

CHAPTER 4

The Catacombs and the Cloisters

Have you ever heard of an UNDERGROUND CEMETERY? This is exactly what a catacomb is. It is an underground burial chamber or cemetery. Catacombs are found in different parts of the world but the most famous are found in Rome and these are the ones we will be studying in this chapter.

Hardly anyone knew about the Roman catacombs for almost a thousand years. Then only a few centuries ago they were rediscovered by some men who were planting a vineyard. What an amazing discovery this was! The catacombs of Rome make up the most interesting cemetery the world has ever known.

These fascinating underground passages were built by the early Christians during the first three centuries of the Christian church. The Romans allowed the Christians to bury their dead underground in these catacombs. After Emperor Constantine, the Christian cemeteries were located above ground. Thus the catacombs were used as a burial ground during the first three centuries (A.D.), prior to Constantine.

The ground upon which the city of Rome is built consists of comparatively soft stone. Burying people within the city limits was not permitted. So in many places just outside the city, long and narrow passages or tunnels were dug out of the soft stone. In the walls of these tunnels holes were dug out and the dead bodies were placed in these holes or compartments. These compartments were cut out of the stone like shelves, one on top of the other. After the body was placed within they were closed with a slab of marble or tile.

An epitaph would be painted or engraved on the tile or marble slab. An epitaph is a brief statement that is written in memory of one who is dead. Have you ever seen an epitaph written on a tombstone in a cemetery? We will mention more about these epitaphs later.

The Christians who lived in or around Rome would bury their dead in the catacombs. The dead included many of the early Christians who died as martyrs. The bodies of these faithful believers were placed in these subterranean (underground) cemeteries.

If we could visit Rome we would be able to have a tour of the catacombs and see these amazing underground passageways with our own eyes. We would see long and narrow passages (the width of the passages is only about two and a half to four feet on the average, hardly wide enough for two persons). The passages are dark and gloomy with only an occasional ray of light from above. They wind and cross each other in every direction so as to form a complicated maze. Many of these underground passages are thirty or more feet below the surface of the ground. If all of these tunnels were put end to end they would be about 500 miles long! And along the walls there are about four to seven million graves! This gives us an idea as to how many Christians were buried in the catacombs!

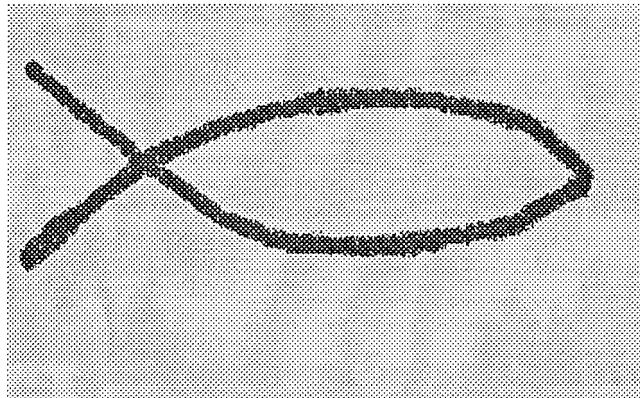
If you were to visit the catacombs today and open up one of the graves (by removing the marble or tile slab) you might find the human skeleton very well preserved (assuming you open a grave

that has not yet been opened). The skeleton will sometimes appear dazzling white as if covered with a glistening glory, but when touched it will fall into dust. How does this remind us of Genesis 3:19; Ecclesiastes 3:20; 12:7?

It is very interesting to study the epitaphs and pictures painted on the walls because from these we can learn about the early Christians and what they believed. There were three symbols or pictures that were commonly found in the catacombs:

1. **A picture of "the good Shepherd" (see John 10)**
2. **A picture of "a VINE" (see John 15)**
3. **A picture of a FISH, which was the early Christian symbol for Christ**

The early Christians would draw a simple FISH:



The fish represented something very meaningful. The sign of the FISH meant this: JESUS CHRIST, GOD (the) SON, (our) SAVIOUR! How did the early Christians get this meaning from a FISH?

The Greek word for FISH is this:

Ἰχθύς

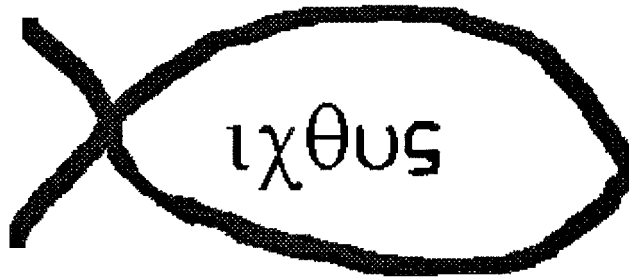
↑
Greek Letters

ICHTHUS

↑
put into English letters

ikh-thoos

↑
pronounced



The Sign of the Fish

The Greek word for fish (ICHTHUS) was actually a GREEK ACROSTIC (with each letter of the word standing for the first letter of another word). Here is how it worked:

	Ι ησους	(Iēsous)	JESUS
	Χ ριστος	(Christos)	CHRIST
	Θ εος	(Theos)	GOD
	Υ ιος	(huios)	SON
	Σ ωτηρ	(sōtēr)	SAVIOUR

Thus the symbol of the fish became the early Christian symbol for Christ: JESUS CHRIST, GOD (the) SON, (our) SAVIOUR! These words are rich in doctrinal content: Jesus Christ is God! He is the blessed Son of God. He is God's only Saviour! Even today the sign of the fish is sometimes seen as a Christian symbol.

The Christian epitaphs found in the catacombs were hopeful and cheerful. They indicated that the early Christians had a great hope of life beyond the grave. Here are some examples of these brief statements (epitaphs) found in the catacombs:

"Weep not, my child; death is not eternal."

"Prima, thou livest in the glory of God, and in the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ."

"Regina, mayest thou live in the Lord Jesus."

"Agape, thou shalt live forever."

What actually takes place when a believer dies (Philippians 1:21-23; Luke 23:43; 2 Corinthians 5:8)?

Is physical death something that the believer should fear and dread? Why or why not?

Is death something that unsaved people should fear or dread? Why or why not? When believers experience the death of loved ones, do they sorrow and grieve for their loved ones in the same way that unsaved people do (compare 1 Thessalonians 4:13)? Why can believers have great hope in the face of death? If you were to die this day or this week, how would your loved ones feel? Would they have the assurance that you were with the Lord in heaven or would they sadly think, "He (or she) may not have been truly saved."

The catacombs served one other purpose for the early Christians of the first three centuries. They not only served as BURIAL PLACES but they were also used as HIDING PLACES. They were not only places for the dead to lie but they were places for the living to hide! The early Christians were often persecuted and chased by the Romans. The catacombs were an excellent place of refuge. The believers could run into these maze-like passages and the Romans would have a very difficult time finding them. The Romans would rarely pursue them in these silent retreats.

Some have thought that the Christians would meet in the catacombs to worship. Certainly the early Christians prayed and praised God wherever they went, but the catacombs were not well suited for places of worship. Even the largest could accommodate, at most, only 20 or perhaps 30 persons within convenient distance. They made good hiding places but they did not make very good church buildings!

Sometimes God's people are pursued by the world and they must flee and hide in all kinds of places. How does Hebrews 11:37-38 remind you of what happened in the catacombs? Sometimes believers must GET AWAY FROM THE WORLD because failure to do so would mean they would be killed. Are there any believers living in the world today who need to hide from their persecutors and go "underground" ("underground" means to meet secretly without the authorities knowing about it)? What warnings and instructions did the Lord Jesus give to His disciples so that they would be ready and able to face the difficulties of persecution from the world (John 15:18-21; 16:1-3,33; 17:14 and Matthew 5:10-12)?

THE CLOISTERS

There were times when the early Christians had to get away from the world and hide out in the catacombs and other places. In later years, however, there were people who tried to get away from the world for other reasons.

In the days of the Roman emperor Constantine, Christianity became an accepted religion and the persecution against Christians, which had been so common before this time, came to an abrupt end. We will study more about Constantine in **Chapter 6** of these notes. Following the days of

Constantine the church became more and more accepted by the world and thus more and more worldly. Those who claimed to be Christians started living more and more like unsaved people. More and more the people of the church came to resemble the people of the world. God's people were more and more being conformed to the world (squeezed into its mold—Romans 12:2) and spotted by the world (James 1:27). Is worldliness a problem that the church faces even today?

There were some people who saw this problem and wanted to do something about it. They knew that God demanded lives that were holy and pure and righteous. They knew that Christians were to be godly and not worldly. They saw the problem and they wanted to solve the problem. Their solution was this: **LET'S GET AWAY FROM THE WORLD! LET'S FLEE FROM THE WORLD! LET'S HIDE FROM THE WORLD!** The world is so wicked that we need to get as far away from it as possible so that we can live holy lives. The farther we get from the world the more our hearts will be cleansed and made pure and holy.

What do you think of this solution? Is it the right solution? Is it possible to try to solve a problem the **wrong way**? When we try to solve a problem the wrong way we can create many other problems!

A CLOISTER is a place where religious people go when they want to flee from this world. It is a place of religious retirement where religious people can retire from the world. It is here that religious people (usually called **MONKS** or **NUNS**) can live a quiet and secluded life by themselves.

A MONASTERY means the same thing as a **CLOISTER**. It is a building where monks (males) or nuns (females) live a very secluded kind of life. The word **MONASTERY** comes from the word **MONAZEIN** which means "to be alone."

Those who entered the monastery were known as **MONKS** (the women were known as **NUNS**). We will learn more about these people later. In 1 Corinthians 5:9-10 the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians and told them about the impossibility of getting away from evil people. Worldly people are all around us--in school, at work, in the neighborhoods, in the shopping centers, etc. They are found wherever people are found. Paul said, if you are going to get away from evil people then "must ye needs go _____ of this _____" (1 Cor. 5:10). To really escape you would need to get into your spaceship and fly to the moon or some nearby planet! Paul was not telling us to do this. He was simply showing us the impossibility of doing this since we are in a world filled with wicked people. "Ye needs go out of this world"--monks are those who have actually tried to do this! They have tried to do the impossible!

The First Famous Monk

There was a man who lived in Egypt toward the end of the 3rd century A.D. by the name of Anthony. This man went to live alone in a cave in the desert and became known as a hermit. A hermit is one who withdraws from the world and lives alone. He lived a very strict life and he somehow believed that the secret of being holy was to go out and live in a hole!

Others followed the example of Anthony. They decided to live a life of seclusion away from the evils of the world. In later times many hermits or monks would live together in large houses called monasteries in which each monk had his own cell or little room.

Extreme Examples

Monks and hermits lived unusual lives. None is so unusual as the famous SIMON STYLITES who died in 1159 A.D. at the age of 69. Simon lived in Syria. For the last thirty years of his life, until the day of his death, he lived on top of a pillar (called a **stylus**, hence his name became Simon **Stylites**). Simon built several pillars, each one higher than the one before. His last pillar was sixty feet high and the top platform was only four feet square (not a very large area upon which to live). He sat there and often stood there for 30 years. There he was every day—day and night, summer and winter, frost and heat, rain and sunshine. From 60 feet up he would preach to the people on the earth below. He lived this kind of life until the day of his death.

Modern flagpole sitters have not done nearly as well. The record squat is 399 days (a little more than one year) by Frank Perkins from June 1, 1975 to July 11, 1976, in an 8 X 8 foot box atop a 50-foot telegraph pole in San Jose, California (see **The Guineas Book of Records**). Simon was higher up and lived on a platform half the size!

Remember, Simon did not perform this stunt so that he could win the world record for flagpole sitting. He did it for religious reasons. Do you think Simon was closer to God than those who lived on the ground beneath him? Do you think Simon was better able to obey Paul's commands found in Colossians 3:1-2 since he was nearer to heaven? Was he successful in getting away from the world and living a holy life?

Other men followed the example of Simon and they too became pillar sitters. One man, Daniel, is said to have spent 33 years or more on top of a pillar. Even to this day he is listed in the **Guinness Book of World Records**! Other monks did other strange things. A group of religious hermits called the Boscis lived in the field and grazed grass as if they were cattle. Another hermit wandered naked in the vicinity of Mt. Sinai for 50 years. Perhaps he thought he could be holy by being near the place where Moses met with and talked with God and received the Ten Commandments. Another hermit names Ammoun had a particular reputation because he had never undressed or bathed after he became a hermit. Maybe he had the strange idea that the dirtier he got on the outside the cleaner he would get on the inside!

The Normal Life of Monks

We have seen some extreme examples; now let's consider some normal examples. The monks and nuns practiced a very strict way of life which is called **asceticism** (the practice of strict self-denial). They abstained from the possession of earthly goods. They did not eat or drink more than was absolutely necessary. Some monks ate nothing but bread and drank only water. Frequently monks fasted which means that for a period of time they did not eat at all. All monks and nuns abstained from marriage. They tried to devote much of their time to praying and reading religious books and to meditating upon what they had read.

Some monks would even punish themselves by beating themselves with whips or scourges. Perhaps some of them thought this way:

"We need to be persecuted (see 2 Timothy 3:12), and since there is no one around here to persecute us we will persecute ourselves! We will create our own persecution and God will be so pleased when He sees how we are suffering for His Name." What do you think is wrong with this kind of thinking?

Did Any Good Come out of the Monasteries?

The monastic movement was totally wrong. God never intended for people to get away from the world and live secluded and isolated lives. Where does God want His believers to LIVE and to SHINE (Philippians 2:15)? _____

Even though something is wrong, God can use it for good. God is able to bring good out of evil (compare Genesis 50:20). Even though the monastic movement was wrong, God wonderfully used it. The monks devoted themselves to the copying of the holy Scriptures. This was one of their jobs. The monasteries were the publishing houses of the middle ages. This was a big job, especially in the days before the printing press when all copying had to be done by hand. The monks did this work and they did it well. Today we have the Bible in our hands and the Scriptures have been faithfully preserved through the centuries. The work of the monks in copying the Scriptures was invaluable, and we can thank God for what these men were able to do.

It is interesting that the very Scriptures copied by the monks were used later by the reformers (Martin Luther, John Calvin and others) to condemn the monks and to condemn their unscriptural practices! The very Book they were copying condemned the kind of secluded, isolated life they were living!

What Was Wrong With the Monasteries?

Here were some of the problems:

1. The men who claimed to know the Lord were taken out of society where they needed to be. How can someone help a lost and dying world if he run away from the world? How can you be a good influence upon others if you are never around others? How can you preach the gospel to sinners if you are never around sinners? How can you "go into all the world" (Mark 16:15) if you have tried to get out of the world?
2. These religious men and women held to a great ERROR. They wrongly thought that the sinful heart of man is cleansed and made holy by fleeing from this world and by isolating oneself from society. Did the Lord Jesus pray that believers should be taken OUT OF THE WORLD (John 17:15)? Did the Lord Jesus recognize that believers need to be IN THE WORLD (John 17:11,18)?
3. These men and women tried to get away from the world for the wrong reasons. They thought that if they isolated themselves from the world they would become more holy. The early Christians living near Rome tried to get away from the world and into the catacombs because they were being chased there by the world. But no one was chasing the monks. No one was persecuting them. They chose to go away to their monasteries and to their tiny cells which they thought would bring them closer to God. They were not driven there. They drove themselves there.

4. Monastic life fostered spiritual **pride**. It was easy for them to think: "Look how holy I am. Look how good I am. I'm living such a strict and difficult life. Very few people live this kind of life." Like Simon Stylites, they probably thought they were much higher and much closer to God than the average "worldly" Christian.
5. They commonly held to the great doctrinal error of SALVATION THROUGH MERIT. "I am living this strict life and doing all these difficult things in order to please God and earn His favor and win my way to heaven. When God sees how many things I have given up for Him and how I have lived, He will certainly let me into heaven." Can you show from the Bible what is wrong with this kind of thinking? Do people think like this even today?
6. The monasteries had a terrible effect on many men. Living in such a secluded way is not a very healthy thing. From the very beginning the Lord had said, "It is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). As a result of monastic life many monks and nuns had moral problems and mental problems. In the ninth century many monasteries became the breeding places of wickedness and corruption. The monks thought that they could get away from the corruption of the world but, they failed to realize that the corruption of the world was in their own hearts and this corruption was brought right into the monasteries. They thought they had escaped from the world but they had really brought the world with them!

Questions to Ponder

1. How can a person really live a holy life?
2. Can a person be with worldly people and not become worldly? How?
3. How can a person stay pure and holy in a very impure and unholy world?
4. How can a person be IN THE WORLD but not OF THE WORLD (John 15:19; John 17:11,14,16)?
5. What is the difference between SEPARATION and ISOLATION? Was the Lord Jesus separated from sinners? Was He isolated from sinners (see Hebrews 7:26)? Does God want us to be separated from the world? Does He want us to be isolated from the world? How can we be in the world and yet not be polluted by the world?
6. What is the correct way for a believer to purify himself? Should he flee from the world to do this? What should he do?
7. Are you overcoming the world or is the world overcoming you?
8. Do we need to become like the world in order to win the world to Christ? Do we need to become "worldly" so that the world will accept us and listen to our message?
9. What responsibilities do we have towards unsaved people all around us?

The believer in Christ has certain responsibilities towards *all men* as he represents Christ *in the world*:

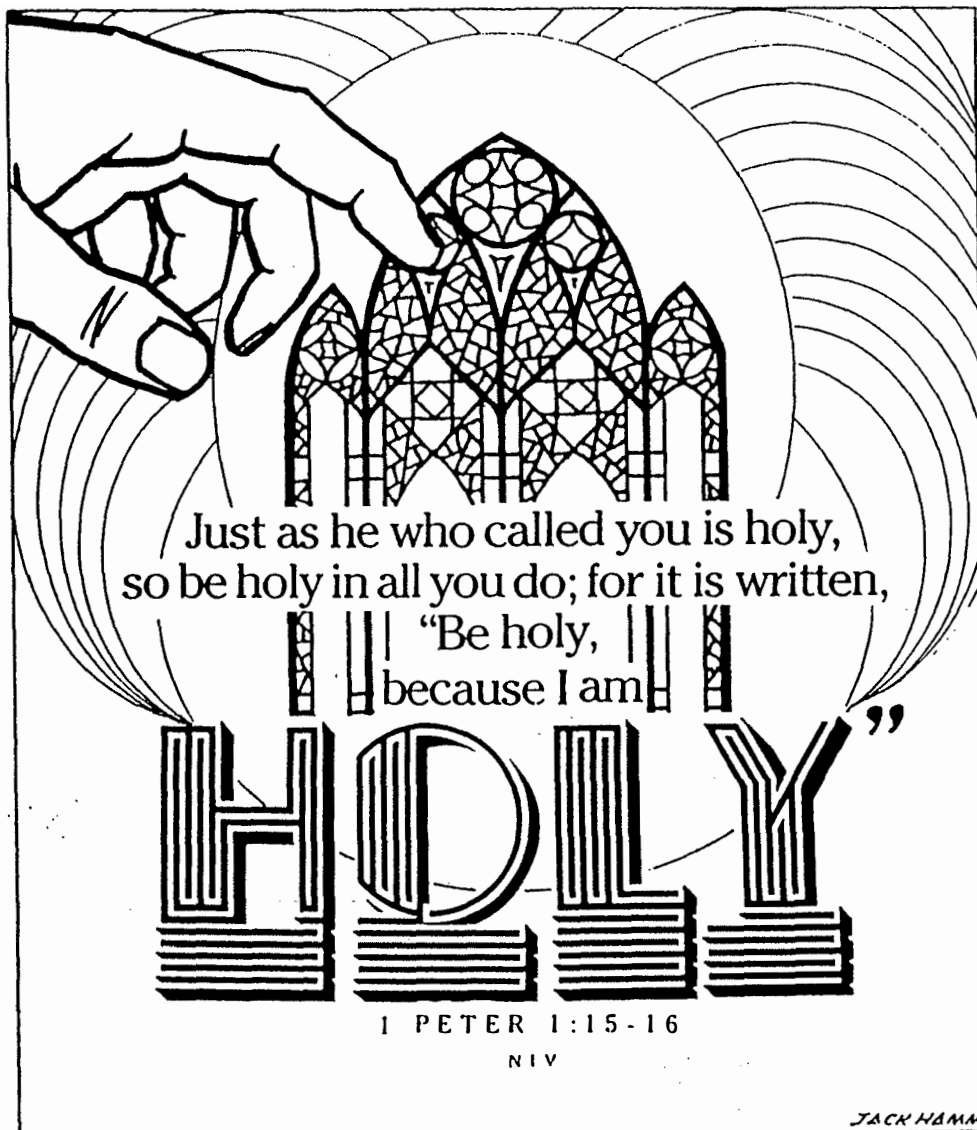
1. He is to be a _____ before all men (Acts 1:8).
2. He is to be an _____ for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20).
3. He is to _____ the _____ to all men (Mark 16:15).
4. He is to _____ (make disciples of) all nations (Matthew 28:19).
5. He is to shine as a _____ before all men (Philippians 2:15; compare Matthew 5:16).
6. He is to do _____ to all men (Galatians 6:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:15).
7. He is to walk in _____ towards all men (Colossians 4:5; compare 1 Corinthians 9:19-23; 10:32).
8. He is to walk _____ before all men (1 Thess. 4:12; compare Romans 12:17).
9. He is to _____ for all men (1 Timothy 2:1).
10. He is to live _____ with all men (Romans 12:18; Hebrews 12:14).
11. He is to _____ all men ((1 Peter 2:17--"to honor" means to give the proper respect. Compare Titus 3:2 where we are told not to speak evil of any man which means we are not to injure the reputation of any man, showing disrespect).
12. He is to have a good _____ (witness, testimony) before all men (1 Timothy 3:7; 3 John 12).

Simeon Stylites, Saint

Simeon Stylites, Saint (390?-459), Syrian ascetic and pillar saint, born in Sisan (possibly the modern Samandađi, Turkey). He withdrew from a monastery near Antioch and in 423 took up residence on a very small platform atop a stone pillar, which fact accounts for his name, Stylites (Greek, "of a pillar"). After leaving this structure, which was about 1.8 m (about 6 ft) high, he lived on a succession of pillars, each higher than its predecessor. He made his final home atop an 18.3-m (60-ft) pillar, from which he did not descend during the last 30 years of his life. Pilgrims came from many countries to hear him preach. He converted many nonbelievers to Christianity and had numerous disciples called Stylites. Pillar saints occasionally have been found in the East, even in recent centuries. Simeon's traditional feast day is January 5.

From Encarta Encyclopedia

Holiness does not come from asceticism.
 Holiness does not come from self effort and self denial.
 Holiness comes from a real and right relationship with God who is HOLY:



IMPOSSIBLE? NOT WITH GOD!