

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 29

The Fall of the Roman Empire

In our gospels, we read repeatedly about the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God. As Mark tells the story of Jesus' ministry, Jesus began calling people to repent because, "The kingdom of God is near" (Mk 1:15). We are also given stories Jesus told about the kingdom of heaven. Jesus would tell parables about the kingdom being a treasure hidden in a field that someone would sell all to possess (Mt 13:43-45). Jesus blessed those who were persecuted for righteousness because "theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:10). Jesus would warn that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Mt 19:24). In fact, Jesus would also say that, "unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:20). Then, after his arrest, when Jesus was brought before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, we read these events from the accounting of the apostle John: Pilate summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus replied, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."

As Jesus spoke, there was one major kingdom known to Pilate and the people. It was the Roman Empire, ruled from Rome by the Emperor, Tiberius Caesar. Upon the death of Jesus, the Roman Empire's population was tens of millions of people, perhaps nearing 100 million. The followers of Jesus, standing at the foot of the cross, were merely a handful. The contrast between Rome and Jesus could not be greater.

Yet, Jesus hung on a tree with a sign nailed to his cross. The sign read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" in Aramaic (the common language of Jews), Latin (the common language of much of the Roman government) and Greek (the common language of learning and commerce) (Jn 19:19-20).

Jesus died labeled a king, but without an apparent kingdom. We know Jesus was, and is in fact, the "King of kings" (Rev. 17:14). So, where exactly is his kingdom? When the Pharisees were peppering Jesus with questions about the kingdom of God and when it might come (the "where" question did not occur to the Pharisees. They assumed the kingdom would be an earthly one ruling from Jerusalem). Jesus replied and answered not the "when," but the "where" question. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is.' Or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you" (Lk 17:20-21).

If the kingdom is within, is there no outward visible kingdom? We know that Jesus taught that to enter the kingdom of God, one must be “born again” (Jn 3:3). Is this strictly an inner process with no external reality?

After his resurrection, Jesus spent 40 days among his followers speaking further about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:2-4). Paul would soon follow and enter synagogues “arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God” (Acts 19:8). Paul boldly “preached the kingdom of God” (Acts 28:31). Yet, the kingdom of God was “not a matter of talk” to Paul, “but of power” (1 Cor. 4:20).

As we read through the New Testament, we see the kingdom, finding birth in the lives of many who together are called the “Church” or the “body of Christ.” In Acts 2, the Holy Spirit descended upon the people and thousands were born again. These were not big numbers compared to the Roman Empire, but the numbers were growing daily! (Acts 2:47)

Throughout this series so far, we have extended our reading and understanding of the church past the pages of Holy Scripture and through later writings of history. We have followed the writings of those taught by the apostles that were the “second generation” of the church. We saw the efforts of the Roman Empire and various other groups to destroy the church and the kingdom of God by torture and death. We read of groups who sought to morph the apostolic church by teaching aberrant and heretical teaching about Jesus, God, and the kingdom.

Yet, in the midst of these controversies and tragedies, the church continued to grow both numerically and geographically. We saw evidence of the church’s expansion as it permeated the Roman world and even beyond the reaches of the Roman Empire. By the time we reached the 300’s, the Roman Empire had reached its apex of power, both in size and reach. Not the kingdom of God! The church continued its growth, even as the Roman Empire started losing its momentum and stability. Ultimately, we saw the persecuted church become the victorious church, at least in the eyes of the world. Christianity became a legal religion after centuries of persecution. Christianity then became the official state religion and things radically changed for the church.

The church lost much of the natural purifying effects of a persecuted body. When one must perhaps die for one’s faith, it has the equivalent function of a strainer in cooking. Just as a strainer keeps seeds and other undesirable materials out of a dish, you do not find many who are merely giving lip service to their faith when they might have to sacrifice their lives for it! But once the church became the way to social acceptability and the aid to political power, the convictions of the “believers” was not always quite the same!

We stand at our point of history and see that the Roman Empire eventually fell. Yet, we are a part of the thriving and historical body of Christ that has remained and continues to grow daily. We are remiss in our Church History Literacy if we do not take time out to study the fall of the Roman Empire and its effects on the church.

THE FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Different scholars date the fall of the Roman Empire at various times. We will not enter that debate here, but we will consider different historical events that, if not the key event for dating the fall, at least are significant signposts along the way! Our goal through this class is to give us insight into the fall as the Christians perceived, and to see how the church changed in the process.

During the early stages of the Empire crumbling, most church scholars would have dismissed any concept that Rome's Empire would end.¹ These scholars would not have necessarily considered the kingdom of God and the Roman Empire as synonymous at this time, but they were convinced that the Roman Empire was the last kingdom of men before the return of Christ. These scholars thought that scripture, Revelation in particular, set up the kingdoms of man before the return of Christ and that the Roman kingdom was the last of these! For the Roman Empire to end must have meant the imminent return of Jesus.

Setting aside the obvious fact that these scholars were wrong, we can glean some insight to the developing views that came with the changes in the Empire itself. The ultimate sacking of Rome came in 410 A.D., but the seeds of problems had been growing for some time. In the late 1700's, Edward Gibbon produced the classic multi-volume work, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. He writes in a wonderful prosaic manner about the decline and fall using various historical sources for his text. For an in depth study of his perceptions of the numerous events and their results, one can get any number of editions of his monumental work.

For our "literacy" purposes, however, we are much more brief. We should consider several events. On July 21, 365, a violent and destructive earthquake struck the Mediterranean and much of the Roman Empire. The devastation was far and wide. People were not able to turn on the news and read about the shifting

¹ Most Romans would not have imagined the empire ending either! It was believed Rome was founded on April 21, 753 B.C. Of course, the Romans did not use "B.C." as a dating system at the time. The Romans dated everything from the founding of the Roman Empire. Thus, the year 410, when Rome was sacked, was considered the year 1163 AUC. "AUC" stood for *ab urba condita*, or "from the foundation of the city." Our system of dating "B.C." and "A.D." does not come about until the early 500's.

of tectonic plates in the earth's crust. They had no knowledge there were such plates shifting!² To the people of that day, an earthquake was a visitation of some divine power.³ Some of those who were Christians saw in the earthquake a divine retribution for man's sins and profligate living or perhaps the heresies that beset the church. Meanwhile, those who still held to the pagan religion saw the earthquake as a visit from the gods because the empire abandoned the temples and worship of the Roman deities in favor of the Christian faith.

This earthquake was a snapshot of what was to come. The invasions that would eventually tear the Empire beyond recognition bred some of the same responses as the earthquakes. We have several writings that give us this insight after the sacking of Rome in 410, but we should take a moment and understand some of the history that preceded the fall of Rome.

The northern frontier of the Roman Empire in Europe was bordered by what we would consider Germanic lands. The people inhabiting those lands were termed "Goths." There were those that were western Goths ("Visigoths") and those that were more eastern termed "Ostrogoths." The Goths were not "civilized city dwellers." They were more tribal in origin and lifestyle. By treaty, the Goths stayed north and east of the Danube River, which marked the border of the Roman Empire. As the 300's were drawing toward a close, however, something was happening. Some "unknown force" from further east was pushing the Ostrogoths into lands possessed by the Visigoths. The Visigoths, in turn, started crossing the Danube River and moving into Roman territory. The menace itself did not become evident until later in the 400's, when Attila brought his Huns deep into Europe.

In 376, however, with the menace unknown, the Visigoths entered Roman territory. They came over the Danube not as aggressors, but as desperate people who needed asylum. Run out of their land by some strange menace, they needed food and land for their animals. Rome responded sloppily. While at first offering asylum, certain Roman authorities ultimately incited the aliens to arms.

² The Romans did not know this concept even though the word "tectonic" comes from the Greek *tekton* (τεκτων) meaning "builder" or "mason."

³ History is replete with what some characterize as a "God of the gaps" theory. The theory is that when people have gaps in knowledge – where there is an event or occurrence that knowledge is not able to explain or comprehend – the tendency is to attribute the event to God, rather than to acknowledge that our understanding may not yet be great enough to explain the process or cause.

On August 9, 378, the Roman army met the Goths on the battlefield outside Adrianople (which is modern Edirne, in the western part of Turkey near Greece and Bulgaria). The battle was a huge loss for the Romans. Two-thirds of the Roman army was killed, including the Emperor. The empire would never be the same. Interestingly, the invading Goths considered themselves “Christians.” Missionaries had gone forth into the Gothic lands decades earlier and converted the people.⁴ The Goths were not “Trinitarians,” but were, by and large, Arians.⁵

The war lasted 4 years, but the groundwork was laid for the Goths and others subsequent invasions into Roman territory. As noted earlier, the incursions even reached Rome by 410. The invasion might have come sooner had the Empire not found strength and success in the emperor Theodosius. At the age of 33, he came on as a strong general who not only subdued the Goths, but also secured Goths to help serve Rome as an army buffer in the north.

Theodosius was the Roman emperor who interacted with St. Ambrose in Milan in earlier lessons. He fought hard to end the Arian heresy. Theodosius enacted a decree making Christianity the religion of the Empire, with all others than faithful Christians labeled as “madmen” or “heretics.” It was Theodosius who called the synod of Bishops to Constantinople in 381 to finally put the Arian heresy to rest and put finishing touches on the Nicene council’s explanation of the Trinity.

Had Theodosius reigned long enough, history would be dramatically different. But he died at the age of 50, leaving the Empire in the care of his two sons, Arcadius and Honorius. Neither was suited to rule, by talent or by age. Arcadius was 17; Honorius was 11!

Once Rome was sacked in 410, the people voiced multiple opinions of why their world seemed to be crumbling. Much like the earthquake 45 years earlier, the ideas fell into several camps. Some felt this was the revenge of the gods for Rome turning Christian. Some Christians felt it was the revenge of God for sin and heresy.⁶ Others continued to preach that a Christian Empire would ultimately win out, and the people should trust in that and accept any chastisement from God.⁷

⁴ One of the principle missionaries had been Ulfilas (c. 311-383). Ulfilas spoke Greek, Latin, and Goth. He worked among the Goths and even translated most of the Bible into the Gothic language. He did not translate the books of Samuel and Kings...the Goths really did not need more lessons in warfare!

⁵ See the earlier lessons on the Trinity. The Arians believed Jesus was a powerful son of God, but not God himself. They believed that Jesus was one of God creations.

⁶ See, for example, Salvian’s 440 A.D. work, *On the Divine Government*.

⁷ See Orosius, *Seven Books Against the Pagans*, written about 417-418.

Augustine wrote one of his seminal works at this point, *The City of God*. Augustine wrote mainly to respond to the pagan argument that Christianity had led to the fall of Rome.

In Augustine's book, he explains that there is a kingdom of God, a kingdom of Satan, and kingdoms of men. We should never confuse those! The Kingdom of God is eternal and founded upon the faith of God's people. Augustine saw that Christians properly belonged to the City of God, his church, and his kingdom. Satan sought to destroy the church, but could never do so. The church would reign through the end of days. Augustine saw Revelation 20:3,7 with its reference to the 1,000-year reign as a symbolic time period of the age of the church.

Satan's kingdom was in constant strife with God's. Man could choose to "live" in one or the other. The kingdoms of men were not to be confused with God's kingdom. Rome was not God's city, nor was the Roman Empire the Kingdom of God. Augustine called people of faith to follow the church, not rest their faith in an earthly kingdom.

Augustine's book also emphasized that Christianity could not be the blame for the fall of Rome. Rome was an earthly kingdom like countless others. These kingdoms fell throughout history. They fell whether they were pagan or not.

Once the Roman Empire started crumbling, there were significant effects on the church both directly and through society. We will study these as we go through the Middle Ages, but we need to note several of them in this lesson. Society itself changed, of course. As the western part of the Roman Empire crumbled first, we saw blending of languages and cultures as the Germanic tribes and others started integrating into the Latin/Roman people. The Goths/Germans wore trousers; the Romans wore togas. The legal systems, the foods, the understanding of the church were all different. It took a good bit of time for the cultures and societies to settle these differences as the seeds of modern Europe are planted. The German/Gothic invaders were rural people, not city dwellers. The importance and populations of cities begins declining. Perhaps most significantly, the overall Empire government changes and local feudal lords arose. Yet, the church itself kept its worldwide character and almost "Empire-esque" form of government. The church arises in this time to take over many of the functions that the Empire had performed. The church becomes the educator of people, the church provides the sustenance of people, and the church provides ultimate authority for people.

These are subjects we will explore as we continue this class. But first, we have a few more loose ends to tie up in this 300-400 time range!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” (Jn 3:3)
2. “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For, ‘All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever.’” (I Peter 1:23-25, quoting Isaiah 40:8)
3. “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God...And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes...for the old order of things has passed away.’” (Rev. 21:1-4)