

THE HOUR HAS COME

“And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber” (Rom. 13:11, NIV)

Romans 13 is a classic chapter admonishing Christians to be good citizens. The same chapter, however, also contains a powerful admonition to wake up and get busy. This call to action was based upon “understanding the present time”. What time was that? Please consider! The Roman letter was written about A.D. 58 and was received in Rome during a period of time known as “Quin-quennium Neronis” or “Nero’s Five Years”. Claudius, the previous Emperor, had been poisoned by his wife Agrippina, who was Nero’s mother from a previous marriage. (As a point of interest, the Emperor Claudius is mentioned twice in Scripture, Acts 11:28, and 18:2) Nero was born in A.D. 37 and through the treachery of his mother came to power in A.D. 54 at the age of seventeen. During the first five years of his administration, however, Nero was content to allow the elder statesmen, Seneca and Burrus, to run the empire. They did an excellent job. Government in the provinces was characterized as a model example of sound administration and good order. The Christians in Rome prospered and their faith was spoken of throughout the whole world (Rom. 1:8). This five year period of tranquillity, however, was about to come to an end.

In A.D. 59 Nero murdered his mother and began to assert himself as one of history’s most cruel despots. This happened only one year after the Christians in Rome received their inspired letter from Paul. Burrus died in A.D. 62 (apparently of natural causes) and Seneca retired from public service. At this time Nero divorced his wife, Octavia, and had her promptly murdered.

In July A.D. 64, a fire broke out in a slum area near the Capena Gate in Rome and destroyed half of the city. It is generally believed that Nero set the fire himself. He wanted

Rome to be more modern and beautiful than Constantinople, and the fire was a quick, easy, and inexpensive way to get rid of the slums. To divert attention from his own guilt, Nero blamed the Christians for the fire and began the first Imperial persecution. This happened only six years after Paul's inspired admonition to "understand the present time" and to "wake up from your slumber".

Because the Christians were a close knit community and radically different from their pagan neighbours, they were already disliked and became easy targets for persecution. Tacitus, the historian, described what happened with these words: "*Therefore, Nero, to get rid of the rumour, substituted as criminals, and punished with exquisite tortures, those persons, odious for shameful practices, whom the common people call Christians. Christ, the author of that name was punished by the Procurator Pontius Pilate, in the reign of Tiberius; and the deadly superstition, repressed for a while, broke out again, not only in Judea, the original seat of that evil, but through the city (Rome) whither from every side all things horrible or shameful flow together and come into vogue*". (Haley's Bible Handbook, p. 860)

Historian Philip Schaff wrote: "*A 'vast multitude' of Christians was put to death in the most shocking manner. Some were crucified, probably in mockery of the punishment of Christ, some sewn up in the skins of wild beasts and exposed to the voracity of mad dogs in the arena. The satanic strategy reached its climax at night in the imperial gardens on the slope of the Vatican . . . Christian men and women covered with pitch or oil or resin, and nailed to posts of pine, were lighted and burned as torches for the amusement of the mob; while Nero, in fantastical dress, figured in a horse race and displayed his art as charioteer*" (Vol. 1 pages 381,382)

Paul's letter admonished the believers in Rome to understand the present time and wake up from slumber. Just because they were experiencing a period of prosperity and peace did not

guarantee that it would always be that way. THIS MESSAGE IS ALSO A RELEVANT FOR US! TIMES OF PEACE AND PROSPERITY ARE OFTEN PRELUDES TO TIMES OF DIFFICULTY!

There is nothing wrong with sleep. God created us with the necessity of sleep. There is a time to sleep, but there is also a time to wake up and get busy. Perhaps that time has come. **“And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed”.**