

The Roman Empire in Decay

As strong as it appeared on the surface, there were trouble spots inside Rome that no one either saw or tried to correct. One was the lack of loyalty many felt toward Rome. Only about 10 percent of the people were citizens; the rest were noncitizen aliens and slaves. As a citizen, a person had special status. When Paul of Tarsus was arrested and was about to be whipped, he told the officer that he was a Roman citizen by birth, and he was immediately freed (*The Bible, Acts 22*). Those without this citizen

privilege had no reason to be loyal to the emperor or the nation. They would cause disturbances and occasionally even large rebellions, and the army (whose common soldiers were mostly noncitizens themselves) would be sent to put down the uprising. Lines of men hanging from crosses along the highway told the story of another rebellion that had failed. But it also showed that there were many willing to risk their lives to fight against Roman tyranny.

It cost money to supply soldiers and pay them. Everyone was taxed to pay the cost of an army they did not want in the first place. Government had other expenses as well. The emperors and their high officials lived very well and wasted money on lavish entertainment. Corruption increased the expenses of government, and to pay the bills, Rome put out money that had little value. The poor of the cities could not compete against slaves for jobs, and unless something was done, they might be stirred up to revolt. That could be a serious threat.

To keep the urban poor content, bread and entertainment were provided them. They might go to a chariot race at the Circus Maximus or watch Christians, criminals, and gladiators being torn apart at the Colosseum. Christians were followers of a religious leader from Palestine, Jesus Christ, who had been put to death on a cross by Pontius Pilate. Jesus's followers believed he had been resurrected from the dead by the God of the Jews. Jesus had not been the usual outlaw. He had told stories called parables to country peasants and, according to his followers, had performed miracles. He had encouraged people to be kind and loving, but above all, to obey God. If they did as he commanded, they would meet him in heaven when they died.

Jesus's followers had spread to Rome, and some were servants of the emperor. Unlike the followers of Greek and Roman gods, these people did not treat religion as a ritual observed only on festival days; they were fanatics willing to die for Jesus Christ if necessary. Emperors Nero, Caligula, and Diocletian made life miserable for Christians, but that only made the religion more appealing to many commoners. When Diocletian retired in 305, a civil war broke out. One of those in competition to be emperor was Constantine. According to legend, when he was battling for control of Rome, he looked up and saw a cross in the sky that had these words across it: "*In hoc signo vinces*" (By this sign, you will conquer). He won the battle, legalized Christianity, and, on his deathbed, accepted Christian baptism.



Power struggles between military leaders and emperors lead to instability within the Roman Empire.

Name _____

Class _____

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CHALLENGES

1. Of every 10 people in the empire, how many were citizens?

2. How did Paul of Tarsus avoid a whipping?

3. What was the usual punishment for rebellion?

4. Why were most taxpayers unhappy about paying to support the army?

5. Why was unemployment high in cities?

6. How did the government keep the poor happy?

7. Where might a Roman go to see a chariot race?

8. Where might a Roman see gladiators battle?

9. Who were three emperors who abused Christians?

10. Who saw a cross in the sky?

1
1
1
2
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2
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1
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1

Name _____

Class _____

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POINTS TO CONSIDER

1. As a law-abiding noncitizen, how would you react to seeing robbers from your own people hanging from crosses? *Why?*

2. Would the modern public react any differently to the bloody shows that were put on in Roman times?

3. After doing some reading about Nero and Caligula in an encyclopedia, why do you think Christians were so opposed to them?
