



# PRESERVING BIBLE TIMES<sup>inc.</sup>

Because Context Matters

## ***Christianity and the Chaos of Roman City Life*** *Understanding the Appeal of the “Good News” in Paul’s Roman World*



View of a main street in Ostia, the ancient port city of Rome. Missing are the several story tenement buildings that housed the working class. Also missing is the perpetual stench of the city and the teeming masses of sickly people with fear, misery, disease and social dislocation etched on their faces. Without that context, we miss the appeal of Christianity to pagans trying to survive in first-century Roman cities.

Photo courtesy of Scott Ashley, a May 2015 participant in PBT’s “Paul’s Roman World” trip to Italy

**Setting the Stage** On our “*Paul’s Roman World*” trip to Italy, we develop the concept of “*Roman Exceptionalism* (RE).” That’s an idea Rome envisioned to unite a diverse empire consisting of 20 different people groups, speaking 12 different languages, having no common alphabet, and being only 10% literate. The purpose of RE was to communicate in multiple ways at every social level, “*Aren’t you glad you are a Roman...we bring order out of chaos... we always win in the end.*” The main components of RE that were exported, emphasized and uniformly re-enforced all throughout the Empire included:

- Uniformity of urban (city) spaces and homes.
- Standardization of social dress and visual clues, e.g., size and color of your toga band, so everyone knew their “place.”
- Social system rooted in patronage and benefactors.
- Creation of prescribed public spectacles to consistently remind everyone of Rome’s greatness.
- Portfolio of major, minor, household and cultic gods that were woven into the fabric of Roman patriotism – the practice of “religion” showed your allegiance to the State.

**Building “Franchise” Cities** As part of RE, Rome intentionally designed its cities to look and feel the same – the forums were the same, the design of public spaces was the same, etc. Thus, no matter where a person was in the Empire, walking into a Roman city made him immediately feel at home. If you are intrigued with how Rome accomplished this, I recommend a fascinating read (to me anyway!) – *City: A Story of Roman Planning and Construction* by David MacCaulay.

Rome's city design mandated the main E/W road (*Decamanus Maximus*) and the main N/S road (*Cardo Maximus*) to be perpendicular to each other. The forum was built where these two intersected and the main marketplace just off the forum. The square city blocks (*insulae*) had prescribed dimensions and the height of a building could never be more than twice the width of the street. Nothing was overlooked; even the curb height of streets was specified. Obviously, aqueducts and sewer systems were a part of every city design.

Although Rome tried to plan for everything, it never anticipated the explosive population growth that would overwhelm the infrastructure of its cities. (Some estimate that eventually the population density in its larger cities was twice that of Manhattan today – and there were no skyscrapers in first-century!) Thus, while RE fostered great economic and political stability for hundreds of years, its soft underbelly was chaotic daily living for the majority of people who migrated to the cities from the countryside. These working poor lived in squalid conditions of the thousands of tenements quickly built to house this invasion. In these ubiquitous dwellings, extreme crowding was the norm. That meant no privacy from the several people living in one upper story, smoky room. How can we grasp such conditions? The focus of this Reflection is to better understand this urban reality - the ever-present filth, disease, misery, fear and social dislocation – in order to apprehend the appeal of the Gospel to pagan city dwellers trying to survive in the uncertainty of living another day.

**Reimagining the Roman Cities** On our “*Paul’s Roman World*” contextual immersion trips, we go to first-century Roman cities, such as Ostia, Minturno, Pompeii, Herculaneum, Rome. All but Rome are quiet, unoccupied places, lending a peaceful, idyllic scene. To counter this impression, we remind our Pauline Pilgrims of what life was like in the early centuries of the Roman Empire. We want them to better appreciate the obstacles to and the appeal of the Gospel in the Roman world.

**A Stench Like No Other** One of the realities we miss as we walk through these first-century Roman cities is the stench. As previously observed, over time Rome’s precise city planning was overwhelmed by rural migration. The influx led to building shoddy 4-6 story tenements (thereby overshadowing narrow streets) to house the influx. The poorer residents were, the higher the tenement floor they occupied. Few of these buildings (think slum landlords) were connected to the city sewer system, so chamber pots became the defacto “sewer system” of the tenement world.

In theory, chamber pots had to be carried down several flights of rickety stairs and taken to a public latrine (maybe two blocks away). However, many shortened that trip by emptying their pots at curbside. Stair-averse people chose to avoid the task by emptying their chamber pots from upper story windows, thus turning sidewalks into an odorous obstacle course. Today we are oblivious to the unavoidable stench of first-century Roman city life, which was true for those in the richest villa as well as the poorest tenement. This was one reason why people of means burned incense continuously. While incense could partially mask the stench, it could not eliminate it (gives you a better context for being “the aroma of Christ!”).

**Filth Beyond Our Imagination** In the first-century, tenement world, sanitation was an illusion - no available soap or disinfectants. When a chamber pot spilled in a tenement room, or on the stairs while being carried down to street level, there was no effective way to clean it up. While the sewage might be scraped to the side, there was no running water to flush the residue. Carrying pots of water six stories up to flush a spill was not a practical option. Add to that, corpses and dead animals lying in the street, creating a fertile breeding ground for disease that added to the ever-present stench.

**Debilitating Disease** Illness and physical afflictions dominated the reality of everyday life. Almost everyone was anemic with significant vitamin deficiencies. Many walked through each day with beriberi, rickets, and/or intestinal worms. Swollen eyes, skin rashes, dysentery and men with lost limbs (no OSHA for workers in those days) were prominent parts of the street scene. Consequently, just about everyone was acutely susceptible to the next disease that arrived on the scene as well as those that never left – malaria.

Disease propagation was enhanced by ever-present squadrons of swarming insects such as flies and mosquitoes. In addition, a goodly number of women carried chronic infections from child-birth complications or the legacy of multiple abortions, often performed with appalling techniques. Many people had pulmonary issues from living in a room with smoke producing braziers (small heater/stove) burning all winter when the windows were covered. These are some of the reasons why the life expectancy in some cities, e.g. Antioch, averaged 30 years.

**An Ever-Present Fear** The continual influx of rural people into Roman cities to take the places of workers who died fostered significant social dislocations. Most urban newcomers had no family or extended family to attach to. As sociologists know, when social cohesion goes down, crime goes up. Factor into that reality the lack of street lights in Roman cities, and you have instant criminal chaos after the sun goes down. One social commentator observed, “If you hadn’t updated your will before you went out at night, you were a fool.”

Add to this crime motif, the frequent cultural riots between ethnic groups, the collapsing of tenement buildings when too many people occupied the upper floors, the tenement fires created by room braziers (small heaters) that destroyed whole city blocks. Then reckon in the occasional epidemic, another famine, and you have what one writer called “*a litany of disasters so staggering that it is difficult to grasp its human meaning.*” The effect of this environment on people who lived in the tenements is unfathomable to most of our era. Another social commentator observed that the “*average family lived a squalid life in filthy and cramped quarters where one-half of children died in childbirth or infancy and one parent died before (surviving) children reached maturity.*” Welcome to Paul’s Roman World for 80% of the Empire.

**Paul’s Challenges** Paul had significant challenges in bringing the Gospel to the Roman Empire. He had to awaken in people the desire to radically change (disrupt) most everything about their lives to follow Jesus:

- To a polytheistic world, Paul said there is only one True God and He will not tolerate any other gods.
- In the Roman world, polytheism was woven into the loyalty fabric of the State. To reject Jupiter/Juno/Minerva in favor of Jesus would constitute rejecting the State. That comes with a risk.
- To a sensual/entertainment saturated society (Las Vegas and ESPN had nothing on the Romans!), Paul brought a God-honoring message of modesty and piety.
- To a “religious” culture infused with cultic practices that left you void of any “faith,” Paul says they have to go.
- To the commonly accepted practices of abortion and female infanticide, Paul says those are an abomination to God and must cease.
- To the entrenched family institution of ancestor worship, Paul not only says that practice must stop, but your ancestors will likely not be in heaven.
- To a rigid, status driven society, Paul announces, “*We are all one in Christ,*” as a Senator’s wife sits next to a sixteen year-old brothel girl, and a slave sits next to a nobleman at a first-century house church *agape* meal.
- Rome had a civil crime of “*disruption of the social order.*” These new Christian behaviors not only brought you shame by the majority pagan culture, but potential persecution for eroding RE. In essence, Paul’s “Christian Exceptionalism” (a phrase I coined to capture his response to RE)...*Aren’t you glad you’re a Christian...we bring meaning out of chaos...we eternally prevail in the end* is in direct conflict with “Roman Exceptionalism.”

**Value and Price in First Century Rome** It is a fundamental principal of decision making that people will choose to do something, e.g., embrace the Gospel, if the perceived **Value** they expect to receive exceeds the perceived cultural **Price** they expect to pay. And the reverse is equally true. When someone decides not to do something, e.g., follow Jesus, it is because the perceived **Value** to them does not exceed the perceived **Price** they feel they will have to pay. We can illustrate these “yes” or “no” **Value/Price** decisions with the following graphics:

$$\frac{V}{p} \geq 1 \text{ (yes)} \qquad \frac{V}{P} \leq 1 \text{ (no)}$$

**The “Competitive” Advantages of Christianity** With the above “cost” (**Price**) aspects of becoming a Christian in the first century Roman world, Paul offered the **Value** of following Jesus. He had, if I can use the language of the marketplace, some very significant “competitive advantages” over the religious culture and daily life reality in Roman cities, e.g.,

- There is only one God and He is actually for you (none of the Roman gods are there to help you). He blesses (honors, esteems) you and always has your best interest in view.
- To a sickly world, physical healing (miracles) in the Power of God’s Spirit.
- A sense of “family” and community – a place to be known and belong.

- The Body of Christ offered immediate social attachments of people who cared for you.
- A solidarity (we are one in Christ) in contrast to the ethnic strife.
- A community where charity, love, hope and grace were ever-present aromas in practical, tangible ways.
- An incredible Eternity awaits you! I think we are so accustomed to heaven being part of our Gospel paradigm that we lose sight of how powerful heaven's appeal was to people living in this chaotic reality of a Roman city who never conceived of such a destiny. As Paul reminded the Romans, *For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.* (Romans 8:18)

As one commentator put it, *“Christianity had a superior capacity for responding to the mosaic of misery that was daily Roman life. It offered a new culture that made life in Greco-Roman cities more tolerable.”* For some Romans, the perceived **Value** of following Jesus exceeded whatever **Price** the Roman world could put in their path. So they accepted *Christos* and joined the family of God meeting and worshiping in a house church before dawn (before slaves needed to be at their posts).

**Church Growth in Perspective** In the first and second century, there was no rush to embrace Christianity on the Italian peninsula. Some estimate the number of believers in Rome to be around 1,000 in 100 AD growing to only 7,000 in 200 AD (1% of Rome's total population). In today's contemporary “church growth” models, Paul's Italian house churches would be Exhibit A of “dismal.” But God's ways often are not congruent with our expectations! As it turns out, the very small nature of the early church actually protected it as it kept this movement from being viewed as a threat to the State.

**Personalizing Value and Price** This **V/P** relationship helps us understand yet another (personal) dimension to Calvary by asking: Did Jesus come to be born at Bethlehem, and did He die on Calvary's Cross? Of course He did. Then the subsequent question that needs to be asked is: What did it cost Him to first come and then die? What **Price** was Jesus willing to pay to come down to earth to establish the great **Value** to Him of rescuing and restoring people in first-century tenements as well as 21<sup>st</sup>-century urban and suburban neighborhoods into a right relationship with God? Part of that answer can be found in Philippians 2:6-8.

*Who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant (slave), and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

While we can't get our minds around what it meant for Jesus to *empty Himself*, to set aside the glories of Heaven to come and be *“the Word became flesh”* (John 1:14) and dwell among us, we do know the **Price** for Him and His Father was indescribably beyond infinite. But even with that enormous **Price** in view, did Jesus come and do it? **Yes!** Thus for Jesus, the **Value** of coming to die to set people free from the consequences of their sin so they could be restored back into a relationship with His Father was immense and indescribable! It exceeded the **Price** that He, the Holy One, would have to pay to come to earth to live armpit to armpit, day after day with incredibly sinful people. That **Value** exceeded putting aside all the accoutrements of Heaven, to be misunderstood, wrongfully condemned, spit upon, mocked, scorned, and shamed as He died on a Roman Cross.

If you think you're not worth much to God, ponder the cost of Calvary that was paid for you. That **Price**, that beyond infinite cost, defines your **Value** as one of God's beloved, adopted children, loved with the exact same love as He has for His only begotten Son (His perfection only allows for one kind of love – the best!) How do I know that? **Because He did it!**

## Reflect Upon

- Prior to this Reflection, how did you view Paul's task in bringing the Gospel to the Roman world? What particularly struck you in this Reflection? Any new thoughts about today's church growth yardstick?
- How would you have responded if Paul's task was given to you, which it actually is by the way? America is now more pagan than superficially “Christian.” Like Paul, we are likewise called to bring the “Good News” to today's contemporary pagan Romans as they pursue their versions of narcissistic and existential exceptionalism!
- Do you think much about Eternity? Do you long for Heaven? To a watching world, are we underplaying the significance of Eternity in our witness and practice?

- Which aspects of Gospel “Value” do you think most appealed to a first-century tenement dweller? A Senator’s wife? A brothel girl? A slave? A Freedman?
- Which “Value” aspects of the Christian message most appealed to you when you came to Christ?
- Have you ever paid a Price for your faith? Maybe you will as we seem to be culturally moving into an era where standing for God’s timeless Truth will require paying a Price. Agree or disagree? Implications?
- Have you ever pondered your immense Value to God? What does that evoke in you?

### Helpful Sources for this Reflection

Lionel Casson, *Everyday Life in Ancient Rome* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).  
 David MaCaulay, *City: A Story of Roman Planning and Construction* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).  
 Nigel Rogers, *Roman Empire* (New York, NY: Metro Publishing, 2014)  
 Randall Smith, *An Italian Adventure: Paul’s Response to the Roman World* Study Notebook (Sebring, FL: Christian Travel Study Program, 2015) 162 pages (used on PBT’s “Paul’s Roman World” contextual immersion trips to Italy).  
 Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Early Christianity* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1997), particularly Chapter 7, “Urban Chaos and Crisis: The Case of Antioch.”

**Shalom** Doug Greenwold PBT Teaching Fellow Reflection # 715 © Doug Greenwold 2015

**Mailing List** If this “Reflection” has been forwarded to you and you would like to receive future “Reflections,” you can subscribe on the PBT website [www.preservingbibletimes.org](http://www.preservingbibletimes.org) home page to receive them.