

## Romans: Verse-by-Verse

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Romans 1:7

### Rome in Paul's Era

*“To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

After describing his credentials Paul continues his initial greeting to the believers at Rome. There is something poignant about his opening words here: “To all in Rome who are loved by God ...”

I want you to notice that he did not just write, “Paul, to the Romans”, and then move on to his point. Instead, he writes, “To all in Rome”.

Paul is emphasizing the geographical location rather than just the recipients. Although a Jew from Cilicia – part of ancient Turkey, like all other Roman citizens – Paul understood importance of the center of the Roman Empire.

It was, after all, the capital of much of the known world. Few armies had conquered as much territory as the Romans – at least not since the days of Alexander the Great.

There are actually two histories of Rome: the legend and the historical reality.

According to legend, Rome was founded in 753 BCE by Romulus and Remus, the twin sons of Mars, the god of war, and Rhea Silvia, human daughter of King Numitor.

The king was overthrown by his brother Amulius, who feared that the

twins would pose a threat to him one day, so he had them placed in a feeding trough and thrown into the Tiber river to drift away and die.

The infants were found by a wolf, which looked after them (on behalf of Mars). They grew up to be strong men who restored their family to the throne and then began to build a new city.

In a moment of anger, Romulus killed his brother. In 753 BCE, he named the city Rome and went on to become a great warrior-king.

**That's the legend;** now for the historical evidence.

Archeologists suggest that bands of Indo-European (Aryan) migrants crossed the Alps and settled throughout the Italian peninsula beginning around 2000 BCE. They blended with the inhabitants of the region, adopted agriculture, and established tribal federations.

Eventually these migrants included the Etruscans, who dominated much of Italy between the eighth and fifth centuries B.C.

The accomplishments of the Etruscans were many:

- They built thriving cities and established political and economic alliances throughout the region.
- They manufactured high-quality bronze and iron goods and worked gold and silver into jewelry.
- They constructed a fleet of merchant ships and traded actively in the Mediterranean.

It was the Etruscans who built Rome into an impressive city with paved streets, public buildings, defensive walls, and large temples.

Knowing all of this history, Paul greets his Jewish and Gentile brothers in Christ who live in the empire's capital. He writes, "To all in Rome . . .", but what exactly was Rome like in Paul's era.

Let me take some time this morning to give you some historical insight into the city of Rome that Paul would have seen during the spring or early summer of 62 A.D. It will be helpful to have an overview of the Rome he intended to visit on his way to Spain.

If you have read Luke's account of Paul's journeys you know he did not go to Rome under the conditions he had first envisioned. Instead of going as a free apostle, he arrived in Rome as a prisoner.

After a harrowing sea voyage, Paul's ship docked in Puteoli - a harbor city located on the north side of the Gulf of Naples. A centurion from the imperial guard took responsibility for Prisoner Paul and proceeded to Rome.

So what Rome did Paul see when he arrived at Caesar's palace and was taken to the Praetorium?

- **Architecture and Development**

It was a Rome that had been shaped at the beginning of that century under the rule of Julius Caesar but now endured the unpredictability of Nero.

It's been said that Caesar founded the empire but Augustus built the city of Rome. As one historian put it, "Augustus found Rome a city of brick and left it a city of marble". Through Augustus and his successors the republic's capital was entirely rebuilt.

Over time the Roman Forum underwent a marvelous transformation. It started as a market place surrounded by shops, a few ancient temples, and some public buildings. It evolved into an imperial city replete with marble clad buildings.

Still, we should not imagine that the Rome of 62 A.D. was the magnificent city we know of. In Paul's day, Rome was only in the early stages under its maniacal emperor known as Nero.

In Paul's day the great Colosseum did not exist. Paul would have never seen what was later deemed one of the chief wonders of Rome.

**To give you an idea of what ancient monuments were yet to be built, here's a Brief Timeline of ancient Roman Architecture:**

29 B.C. – Temple to the Divine Julius

64 A.D. -- Domus Aurea – Palace of Nero

70 A.D. – Roman Colosseum

81 A.D. – Arch of Titus

92 A.D. – Stadium of Domitian

100 A.D. – Markets of Trajan

118 A.D. – Pantheon

125 A.D. – Hadrian's Summertime Theater

315 A.D. – Arch of Constantine

Just the same, the Rome of Paul's day was the foremost city of the world in wealth and outward beauty. It had its rivals, including Alexandria and Athens. Alexandria was Rome's equal as far as commerce was concerned. Athens was no doubt even greater in its art and magnificent geography.

In fact, for more than two centuries Rome had collected for herself great treasures from the Greek world, including its paintings and sculpture. In addition the emperors had obtained a great number of Greek architects and artists.

- **Population Estimates**

Another question we must ask is, "What was the population of Rome when Paul arrived in early 62 A.D.? Unfortunately, the answer is not easy to arrive at.

It is extremely difficult to accurately estimate the population first-century Rome. Depending upon what scholars suggest, the number could be anywhere from half a million persons to four million.

The ancient city's boundaries suggest it could have accommodated the highest estimates. We also know that the population was packed into dense streets of tenement houses. Historians tell us that the streets of central Rome were so narrow, carriages and wagons were not permitted within its walls.

One account of Rome's housing suggests that at one point the city had 46,600 tenements or "blocks". 1800 isolated residences are also listed, but we do not know how many people lived in these buildings.

Rome's suburban land tracts were also quite full. This does not even take into account the space occupied by temples, basilicas, theaters, circuses and baths. We can add to this public parks, gardens, villas of the nobility, and open squares for business or entertainment.

- **Entertainment & Sports Facilities**

Speaking of entertainment, while the famed Coliseum had yet to be built, there was the "Circus Maximus" of Nero's time. "Circus Maximus" is Latin for greatest or largest circus.

In ancient Rome it was a chariot racing stadium and mass entertainment venue. Scholars suggest it was built sometime between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.

Located in the valley between the Aventine and Palatine Hills, it was the

first and largest stadium in ancient Rome and its later Empire.

It measured some 2,000 feet in length and was 387 feet wide. Depending upon what historical sources you read, it is said to have seated between 150,000 to 250,000 spectators.

- **Rome's Society**

That gives us a small idea of the housing situation and the development of the city of Rome during Paul's day. But what do we know about the make-up of society in Rome's capital?

At the bottom of the social ladder – as in any era – were a large number of slaves. Historians estimate the number of slaves in Rome were equal to all the other classes combined. Merivale is very conservative, preferring seven hundred thousand. Gibbon's estimates the total population was twelve hundred thousand. Bunsen and others have suggested two million.

A safe estimate would be around one million during Nero's time, though a century later the number may have reached one and a half or two million.

This reality has a direct bearing on the apostle Paul's view of slavery and the place of Christian slaves in the empire. It also carries great weight in Paul's theology regarding the conduct of Christian slave's toward their masters.

In a very real way it speaks to the question of why Paul did not have more negative stance about the institution of slavery.

- **Population Diversity – The Loss of Power Among Native Italians**

The population of Rome in the first century A.D. had become thoroughly diverse because of the gradual absorption of ethnicities

from every part of the empire.

The native Italians were now insignificant in numbers, and were no longer the controlling force in government or society. The court circle included many old families, but the power behind the throne was usually some favorite of foreign birth or descent. In essence, the growth of diversity had destroyed the original Italian powerbase.

The top offices of state were often held by non-Italians, and the civil service was filled with freedmen, or the sons of freedmen, who had come to Rome as slaves.

The great names in literature in this century were of provincial origin. Wealth, which was formerly monopolized by the nobility, was now shared by new-comers of every nationality.

Trade was also chiefly held in the hands of non-citizens; Rome swarmed with traveling merchants from every area of the empire. Eventually, the poorer class of citizens thought of manual labor as beneath them. They became content to live in poverty and subsist on the generosity of the government and the gratuities received from their rich patrons.

Given these realities, we should ask how the political life of Rome's capital was shaped.

- **Political Life**

The life of Rome under the early emperors was diverse – especially with the ongoing wars. But once the Pax Romana was fully realized, politics and war were no longer the primary focal points.

Instead, we find the cultivation of literature, new commercial activity, and an enormous development of all forms of public amusement.

In politics, the popular assemblies no longer convened to elect leaders or to vote on laws. The senate appeared to share legislative and administrative power, but in reality the emperor held most power – providing he had the support of the army and the people's favor.

Public officials morphed from leaders concerned about the welfare of their constituents to using them for personal political and financial gain.

Any criticism of the emperor or his agents was treated as an act of treason. As such, informers made themselves rich or settled scores with their opponents by accusing both the innocent and the guilty. All this created an atmosphere of distrust towards government. Ultimately, it squashed freedoms of speech and damaged national unity.

- **Religion at Rome**

By Paul's era, Roman thinkers cared little about cosmology and theology. They were much more involved in questions of character and behavior.

Religion still had a place – mostly as a restraining influence -- but religion and morality were not as closely linked in Roman life as in Christian life.

A perusal of Rome's religious literature bears out the fact that Roman language originated as a form of nature worship. Their gods were manifestations, if not personifications, of the forces of nature. The goal of this primitive religion was to seek and obtain the favor of such gods.

Paul expresses this very understanding in Romans 1, when he notes:

*For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.*

These statements are borne out by the fact that every local population and event had its own deity. In Paul's era, ancestor worship was a part of every Roman household – at all levels of society.

Emperor worship was one outcome of ancestor worship. At first it was limited to deceased rulers, but eventually evolved into the worship of sitting emperors. At its height, emperor worship became the ultimate test of political loyalty.

But what about the religions of those cultures the Romans conquered and assimilated into the empire. Foreign religions were allowed and even encouraged, unless they became or appeared to be politically dangerous. In the process, Temples were built to Egyptian deities and even Romans attended them. It might surprise some that the Jewish Sabbath was a common practice in Rome; it was not only observed by the Jews, but other ethnicities as well.

By Paul's day the prevailing attitude was agnosticism. Atheism and materialism were much more common than religious belief. It's been noted that the great Seneca wrote of the Fatherhood of God in glowing terms, but Pliny declared that the belief in immortality was the proof of mental derangement.

That is the city of Rome and Roman society Paul found when he arrived as an appellate of Caesar in 62 A.D. There, in the midst of this environment, Christianity was growing.

In less than one generation after Christ's Passion Christianity had grown rapidly. The growth was enough that believers became the focus of Nero's hostility – especially after the Great Fire of Rome.

In the popular mind Christians were already well distinguished from the Jews. At this early stage more Christians occupied the lower classes of society. No doubt the preaching of an alternative kingdom attracted

many of them. A great number of Christians were also from the diverse foreign cultures.

We do not know a great deal about the daily life of the early church in Rome, but there are historical evidences of social ostracism, Jewish hostility, government-sponsored persecution – and most prominently – self-sacrificing fidelity to the faith.

With all of this in focus, let me conclude with Paul's words to the Romans in chapter one:

*“First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.*

*I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.*

*I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.*

*I am obligated both to Greeks and Non-greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome.*