaism* and *Christianity* — emerged from what had until then been a single Jewish matrix.

Mark Noll calls it the first turning point of church history because it was the moment the church was **pushed out on its own**.

PART 1 — THE SETTING: JUDEA UNDER ROME

In AD 6 the Romans had annexed Judea as an imperial province under a prefect (later called procurator) reporting to the governor of Syria. The arrangement never really worked. Five pressures were building:

- **Taxation and census.** Rome taxed by head-count; Jewish religion remembered 2 Samuel 24 and regarded the census as an affront. The census of Quirinius (c. AD 6) triggered Judas the Galilean's revolt — referenced by Gamaliel in Acts 5:37.
- **Prefect misrule.** Pontius Pilate (26–36) had brought military standards bearing the emperor's image into Jerusalem. Albinus (62–64) and Gessius Florus (64–66) openly plundered the Temple treasury. Josephus says of Florus: "He forced the people into rebellion, hoping to cover his own crimes in the general disaster."
- **Messianic expectation.** The Dead Sea Scrolls, Josephus, and the Gospels all show that first-century Judea was saturated with apocalyptic hope. Many expected a Davidic king to expel Rome and restore Israel. Jesus' own disciples held this expectation up to Acts 1:6 ("Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?").
- **Zealot violence.** The *Sicarii* ("dagger-men") assassinated collaborators in crowds. Simon the Zealot was one of Jesus' Twelve (Luke 6:15). Jesus walked a narrow path between collaboration and revolt — "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Mark 12:17).
- **The Temple's unfinished glory.** Herod the Great had begun a massive renovation of the Second Temple around 20 BC; work was still in progress in the 60s AD (John 2:20: "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple"). The retaining wall stones were among

the largest ever moved. When Jesus' disciples marvelled at it (Mark 13:1), they were looking at an active construction project.

PART 2 — JESUS FORESAW IT

The Gospels preserve three distinct moments in Jesus' ministry where he prophesies Jerusalem's destruction with remarkable specificity.

During the Triumphal Entry (Luke 19:41–44), looking across the Kidron at the city, Jesus wept:

Greek NT (Luke 19:43–44): ἥξουσιν ἡμέραι ἐπὶ σε καὶ παρεμβалоῦσιν οἱ ἐχθροὶ σου χάρακά σοι... καὶ οὐκ ἀφήσουσιν λίθον ἐπὶ λίθον ἐν σοί.

Luke 19:43–44 (ESV): “The days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you... and they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation.”

Leaving the Temple for the last time (Mark 13:1–2; Matthew 24:1–2):

Greek NT (Mark 13:2): οὐ μὴ ἀφεθῆ ὧδε λίθος ἐπὶ λίθον ὃς οὐ μὴ καταλυθῆ.

Mark 13:2 (ESV): “Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

On the Mount of Olives, in answer to the disciples' question, Jesus gave what is now called the Olivet Discourse (Mark 13; Matthew 24; Luke 21). Luke preserves a detail that would matter forty years later:

Greek NT (Luke 21:20–21): ὅταν δεῖ ἴδητε κυκλουμένην ὑποστρατοπέδων Ἱερουσαλήμ, τότε γνῶτε ὅτι ἤγγικεν ἡ ἐρήμωσις αὐτῆς. τότε οἱ ἐν τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ φευγέτωσαν εἰς τὰ ὄρη.

Luke 21:20–21 (ESV): “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the

mountains.”

Three precise predictions: **the city encircled**, **the stones thrown down**, and **the disciples fleeing to the hills**. Every element was visible forty years later.

PART 3 — THE FIRST JEWISH-ROMAN WAR (AD 66–73)

AD 66 • Gessius Florus seizes 17 talents from the Temple treasury; riots break out in Jerusalem. Eleazar, son of the high priest, suspends the daily sacrifice offered on behalf of Caesar — an open act of war. The Roman garrison at the Antonia fortress is massacred. The legate of Syria, Cestius Gallus, marches on Jerusalem, is unexpectedly repulsed, and loses part of his legion in a disastrous retreat at the pass of Beth-horon.

AD 67 • Nero dispatches **Vespasian**, his most competent general, with three legions (roughly 60,000 troops) and a young son named **Titus** as second-in-command. Vespasian systematically reduces Galilee. **Josephus**, the Jewish general at Jotapata, surrenders after a 47-day siege; he predicts Vespasian will become emperor, is spared, and spends the rest of his life as a Roman client and our single most important eyewitness to the war.

AD 68–69 (“The Year of the Four Emperors”) • Nero is overthrown and commits suicide; Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and finally Vespasian himself take the throne in rapid succession. Vespasian leaves Judea to claim the empire. Command of the Judean war passes to Titus.

AD 70 • Titus arrives before Jerusalem in April with four legions (V Macedonica, X Fretensis, XII Fulminata, XV Apollinaris) and auxiliaries. The city is already torn by civil war among three Jewish factions: Eleazar ben Simon in the Temple, John of Gischala on the Temple Mount, Simon bar Giora in the upper city. They burn each other’s grain stores — Josephus calls it “one of the fatal strokes against the city.” The Roman siege is

brutal; Titus crucifies up to 500 Jews a day outside the walls (Josephus, *War* 5.449–451).

August AD 70 • Roman troops breach the Antonia and the outer Temple courts. On **the 9th of Av** — the same day, by tradition, that Babylon burned Solomon’s Temple in 586 BC — the Second Temple is set ablaze. Titus reportedly tried to save the sanctuary itself; Josephus says the fire got away from the soldiers. The whole complex burns. The Roman standards are brought into the Temple court and sacrifices are offered *to them* in the ruins.

AD 73 • Mountaintop fortress of **Masada**, the last Jewish stronghold, falls after a siege. According to Josephus (*War* 7), Eleazar ben Yair’s nine hundred defenders take their own lives rather than be enslaved. The war is over.

The **Arch of Titus** still stands at the edge of the Roman Forum. Its interior relief shows Roman soldiers carrying off the Menorah and the Table of the Shewbread from the Temple. Every visit to that arch is, for a Christian reader of the Olivet Discourse, a visit to the back side of Jesus’ own prediction.

PART 4 — JOSEPHUS AS EYEWITNESS

Flavius Josephus (born *Yosef ben Matityahu*, c. AD 37–100) is the reason we know what we know. A priestly Jew who commanded the rebel forces in Galilee, was captured at Jotapata, defected to Rome, and watched the siege of Jerusalem from Titus’ side, he wrote *The Jewish War* in the 70s AD and the *Antiquities of the Jews* two decades later. He is not a neutral witness — he writes to please Vespasian’s family and to defend his own record — but he was *there*, and no other detailed narrative survives.

“No other city ever suffered such things, nor did any generation from the beginning of the world foster wickedness more productive of them than this one did.”

— **Josephus, *The Jewish War*, Preface 4 (c. AD 75)**

“While the sanctuary was burning... neither pity for age nor respect for rank was shown; old men and children, laymen and priests alike were butchered. Every class was pursued and enveloped in the grasp of war.”

— **Josephus, *The Jewish War* 6.271 (on the burning of the Temple)**

Josephus also records three passages on Jesus and John the Baptist (including the disputed *Testimonium Flavianum* in *Antiquities* 18.3.3) and the execution of **James, the Lord’s brother**, by stoning in AD 62 (*Antiquities* 20.9.1) — one of the earliest non-Christian references to a New Testament figure. His writings sit alongside the New Testament on the shelf of every serious first-century historian.

PART 5 — THE FLIGHT OF THE JERUSALEM CHURCH TO PELLA

The book of Acts ends in the early 60s with Paul under house arrest in Rome. For the next seven years the New Testament falls silent on Jerusalem. What happened to the congregation the Apostles had planted there — the mother church of Acts 2?

Eusebius of Caesarea, writing his *Ecclesiastical History* around AD 325, preserves an early tradition: before the Roman siege closed, the Christians of Jerusalem obeyed Jesus’ Olivet warning and fled across the Jordan to a Gentile city called Pella in the Decapolis.

“Furthermore, the members of the Jerusalem church, by means of an oracle given by revelation to acceptable persons there, were ordered to leave the city before the war began and to settle in a town in Peraea called Pella. So when the believers in Christ had moved out of Jerusalem, as if holy men had utterly abandoned the royal metropolis itself... the judgement of God overtook it.”

— **Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.5.3 (c. AD 325)**

The historicity of “the flight to Pella” is debated. Some modern scholars regard it as a later legend; others (including the evangelical historian Craig A. Evans) consider it credible precisely because a fleeing community does not invent a story of its own retreat unless it is true. What is *not* debated: the Jerusalem church as Acts knew it — led by James until AD 62, located in its mother city, worshipping alongside its fellow Jews at the Temple — ceased to exist in 70. When

Christians returned to Jerusalem in the second century, it was as a tiny Gentile congregation under a bishop named Mark.

PART 6 — TWO RELIGIONS EMERGE

With the Temple gone, the sacrificial system of the Torah could not be performed. Every sacrifice commanded in Leviticus required the altar; the altar was rubble. Two utterly different answers emerged to the same catastrophe.

THE JEWISH ANSWER — YAVNEH

According to the Talmud (*Gittin* 56a), the rabbi **Yoḥanan ben Zakkai** was smuggled out of besieged Jerusalem in a coffin and obtained permission from Vespasian to found a school at **Yavneh** (Jamnia) on the coastal plain. There the surviving Pharisaic rabbis rebuilt Judaism without a Temple — around the Torah, the synagogue, the *berakhah* (blessing), and the home. Sacrifice was replaced by prayer and study (“*teshuvah, tefillah, tzedakah*” — repentance, prayer, righteous giving). This reconstructed faith is the root of every branch of Judaism today. The Pharisees won the post-Temple argument because only their party had an answer that could survive without the altar.

THE CHRISTIAN ANSWER — HEBREWS

The Epistle to the **Hebrews**, written in the 60s to Jewish Christians tempted to return to Temple worship, gave the Christian answer *before* the Temple fell. Christ is the final high priest, who has entered the true sanctuary with his own blood, not that of bulls and goats (Heb 9:11–14). The Temple’s rituals were a “shadow” (Heb 10:1) of what has now come in Christ. Hebrews 8:13: “In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.” Three years after Hebrews was written, the Temple did vanish. For Christian readers, its fall was not a catastrophe but a confirmation.

Greek NT (Heb 10:11–12): πᾶς με̅ν̅ ἱερευ̅ς̅ ἔσθηκεν καθ' ἡμέραν λειτουργῶν... οὗτος δε̅ μίαν ὑπε̅ρ̅ ἁμαρτιῶν προσενέγκας θυσίαν εἰς το̅ διηνεκε̅ς̅ ἐκάθισεν ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ θεοῦ.

Hebrews 10:11–12 (ESV): “Every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.”

From AD 70 onward Judaism and Christianity began the long work of defining themselves *against* each other. The *Birkat ha-Minim* (“Blessing Against the Heretics”), likely added to synagogue prayer around AD 80–90, excluded those (widely understood to include Jewish Christians) who confessed Jesus as Messiah. The church, now largely Gentile, began to read the Old Testament through Christ as its lens. A family had become two.

PART 7 — WHY NOLL CALLS THIS A TURNING POINT

Mark Noll opens *Turning Points* with the Fall of Jerusalem because the destruction did five things simultaneously that no later event could undo:

1. It ended the Jewish-Christian church. The single largest body of Christians in the empire had been in Jerusalem, led by James. After 70, that congregation was gone. The centre of gravity moved permanently to the Gentile world — Antioch, Ephesus, Rome. From that day, “Christian” and “Jewish” became different religious identities.

2. It ended any practical argument for Christian participation in Temple sacrifice. The question of whether a believer in Jesus should still bring a lamb at Passover was settled the moment the altar was ash.

3. It validated Jesus’ prophetic authority. For Christians, the precise fulfilment of Luke 21 and Mark 13 was both apologetic evidence (“he said it would happen and it did”) and spiritual confirmation that Jesus was indeed the prophet greater than Moses (Acts 3:22).

4. It accelerated the writing of the Gospels. Mark is usually dated to the mid-to-late 60s, Matthew and Luke to the 70s and 80s. With the Temple gone and the eyewitnesses dying, the church preserved in ink what had previously been preserved in living memory. (See [Lesson 1](#) for this arc in detail.)

5. It reshaped Christian identity. Without a holy city or a holy building, Christians had to locate holiness elsewhere — in Christ, in the gathered church, in the Spirit who indwells believers as “a temple of the living God” (2 Cor 6:16). The ecclesiology of the New Testament after AD 70 — the church as temple, believers as priests, Christ as cornerstone — was a response to a world in which no other temple stood.

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR US

For disciples reading this two thousand years later, four disciplines come out of AD 70:

• **Scripture is reliable about things we can verify.** Jesus’ Olivet prophecy was not a vague prediction. It was a specific one, recorded before the event, preserved by communities that had no reason to fake it, and confirmed in bloody detail by a Jewish general turned Roman historian who had no interest in corroborating Christian claims. When we read difficult passages we cannot yet verify, the track record is not nothing.

• **God’s people have lost buildings before.** The Temple was the most sacred building on earth, and God let it burn. Every brick-and-mortar place we love — our church building, our denomination, our nation’s churchgoing culture — is less permanent than the Second Temple was. Putting our trust in structures is always a category error.

• **Our Jewish roots deserve honor, not forgetting.** The first church was Jewish. The Scriptures we read are overwhelmingly Jewish. Our Lord is Jewish. The parting of the ways in AD 70 is a wound worth grieving, not a victory worth celebrating. Paul’s heart-cry of Romans 9:1–5 for his kinsmen according to the flesh should still be ours.

• **Christ is where God meets us.** “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19) — John adds, “he was speaking about the temple of his body.” The true Temple is not in Jerusalem. It is the crucified and risen Son. Every Sunday we gather, we gather there.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Read Luke 21:20–24 alongside Josephus’ description of the siege. What strikes you about the fit?

2. Before AD 70, could a Christian have offered a sacrifice in the Temple without contradicting the gospel? Acts 21:26 and Hebrews 10:11–12 are in tension here. How would you explain that tension to a friend?

3. The Jerusalem church apparently fled to Pella rather than defend the holy city. What does that choice say about the relationship between discipleship and the preservation of sacred places?

4. Rabbinic Judaism rebuilt faith around Torah, synagogue, prayer, and home. Christianity rebuilt around Christ, the gathered church, and the Spirit. What do the two answers have in common?

5. Where are you tempted to put your trust in a Christian *structure* (building, institution, national culture) that the Fall of Jerusalem should make you hold more loosely?

6. Romans 9–11 is Paul’s long reflection on the relationship between the church and his Jewish brothers and sisters. What does it mean, in light of AD 70, that the apostle still calls them “beloved for the sake of their forefathers” (Rom 11:28)?

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you wept over Jerusalem while you rode into it. You foresaw the stones thrown down and the enemies at the walls, and you loved the city still. Forgive us for the structures we love more than you. Forgive us for the buildings and denominations and nations we have sometimes treated as though they were temples themselves. Teach us to hold the bricks loosely and the Rock tightly. Thank you for being the true Temple, the final high priest, the one sacrifice for all time. Where Jerusalem’s altars fell, your cross still stands. Let us meet you there — and gather us to our Jewish brothers and sisters in your own appointed time. Amen.

FURTHER READING

Primary sources (public domain):

- Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War*, Books 5–7 (c. AD 75) — the eyewitness account of the siege.
- Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.3.3 (on Jesus), 20.9.1 (on the execution of James).
- Tacitus, *Histories* 5 (Roman perspective on the war).
- Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.5–3.7 (the flight to Pella, the aftermath).
- Talmud, *Gittin* 56a (Yohanan ben Zakkai and Vespasian).

- The Gospels, esp. Mark 13, Matthew 24, Luke 19:41–44 and 21:5–24.
- The Epistle to the Hebrews, esp. chs. 8–10.

Modern studies:

- **Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points*** (3rd ed., 2012), ch. 1: “The Church Pushed Out on Its Own: The Fall of Jerusalem (70).”
- Martin Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations* (2007).
- James D. G. Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways Between Christianity and Judaism* (2nd ed., 2006).
- N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (1992), esp. Pt. III.
- Craig A. Evans, *From Jesus to the Church* (2014).

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