

## **PROLOGUE TO PRISON**

### **Paul's Epistle to the ROMANS**

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#### **Introduction -**

### **ROME IN THE DAYS OF PAUL**

#### **The Setting for the Epistle**

The sun's rays, slanting up over the Campius Martius, had just slightly warmed the marble slabs, and another day in the rule of the Roman Emperor Nero promised fair and radiant skies.

Already the market-place was droning with the prattle and gossip which had need to be dispatched before the day's business began. The chatter grew more strident, and the air became filled with the smells of plucked fowl and the butchers' offerings. While a vendor of fruit feverishly polished and arrayed the crimson and golden orbs, his neighbor with equal bustle filled earthenware jars with ointments sweet and thick.

The rumblings and movement and sound in the palace chambers were hushed and subdued. The handmaidens, their diaphonous gowns the color of sunburst oranges whispering about their bare ankles, prepared their mistress' bath. Yawning they liberally poured oils scented with lemon and vertivent into the warmed sea water which filled the golden-crested pool.

Soon a rising crescendo of activity broke alive. The senators, clad in white and magenta coming together in groups of three or more - a bold one, by chance, alone - walked and talked and made their way to the Senate House. Some were given to coarse laughter and ribaldry. Others, in serious vein, were engaged in heated argument. The curses were many; slanderous and contemptuous the insults that were bandied in the warm morning air.

A few hours passed; and the midday resting period was pierced by the sound of chariot wheels, the drivers sporting a private race and subsequent wager. One could hear the thundering and pounding of the blooded horses, the shrieks of excitement from the women who looked on, and the derisive calls driver to driver.

Scarcely could be heard the piteous wail of a newborn infant girl left on the street to die. A wheel of one of the chariots had scudded over the frail little body. The blood ran red over the rough cobblestones and settled into the dirty cracks. A young woman moaned, and covering her head with a grayish shawl and with head bent low, pushed her way through the gathering spectators.

Yet the excited babble of the crowds spoke of this day as one of unusual vitality, for the Great Festivals had been proclaimed by the Emperor. Speculation was rife.

"Would there really be a chariot race of four camels each?"

"Who was this famous knight brave enough to ride an elephant down a sloping tightrope?"

Gleeful was the crowd's anticipation of Nero's generosity - the thousands of birds of bright plumage, the quantities of food parcels, the vouchers for corn, clothes, gold, silver, precious stones, even slaves and trained wild beasts!

The afternoon in Rome passed amid the spectacles, the gladiatorial shows. To those who preferred the participant sports, the huge gymnasiums and adjacent baths stood invitingly open.

Night, ominous and dark with only a tiny handful of stars, settled over the great city. The streets were almost barren now save for an occasional weary peddler on his way home or a claque of young guardsmen, their bushy hair and splendid dress tell-tale of their positions as applauders for Nero and his beloved lyre-playing.

And now the market-place was closed and filled with the stench of spoiling meat and fruits.

Yet the palace was astir with guests, the women in gowns of purple and gold, sapphire-blue and green, the hue of the tree-dappled hills surrounding the city. The men were resplendent in plummaged helmets and robes embroidered and bespangled.

Nero's palace was a structure awesome and wonderful - the long pillared arcade which ran almost a mile, the enormous pool so vast and blue that it resembled an indoor sea and surrounded by buildings built to look like miniature cities. Many parts of these were overlaid with gold and studded with precious stones and nacre from the far seas.

The guests were dutifully awed and chattered amiably as the vain Nero childishly and pompously displayed the dining-room ceiling which rained down flowers and perfume, or the larger circular roof which revolved slowly day and night in synchronous timing with the heavens.

Grandiose and opulent entertainment was the forte of this ostentatious young emperor; and as surely as the wine was poured into the golden goblets, the passions grew more tumultuous.

Nero waved a slender arm and dancing girls in scant and vivid attire writhed to the plaintive sounds of stringed music. Every sense and every desire gave portent of being fulfilled.

Great and magnificent were the trays of food and delicacies - hens roasted on spits to a crackling golden-brown, suckling pigs their snouts agape with crimson apples - viands from far and near to tempt gourmet and gourmand alike.

Gorging and feasting and pleasures of all kinds occupied the night until dawn.

Outside on the blackened sea, only an occasional burst of raucous laughter could be heard in

accompaniment to the steady slap-slap of the water against the royal barge. Pillars of fire sent out spurts of gold-red flames into the darkness.

Another day ended in the Roman Empire, an empire whose magnificence before many years, would be relegated to the descriptive passages and odes of the historians and bards.

Now there was across the Adriatic Sea down the craggy, thorny coastline of the provinces of Macedonia and Achaia, down through the ragged Isthmus of Corinth, the city of the same name.

There in the house of the hospitable Gaius, a short, stocky man sat at a table writing in haste. Indeed his hands, worn and calloused with the results of his trade of tent-making, seemed almost in frenzied haste so filled were his heart and mind with the concern for his beloved friends who also believed in JESUS CHRIST as the SON of GOD.

Now his special feelings of apprehension were for those Christians in the decaying city of Rome. He felt chafed with frustration; he wanted so to express his pent-up feeling with as much clarity as he could command.

Nero had just made one of his spectacular visits to the city of Corinth. The Emperor had arrived reclining on his sumptuous barge, the red of the sails contrasting with the brown-ebony backs of the oarsmen who moved with monotonous but wondrous precision.

Indeed, the Roman Emperor held special fondness for those Greek subjects who so diplomatically lauded his playing of the lyre. He had even, with great beneficence, staged a naval engagement on an artificial lake of salt water with sea monsters swimming in it and a ballet of certain young Greeks.

After Nero's revelry, more than ever Paul was anxious to strengthen and encourage the Christians in Rome.

The door opened and Timothy entered, quietly mindful of the task before the fiery Apostle. His own shabby brown robe was dust-laden, and his feet in their thonged sandals were pricked and grimy. Yet his arms were laden with prizes for his friends - crusty fragrant loaves of bread, sweet ripe peaches offered to him by a shy young girl in an orchard, a silvery string of bass.

Hidden away in the folds of his garment was a small jar of ointment. Tonight he would rub Paul's hands which surely would be aching from long hours of writing.

They would talk tonight - talk that lifted the heart and soothed the spirit. There might be news of fellow Christians - if good, they could rejoice together; if not, they could pray together - Paul, Timothy, Gaius, Lucius, Jason, Sosipater; and perhaps even Erastus would be there.

Paul looked up, his frown of concentration smoothing as he saw his friend. "I've finished this epistle, Timothy. See I've ended it with these words, **"To God only wise, be glory through Jesus Christ for ever. Amen"** (Romans 16:27).

~ end of introduction ~