

daylight[™]
Bible Studies

A DVD-based study series
Study Guide

THE DAWNING

Christianity in the Roman Empire

With Joe Stowell

Fifteen Lessons for Group Exploration



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Feeding the Soul with the Word of God

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	
An Unexpected Transformation	7
SESSION 1	
Rome: Ruler of the World	9
SESSION 2	
Rumors of a Better King	17
SESSION 3	
Rome Resists the Gospel	25
SESSION 4	
The Ways of Jesus	33
SESSION 5	
Persecution of Christians	41
SESSION 6	
The Marginalization of Christians	49
SESSION 7	
The Gospel: A Traveling Enterprise	57
SESSION 8	
Lessons from Capernaum	65
SESSION 9	
The Example of Peter	73
SESSION 10	
Ephesus: Challenge for the Christians	81

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SESSION 11 Ephesus: Compassion of the Christians	89
SESSION 12 The Empty Tomb	97
SESSION 13 Christians in Pompeii	105
SESSION 14 Christians in Aphrodisias	113
SESSION 15 The Changing Face of Rome	119

An Unexpected Transformation

At the outset of the Roman Empire, there was no Christian influence because there was no Christianity. But when Rome was at its height, the birth of a little baby in Bethlehem began to set in motion a series of events that would alter the fabric of Roman life—despite its resistance.

At the time when Jesus' earthly ministry in Israel—a part of the Roman Empire—culminated in His death by crucifixion and by His surprising resurrection, the empire was marked by worship and lifestyles that had no room for the one true God Jehovah. By its very nature, Roman culture mocked the idea that this Jesus was a king in His own right.

Not long after Jesus' resurrection, messengers and disciples who believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Anointed One from God, began to quietly make their presence known in the empire's polytheistic society. As they went about their day-to-day existence, they endured a life of marginalization and opposition. They lived in a land where their standards of morality and their faithfulness to their Savior were either ignored or mocked, but seldom accepted.

Yet they stood their ground—not belligerently or negatively but in a way that honored Jesus' teachings such as “love your enemies” and making sure people “know them by their love.”

For the most part, nations don't change overnight. Societal changes sometimes move at a glacial pace. But the Christians in Rome began to make a difference. They endured their persecution. They served their time in places like the Mamertine Prison. They practiced morality while surrounded by immorality sanctioned by the society.

And things began to change.

We look around us today, and we see Rome in reverse, we might say.

In the United States, for instance, it is rather clear that at the outset of its history, the ones who forged the land and made the laws had a basic understanding of Christianity and in many ways incorporated it into life.

Rome: Ruler of the World

Early American documents and rulings made room for God, and specific scriptural teachings were incorporated as building blocks in early laws.

Yet as US history continues to unfold, some feel that the nation is heading toward the ways of first-century Rome—where Christianity was nearly non-existent in the eyes of the government.

While the nuances of this historical argument can be debated, there is a reality that stems from a study of Christians in Rome during the early church period that is indisputable. We know that many of these brothers and sisters in Christ existed in a non-Christian world yet flourished because they obeyed scriptural teachings about living for Jesus. We can observe that no matter whether we see our society as declining or advancing in regard to matters of faith, our task—as was theirs—is to shine the light of Jesus wherever we go.

Dr. Joseph M. Stowell, the president of Cornerstone University in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and the video team from the *Day of Discovery* television program visited several locations from both the Roman Empire and the land of Israel to examine the remarkable story of how Christianity dawned upon Rome. In a study that is replete with both historical fact and biblical foundation, we are challenged by this presentation of a tiny sect of people who trusted Jesus after His resurrection, then by their life and light carried the good news of the gospel throughout a thoroughly non-believing empire.

Whether they knew it or not, these people were key to the unexpected transformation of Rome—and they can serve as a wakeup call to us that following their example just might help us transform our world as it is today, no matter where we live.

—Dave Branon
Editor

DAYLIGHT PREVIEW

Touching the Past

Two thousand years after Rome ruled the known world, visitors to that great city can still touch the past. They visit the ruins of magnificent buildings—many of which were built to honor either the numerous gods of the Romans or the rulers who proclaimed themselves to be deity. Yet what most visitors to Rome may not realize is that a tiny sect of people made more magnificent contributions to the empire than even the emperors and their architects. The believers in Jesus who took Christianity to Rome not only touched the past but they also changed the future for thousands upon thousands of people throughout the land—and eventually changed the world for the better.

COME TOGETHER

Icebreaker Questions

1. What would you say is the greatest city you have ever visited?
2. Have you ever been to Rome? If so, what was your favorite place to visit? If not, what would you most like to visit?

3. When you were a kid, how close was history to the top of the list of your favorite subjects? Later on, how did you feel about taking “History of Western Civilization”?



FINDING DAYLIGHT

Experience the Video

Feel free to jot down Video Notes as you watch the presentation by Joe Stowell. Use the space below for those notes.

VIDEO NOTES

Rome: *The great city of the ancient world*

Walking through the city

The Colosseum

Rome's rule

Another city: Jerusalem

Claims of a Savior

A message—and the tension it created

The message: Jesus

A threat to the Roman rulers? Hardly

Yet Christianity will conquer Rome

What led to this change?



WALKING IN THE DAYLIGHT

Discussion Time

DISCOVER GOD'S WORD

Discussion/Application Questions

1. Why do you suppose that even though Rome fell from its height as the seat of a mighty empire some 1500 years ago, people from all around the world still stream to it?
2. What are your recollections about how Rome came to rule a massive amount of the known world?
3. What are your impressions of life in first-century Rome and elsewhere in the Roman Empire?
4. Joe Stowell states, "There was another city: Compared to the grandeur of Rome and its political muscle, relatively inconsequential—Jerusalem. Located at the end of the Mediterranean Sea, its most recent headlines were about a self-proclaimed Messiah who'd been

crucified by Rome. His followers claimed that three days after His death He rose again. They claimed to be eyewitnesses of His post-resurrection appearances. And then forty days later He ascended into heaven, promising that He would come again for them. Before He left He gave them a commission. And that was to take a simple yet clear message throughout the whole world, which would mean that it would be throughout the Roman Empire."

Read about that commission in Matthew 28:16–20.

In what way could this commission be viewed by the emperor and the leaders of the Roman Empire as a threat to their authority?

5. Read Philippians 2:1–11, a portion of the apostle Paul's letter to that first-century church within the Roman Empire.
 - a. In what way could this passage be viewed by the emperor and the leaders of the Roman Empire as a threat to their authority?
 - b. What kind of attitude—which Paul, in turn, was urging upon his readers—did Jesus have?

6. Joe points out that the emperors were jealously protective of their positions and powers. For them to hear that there was another king often raised a sense of paranoia and launched fierce and brutal persecution.

How do you react to Joe's statement that if you're giving these early Christians the odds, they don't stand a chance?

7. So without sword and shield, how were Christians eventually able to "conquer" Rome, in the sense that Christianity became the state religion of the empire?

BRINGING IT HOME

1. What do you hope to gain from this study and from spending time with this group?
2. How do you need to grow in having the "attitude of Christ"?

DAYLIGHT ON PRAYER

Spending Time with God

1. How can the group pray for your journey and relationship with God?
2. Do you have any other prayer requests to share with the group?
3. Close your prayer time by reading Philippians 2:5-11 out loud together.

DAYLIGHT AHEAD

Fasten up, because in Session 2 you are going to cover a lot of ground. Joe Stowell will take you all the way back to the beginning—to the garden of Eden—as a reminder of God's plan for salvation. He will then take you on a history lesson to see how Rome became a world power. He'll reveal some dirty little secrets about the Roman Empire. And you will begin to see why these people needed the plan revealed way back in Adam's day.