THE QUESTION

What is the holy kiss in the Bible, and how did early Christians practice it?

Asked by a THF member on May 8, 2026 · published November 9, 2026, updated November 11, 2026 · 10 numbered quotations · the 20 early Christian passages and 57 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/what-is-the-holy-kiss-in-the-bible-and-how-did-early-christians-practice-it

The short answer *From the text: says what the passages say*

The holy kiss was a greeting of peace that Christians gave one another, following the apostles' command. Early writers place it after the shared prayers in worship and call it the seal of prayer. It was holy only when given sincerely and purely, with real love, not with deceit like Judas, for show, or with lust.

LIBRARY ONLY	This study was written only from The Historic Faith's library of early-Christian writings and the Bible, never from the web. Every passage we kept from what the library gave is listed at the back, with a link to read it.
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POINT 1 OF 6

A greeting Christians shared, as the apostles taught

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Ignatius ends a letter by passing on greetings and repeating the apostles' words, "Greet one another with a holy kiss," then greets the men and women who are in Christ. Justin, describing Christian worship, says that when the prayers are finished, believers greet one another with a kiss, and then the bread and cup are brought to the leader.

1 “Agathopus, the deacon from Syria, who follows Christ with me, greets you. “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” I greet you all, both men and women, who are in Christ.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Ignatius of Antioch,** *Epistles of Ignatius* (c. 98–117 AD) **Source 2, page 6** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

2 “After finishing the prayers, we greet one another with a kiss. Then, bread and a cup of wine mixed with water are brought to the leader of the brethren.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Justin Martyr,** *First Apology* (c. 130–165 AD) **Source 5, page 6** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 6

Tertullian called it the seal of prayer

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Tertullian calls the kiss of peace the seal of prayer, given after praying together with fellow believers. He objects to people who hold it back while fasting, and asks how prayer can be complete, or worship pleasing, when people leave without peace.

3 “Another custom has now become common. Those who are fasting withhold the kiss of peace, which is the seal of prayer, after prayer made with brothers.”

later in the same passage

“What prayer is complete if it is separated from the holy kiss? Whom does peace hinder when he is rendering service to his Lord? What kind of sacrifice is that from which men depart without peace?”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *On Prayer* 18 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 11, page 6** Read it in the library ›

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POINT 3 OF 6

Church prayers asked for a pure, sincere kiss

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

In old liturgies the people are called to greet one another with a holy kiss and then bow to the Lord. One prayer asks God for His peace, love and Spirit so that believers may greet each other with a pure heart, without hypocrisy or hidden hostility, as one body in one faith.

4 “Let us greet one another with a holy kiss. Let us bow our heads to the Lord.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Early Liturgies,** *Divine Liturgy of St. James* 1 (c. 200–400 AD) **Source 15, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

5 “Give us Your peace, Your help, and Your love, and send us the gift of Your Holy Spirit, so that with a pure heart and a good conscience we may greet one another with a holy kiss, without hypocrisy and with no hostile purpose, but sincerely and purely in one spirit, in the bond of peace and love, one body and one spirit, in one faith, just as we have been called in one hope of our calling, so that we may all come together in the divine and boundless love, in Christ Jesus our Lord, with whom You are blessed.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Early Liturgies,** *Divine Liturgy of St. Mark* 1 (c. 200–400 AD) **Source 14, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 4 OF 6

Holy means sincere, unlike the kiss of Judas

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Clement of Alexandria points to Judas, who betrayed the Lord with a hypocrite's treacherous kiss. John Chrysostom, a later fourth-century preacher, says a holy kiss is not hollow or treacherous like that one. It is meant to kindle love, so that believers love one another like family, by God's grace rather than by nature.

6 “You see the treacherous man, and this same Judas betrayed the Master with a kiss. For he was a hypocrite, giving a treacherous kiss, in imitation of another hypocrite from long ago.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Alexandria,** *Instructor* 2.8 (c. 190–215 AD) **Source 8, page 6** Read it in the library ›
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7 “What is holy? It is not hollow or treacherous, like the kiss Judas gave to Christ. For the kiss is given for this reason: that it may be fuel for love, that it may kindle affection, that we may love one another as brothers love brothers, as children love parents, as parents love children. Yes, rather, even far more. For those kinds of affection are implanted by nature, but these are by spiritual grace.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **John Chrysostom,** *Homilies on Second Corinthians* 30 (c. 386–407 AD) **Source 20, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 5 OF 6

Not for show and not for lust

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Clement of Alexandria says love is shown by kind feeling, not by a kiss. He criticizes people who make the churches ring with kissing but have no love, since such shameless kissing breeds suspicion, and he holds to the apostle's word holy. He also warns of an unholy kiss that pretends to be holy and can carry sexual sin.

8 “And if we are called to the kingdom of God, let us live in a way that is worthy of the kingdom, loving God and our neighbor. But love is not proven by a kiss, but by kind feeling. Yet there are some who do nothing but make the churches ring with kissing, while not having love itself within them. For this very thing, the shameless use of a kiss, which ought to be sacred and hidden, causes shameful suspicions and evil reports. The apostle calls the kiss holy.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Alexandria,** *Instructor* 3.11 (c. 190–215 AD) **Source 10, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

9 “But there is another unholy kiss, full of poison, pretending to be holy. Do you not know that spiders, simply by touching the mouth, cause people pain? And often kisses also put in the poison of sexual sin.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Alexandria,** *Instructor* 3.11 (c. 190–215 AD) **Source 7, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

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POINT 6 OF 6

It was part of everyday Christian fellowship

Our note · compiled by machine learning · Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words

Tertullian lists things an unbelieving husband might keep a Christian wife from doing: kissing a martyr's chains in prison, meeting a fellow believer to exchange the kiss, washing the feet of the saints, and sharing her food. The kiss belonged with these ordinary acts of love among believers, not only to worship.

10

> “Who will allow her to creep into prison to kiss a martyr's bonds? No, truly, to meet any one of the brothers to exchange the kiss? To offer water for the saints' feet? To snatch something for them from her food, from her cup?”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *To His Wife* 2.4 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 13, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**

THF's updated English

THE LIMITS

What these passages don’t tell us

- These passages do not describe the exact form of the kiss, such as cheek or lips, or how many times it was given.
- They show how some churches used it, but do not settle whether every church practiced it the same way.
- A word-for-word match shows that a quotation really is in our text. It does not show that our reading of it is right, or who wrote each work.

WHERE EVERY QUOTE CAME FROM

The Sources

The 20 early Christian passages and 57 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–20, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 21–62, in Bible order), then 15 more verses THF links to these passages, by reference. **Quote 1, page 2** beside a source shows where the study quotes it. Passages are in THF’s updated English unless marked “1885 English” (the Roberts–Donaldson translation, public domain). “… [continues online]” marks a passage the library gave only in part. **On paper?** At **thehistoricfaith.com**, Bible verses are in the **Audio Bible** and early Christian writings in the **Library** (search for the title).

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EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS *20 passages from 8 writers*

Ignatius of Antioch, *c. 98–117 AD · sources 1–4*

1 *Epistles of Ignatius* (1885 English; on point 1) “salute the holy bishop Polycarp; I salute the holy bishop Vitalius, and the sacred presbytery, and my fellow-servants the deacons… [continues online] **read ›**

2 *Epistles of Ignatius* **Quote 1, page 2** “where I am also writing to you, greet you. Philo, your deacon, to whom I also give thanks as one who has zealously served me in all things, greets you… [continues online] **read ›**

3 *Epistles of Ignatius* (on point 1) “to him in the Lord. The whole Church of the Smyrnæans remembers you in their prayers to the Lord. Onesimus, the pastor of the Ephesians, sends his greetings. Damas, the… [continues online] **read ›**

4 *Epistles of Ignatius* (on point 1) the laborers, the exorcists, the confessors. I greet the keepers of the holy gates, the deaconesses in Christ. I greet the virgins betrothed to Christ, of whom may I have… [continues online] **read ›**

Justin Martyr, *c. 130–165 AD · source 5*

5 *First Apology* **Quote 2, page 2** “that we may offer heartfelt prayers together for ourselves, for the baptized person, and for everyone else everywhere. We pray that we may be deemed worthy, having learned the truth… [continues online] **read ›**

Athenagoras, *c. 170–190 AD · source 6*

6 *A Plea for the Christians* 32 (on point 5) “Therefore the kiss, or rather the salutation, should be given with the… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Alexandria, *c. 190–215 AD · sources 7–10*

7 *Instructor* 3.11 **Quote 9, page 4** “there is another unholy kiss, full of poison, pretending to be holy. Do you not know that spiders, simply by touching the mouth, cause people pain? And often kisses also… [continues online] **read ›**

8 *Instructor* 2.8 **Quote 6, page 3** the Master with a kiss. For he was a hypocrite, giving a treacherous kiss, in imitation of another hypocrite from long ago. And He rebukes that people about whom it… [continues online] **read ›**

9 *Instructor* 3.12 (on point 5) would advise married people never to kiss their wives in front of their household servants. Aristotle does not allow people even to laugh with their slaves. So a wife must… [continues online] **read ›**

10 *Instructor* 3.11 **Quote 8, page 4** “this very thing, the shameless use of a kiss, which ought to… [continues online] **read ›**

Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · sources 11–13*

11 *On Prayer* 18 **Quote 3, page 2** “custom has now become common. Those who are fasting withhold the kiss of peace, which is the seal of prayer, after prayer made with brothers. But when should peace be… [continues online] **read ›**

12 *On the Veiling of Virgins* 11 had seen from afar was the man, she did not wait for the grasp of the hand, or the meeting of the kiss, or the interchange of salutation. Instead, confessing… [continues online] **read ›**

13 *To His Wife* 2.4 (1885 English) **Quote 10, page 5** “truly, to meet any one of the brethren to exchange the kiss… [continues online] **read ›**

Early Liturgies, *c. 200–400 AD · sources 14–16*

14 *Divine Liturgy of St. Mark* 1 **Quote 5, page 3** “us the gift of Your Holy Spirit, so that with a pure heart and a good conscience we may greet one another with a holy kiss, without hypocrisy and with… [continues online] **read ›**

15 *Divine Liturgy of St. James* 1 **Quote 4, page 3** “us greet one another with a holy kiss. Let us bow our heads to the Lord… [continues online] **read ›**

16 *Divine Liturgy of St. Mark* 1 (on point 3) The priest says the greeting prayer. **read ›**

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Apostolic Constitutions, *c. 250–380 AD · sources 17–19*

17 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 3) “no one come in hypocrisy." Then let the men give the men, and the women give the women, the Lord's kiss… [continues online] **read ›**

18 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 3) his throne, in a place set apart for him among the rest of the bishops, they all giving him the kiss in the Lord. And after the reading of the… [continues online] **read ›**

19 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 3) “And let the people answer, "And with your spirit." And let the deacon say to all, "Greet one another with the holy kiss." And let the clergy greet the bishop… [continues online] **read ›**

John Chrysostom, *c. 386–407 AD · source 20*

20 *Homilies on Second Corinthians* 30 **Quote 7, page 4** “What is holy? It is not hollow or treacherous, like the kiss Judas gave to Christ. For the kiss is given for this reason: that it may be fuel for love, that it may kindle affection, that we may love one another as brothers love brothers, as children love parents, as parents love children. Yes, rather, even far more. For those kinds of affection are implanted by nature, but these are by spiritual grace.” **read ›**

THE BIBLE *42 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

21 **Genesis 27:26** Then Isaac his father said to him, “Come near and kiss me, child.” **read ›**

22 **Genesis 27:27** He came near and kissed him, and he smelled the smell of his garments. He blessed him and said, “Behold, the smell of my son is like the smell of a full field which the Lord has blessed. **read ›**

23 **Genesis 29:11** Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and he cried aloud and wept. **read ›**

24 **Genesis 33:4** Esau ran to meet him, and embracing him, he fell on his neck and kissed him; and they both wept. **read ›**

25 **Genesis 45:15** He kissed all his brothers and wept over them; and after these things his brothers talked with him. **read ›**

26 **Genesis 48:10** Now Israel’s eyes had grown dim from old age, and he could not see. And he brought them near to him, and he kissed them and embraced them. **read ›**

27 **Genesis 50:1** Then Joseph fell on his father’s face and wept over him and kissed him. **read ›**

28 **Exodus 4:27** And the Lord said to Aaron, “Go into the wilderness to meet Moses.” So he went and met him at the mountain of God, and they kissed each other. **read ›**

29 **Exodus 18:7** So Moses went out to meet his father-in-law, bowed down before him, and kissed him; and they greeted one another, and he brought them into the tent. **read ›**

30 **Leviticus 6:20** “This is the gift of Aaron and his sons, which they shall offer to the Lord on the day when you anoint him: the tenth part of an ephah of fine flour for a sacrifice continually, half of it in the morning and half of it in the evening. (Septuagint Leviticus 6:13 (Leviticus 6:20 in most Bibles)) **read ›**

31 **Leviticus 21:22** He may eat the gifts of God, the most holy things, and of the holy things; **read ›**

32 **Ruth 1:9** May the Lord grant you that each of you find rest in the house of her husband.” Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voice and wept. **read ›**

33 **1 Samuel 20:41** When the boy had gone in, David rose up from the ergab and fell on his face, and bowed down to him three times; and they kissed one another and wept with one another, at great length. **read ›**

34 **1 Samuel 25:27** And now accept this blessing which your slave has brought to my lord, and give it to the young men who attend my lord. **read ›**

35 **2 Samuel 15:5** And when a man came near to bow down to him, he would stretch out his hand and take hold of him and kiss him. **read ›**

36 **2 Samuel 20:9** Joab said to Amasa, “Are you well, my brother?” And Joab’s right hand took hold of Amasa’s beard to kiss him. **read ›**

37 **Psalms 5:9** For there is no truth in their mouth; their heart is vain; their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have dealt deceitfully. (Septuagint Psalm 5:10 (Psalm 5:9 in most Bibles)) **read ›**

38 **Psalms 7:6** Arise, O Lord, in your anger; be exalted in the borders of my enemies; awake, O Lord my God, according to the statute that you commanded, (Septuagint Psalm 7:7 (Psalm 7:6 in most Bibles)) **read ›**

39 **Proverbs 10:18** Righteous lips cover hostility, but those who utter abuse are most foolish. **read ›**

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40 **Proverbs 12:10** The righteous has compassion on the lives of his cattle, but the inward parts of the ungodly are unmerciful. **read ›**

41 **Proverbs 12:17** The righteous declares a faithfulness that is shown openly, but the witness of the unrighteous is deceitful. **read ›**

42 **Proverbs 24:26** and they will kiss lips that answer good words. **read ›**

43 **Ecclesiastes 1:1** The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king of Israel in Jerusalem. **read ›**

44 **Song of Solomon 7:13** The mandrakes have given a fragrance, and at our doors are all choice fruits, new and old; my kinsman, I have kept them for you. (Septuagint Song of Solomon 7:14 (Song of Solomon 7:13 in most Bibles)) **read ›**

45 **Isaiah 13:8** The elders will be troubled, and pains will seize them like a woman in labor; and they will lament one to another and be astonished, and they will change their faces like a flame. **read ›**

46 **Jeremiah 17:26** And they will come from the cities of Judah and from around Jerusalem, and from the land of Benjamin, and from the land of the plain, and from the hill country, and from the south, bringing whole burnt offerings and sacrifices and incense and grain offerings and frankincense, bringing praise to the house of the Lord. **read ›**

47 **Lamentations 1:11** Kaph. All her people groan, seeking bread; they have given her desirable things for food to bring back the soul. See, O Lord, and look, for she has become dishonored. **read ›**

48 **Joel 1:2** Hear these things, you elders, and give ear, all you who dwell in the land. Has such a thing happened in our days, or in the days of your fathers? **read ›**

49 **Habakkuk 2:16** You also, drink your fill of dishonor instead of glory; be shaken, O heart, and quake; the cup of the right hand of the Lord has come round upon you, and dishonor has gathered upon your glory. **read ›**

50 **Matthew 6:16** Moreover when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with sad faces. For they disfigure their faces that they may be seen by men to be fasting. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. **read ›**

51 **Matthew 26:49** Immediately he came to Jesus, and said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” and kissed him. **read ›**

52 **Mark 2:12** He rose immediately, took up the mat, and went out in front of them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!” **read ›**

53 **Mark 14:45** When he had come, immediately he came to him and said, “Rabbi! Rabbi!” and kissed him. **read ›**

54 **Romans 16:16** Greet one another with a holy kiss. The churches of Christ greet you. **read ›**

55 **1 Corinthians 16:14** Let all that you do be done in love. **read ›**

56 **1 Corinthians 16:20** All the brothers greet you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. **read ›**

57 **2 Corinthians 13:12** Greet one another with a holy kiss. **read ›**

58 **2 Corinthians 13:13** All the saints greet you. **read ›**

59 **1 Thessalonians 5:26** Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. **read ›**

60 **Hebrews 13:24** Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy greet you. **read ›**

61 **1 Peter 5:14** Greet one another with a kiss of love. Peace be to all of you who are in Christ Jesus. Amen. **read ›**

62 **1 John 5:3** For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments; and his commandments are not burdensome. **read ›**

ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *15 verses, by reference*

Partly machine-linked: related to the passages, not always quoted in them. Each reference links to the verse in our audio Bible.

Matthew 5:13 · 5:28 · 22:39 · 26:23

Mark 7:6

John 5:3 · 10:29 · 17:17

Acts 20:28

2 Corinthians 1:3

1 Timothy 5:10

Titus 2:14

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1 Peter 1:19 · 2:9

2 Peter 3:9

Searched: Ante-Nicene Fathers volumes 1–9 and the Bible, including the Septuagint.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

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How to cite this study. The Historic Faith, “What is the holy kiss in the Bible, and how did early Christians practice it?” Early Church Questions, published November 9, 2026, https://thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/what-is-the-holy-kiss-in-the-bible-and-how-did-early-christians-practice-it. To cite one quotation, add its number and source, for example “quote 1, source 2.”

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THE END OF THIS STUDY