

Romans: Verse-by-Verse

Romans 1:7

Student Notes:

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.”

- **Notes on Paul's Introduction:**

“To all in Rome who are loved by God ...” Paul did not just write, “Paul, to the Romans” ... 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.

In this instalment: Some historical insight into the city of Rome that Paul would have seen during the spring or early summer of 62 A.D.

- **Architecture and Development**

It's been said that Caesar founded the empire but Augustus built the city of Rome. “Augustus found Rome a city of brick and left it a city of marble”.

The transformation: The Roman Forum 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 and remarkable bronze statues.

By 62 A.D. -- Rome was only in the early stages of architecture and development. Nero was its emperor. The great Colosseum did not exist yet.

The Rome of Paul's day was the foremost city of the world in wealth and outward beauty. Rivals: Alexandria and Athens. 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**

It is extremely difficult to accurately estimate the population first-century Rome. Estimates: 500,000 to 4 million.

One account: (At one point) City had 46,600 tenements ("blocks"), and 1800 isolated residences. This does not take into account temples, basilicas, theaters, circuses, baths, public parks, gardens, villas of the nobility, and open squares for business or entertainment.

- **Entertainment & Sports Facilities**

The "Circus Maximus" of Nero's time. ("Circus Maximus"= "Greatest or Largest Circus.) A chariot racing stadium and mass entertainment venue. Seated an estimated 150,000 to 250,000 spectators.

- **Rome's Society**

Slaves: Historians estimate the number of slaves in Rome were equal to all the other classes combined. Possible numbers: 700,000 to 2 million. (Safe estimate: one million during Nero's time.

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.

- **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.

1. Native Italians were now insignificant in numbers.
2. No longer the controlling force in government or society.
3. The growth of diversity had destroyed the original Italian powerbase.
4. Top offices of state were often held by non-Italians.

Note: 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 rich patrons.

- **Political Life**

With the “Pax Romana” – “Peace of Rome” politics and war were no longer the primary focal points. Cultivation of literature, new commercial activity, and an enormous development of all forms of public amusement.

1. The popular assemblies no longer convened to elect leaders or to vote on laws. Senate only appeared to share legislative and administrative power with the Emperor. 2. Public officials morphed from concerns about their constituents to political and financial gain.

- **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.

Historical references show Roman religion originated as a form of nature worship; gods were 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.

Every local population and event had its own deity; ancestor worship was a part of every Roman household – at all levels of society.

Emperor worship: an outcome of ancestor worship. Limited at first to deceased rulers, but eventually evolved into the worship of sitting emperors. At its height, emperor worship became the ultimate test of political loyalty.

Foreign Religions: Were allowed and even encouraged, unless they became or appeared to be politically dangerous. Temples were built to Egyptian deities and even Romans attended them. Jewish Sabbath was a common practice in Rome, observed by the Jews and other ethnicities.

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

Paul's arrival in 62 A.D.: 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.

Popular conception; Christians well distinguished from the Jews. Most Christians occupied the lower classes of society; a great number were from the diverse foreign cultures.

The picture we find: Social ostracism, Jewish hostility, government-sponsored persecution – and most prominently – self-sacrificing fidelity to the faith.

Paul's words in chapter one: *"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.