

## Chapter 7 Section 5 --- The Fall of Rome

### Key Terms:

<b>Constantine</b>	-- emperor of Rome from AD 312 to 337; encouraged the spread of Christianity
<b>Mercenary</b>	-- a soldier who serves for pay in a foreign army
<b>Inflation</b>	-- an economic situation in which there is more money with less value

The Roman emperor and his troops paused on the banks of the Tiber River. The enemy waited across the river. A battle was about to begin. Constantine, emperor of Rome from AD 312 to 337, looked up and saw a cross in the sky. Written in Latin above the cross was the message, "By this sign you shall conquer."

Constantine's army went on to win an overwhelming victory. Because Jesus had died on a cross, Constantine believed he owed his victory to the God of the Christians. He vowed to become a Christian himself.

This story was told by a historian who lived during the reign of Constantine. Historians today debate whether he actually had this religious experience. However, Constantine is known for strongly encouraging the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire.

### The Decline of the Empire

The Christian Church provided comfort and authority at a time when the mighty Roman Empire was on the edge of disaster. By the time Constantine took power, he could do little to stop the empire's fall.

The decline had begun many years before, when Marcus Aurelius died. The emperor, known for his wisdom, had left his son Commodus in power in AD 180. Commodus was not a wise choice. He was a savage ruler who loved the bloodshed of the gladiators. To strengthen his position as ruler, he bribed the army to support him.

The decline of the Roman Empire began under Commodus. Historians do not agree on any one main cause for this decline. Generally, they believe that the following problems together led to Rome's end.

**Weak, Corrupt Rulers:** After Commodus, Roman emperors were almost always successful generals and not politicians. They often stole money from the treasury. They used the money to make themselves rich and to bribe the soldiers. Under these emperors, the government and the economy lost stability. The senate lost power. World be rulers gained the throne by violence. Between AD 180 to 284, Rome had 29 emperors. Most were assassinated.

**A Mercenary Army:** Once the Roman army had been made up of citizen soldiers willing to defend their land. Now the army was filled with mercenaries, foreign soldiers who served for pay. Mercenaries are motivated by money, not by loyalty to any cause. They often change sides if it is to their personal advantage. Rome's strength depended on a strong army loyal to the nation. Such an army was now just a memory.

**The Size of the Empire:** The Roman Empire had grown too big to be ruled from one place. Tribes that the Romans had conquered earlier now invaded the empire. Many conquered territories regained their independence. The Roman army now had to spend its time defending the empire instead of extending its authority into new areas. The loss of former territories and an inability to gain new territories caused the empire to shrink.

**Serious Economic Problems:** After Rome stopped conquering new lands, no new sources of wealth were available. The empire struggled to pay its army, one that often refused to fight. To raise money, taxes were increased. In the meantime, the people of the empire suffered severe unemployment.

Food was in short supply, so the price of food went up. To pay for food, the government decided to produce more coins. The value of the coins depended on the amount of silver in them. But since the government did not have much silver, it put less in each coin. This resulted in **inflation**, an economic situation in which there is more money, but the money has less value. If inflation is not controlled, money will buy less and less. Roman coins soon became worthless.

**Efforts to Stop the Decline:** Some emperors tried hard to stop the steady decline of the Roman Empire. Diocletian worked to strengthen Rome. He enlarged the army and built new forts at the borders. He also improved the system of collecting taxes. This brought in more money to pay the army. Diocletian divided the empire into two parts to make it easier to control He ruled over the wealthier east, and he appointed a co-emperor who ruled over the west.

## **The Romans Accept Christianity**

Diocletian and his co-emperor stepped down in AD 305. A struggle for power followed. For seven years, generals fought each other to lead Rome until one --- Constantine – Won the power to rule. As you read earlier, Constantine claimed that the Christian God had helped his army win the battle for the control of Rome. A year later, Constantine proclaimed freedom of worship for people in the empire. Under Constantine, Rome would no longer persecute the Christians. Christianity soon became the official religion of the Roman Empire – the one accepted by the government.

During Constantine's 25 years as emperor, he worked to strengthen the Christian church. In 330, Constantine moved his capital to the city of Byzantium in present-day Turkey. He renamed the city Constantinople. The power of the empire was now firmly in the east.

## The Defeat of Rome

Constantine had struggled to keep the empire together. But the forces pulling it apart were too great. After his death, northern invaders swept across Rome's borders. Today, we call these people Germanic tribes. The Romans called them barbarians. In the past, the Roman army had been able to defeat these tribes. Now, however, they could not stop them. In the AD 400s, the Germanic tribes overwhelmed the empire. One tribe, the Visigoths, captured and looted Rome in 410. The Vandals, another Germanic tribe, took Rome in 455. The Roman emperor was almost powerless.

The last Roman emperor was 14-year-old Romulus Augustulus. His name recalled more than 1,000 years of Roman glory. But the boy emperor did not win glory for himself. In 476, a German general seized control of Rome and sent the boy to live with his relatives in southern Italy. After Romulus Augustulus, no emperor ruled over Rome and the western part of the empire.

However, even after Rome fell, the eastern part of the empire remained strong. Its capital, Constantinople, remained the center of another empire, the Byzantine Empire, for another thousand years.

### Links Across Time:

Vandals: Today, we call someone who destroys property and valuable objects a vandal. The Vandals were one of the Germanic tribes that invaded the Roman Empire. They looted Rome in AD 455, stealing artwork and other highly prized items. Their name came to be linked with this kind of damaging behavior.

### Questions:

1. What problems did having a mercenary army cause the empire?
2. What city became the new capital of the Roman Empire?
3. Who was Romulus Augustulus, and what was his fate?

Guided Reading: These questions are attached to your daily email. 😊