

There Is A Cross

The Colosseum is probably the most famous landmark in Rome. Built in the 1st century AD, this great arena could seat nearly 50,000 spectators and was the largest Roman amphitheater in the world. The amphitheatre was used for gladiatorial combats, mock sea battles, spectacles with wild beasts, public executions, re-enactments of famous battles, dramas based on Classical mythology ... and the execution of early Christians.

Construction on the Colosseum began under Emperor Vespasian (69-79) in AD 72 and was completed under his son Titus (79-81) in AD 80. Much of the funding for the arena came from the treasures that had been looted from the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in AD 70, when Titus served his father as a Roman General and led Rome's armies against Jerusalem. This building was literally a slap in the face to God's people, and it served as a gruesome Arena of Death for nearly 400 years.

The exterior of the Roman Colosseum stretches 1730 feet around and 140 feet tall. The arches of the second and third stories were originally filled with statues. There were 80 entrances, with the most imposing one reserved for the emperor and his entourage. Directly across from the royal box was the entrance of the gladiators.

The central arena was covered with a great wooden floor and canvas to make it waterproof. Over this was a layer of sand to absorb blood - in fact "arena" derives from the Latin word for sand. The floor is now exposed down to its underground passages, where beasts and gladiators awaited their fate. The arena was surrounded by a 15 foot high wall to protect spectators from attacks by wild beasts. At the top of the wall was the **podium**, on which the imperial party and other VIPs had their seats. All around this was the seating area, divided into three tiers: the lowest for knights; the middle for wealthy citizens; and the top for the general population. And it served as an Arena of Death for nearly 400 years.

The inaugural festival of the arena, which was the largest amphitheatre in the world, lasted 100 days, during which over 5,000 wild beasts were killed in the arena. The statistics of those who met their deaths at the Colosseum during another festival, held in 240 AD, are staggering: 70 lions; 40 wild horses; 30 elephants; 30 leopards; 20 wild donkeys; 19 giraffes; 10 elk; 10 hyenas; 10 tigers; 1 hippopotamus; 1 rhinoceros; and 2,000 gladiators.

The name "**Colosseum**" was not used until 7th century, and derives from the colossal statue of Nero that once stood here. Nero did not live to see the Roman Colosseum, but he was really the originator of much of this form of brutal entertainment during the time of his rule. He had hundreds of Christians put to death in other arenas throughout the empire, and especially at his own "Circus of Nero" on Vatican Hill.

Travelers of the 18th and 19th centuries were smitten with the great ruin of the Colosseum. Among these were Charles Dickens, who wrote in 1846: "It is the most impressive, the most stately, the most solemn, grand, majestic, mournful sight, conceivable. Never in its bloodiest prime can the sight of the gigantic Colosseum, full and running over with the lustiest life, have moved one heart, as it must move all who look upon it now, a ruin. God be thanked: a ruin!"

But what is most outstanding to the heart of every Christian who walks into this arena today is that there is a CROSS standing on the spot where the emperor sat to watch the games in the Roman Colosseum!

Pope Benedict XIV (1740-58) placed this cross in memory of the Christian martyrs who shed their blood here. And it is a truly remarkable and emotional experience to see it standing right where the emperor once sat. I knew what to look for (credit – sermon by Andy Stanley this past Easter), but the power of it still caught me by surprise.

Now imagine that you could go back in time nearly 2000 years and talk to the Roman Christians who lived in the shadow of the Colosseum, literally in fear for their lives. Imagine that you could talk to the families of some who had already been cruelly executed in public spectacles in the arena.

And imagine saying to them, "Someday a cross will stand right where the Emperor sat in the Colosseum ... and it won't represent the thousands of crucifixions carried out by Rome, it won't represent the mangled bodies and tortured demise of thousands of Christians, and won't represent the preferred method of execution of the Empire now in control of the entire known world ... but rather, it will represent the single crucifixion of a Jew named Jesus who never even entered the city of Rome during his life!"

Someday, centuries after the Roman Empire is a pile of ruins for archaeologists and tourists to look at, millions will still worship this man whose cross stands where the Roman Emperor used to sit!

Someday, the Roman Emperors will simply be footnotes of history in the pages of the Scriptures that tell His story!

When we read the Christmas story in Luke 2, we never stop and preach at the words "there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus" ... we stop and preach at the words "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord" ... and in Matthew 1 we stop and preach at the words "and thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins." The Emperors are dead and their bones have turned to dust – we could care less about them. But Jesus is still alive and He's here with us by His power right now!

Someday, there will be a cross standing where the Emperor now sits on his throne in the Roman Colosseum!

Someday, people will come to the city of Rome and wander through the ruins of the Roman senate ... and they won't ask where the emperors are buried, but they will ask where the Apostle Paul was imprisoned!

Someday, millions of tourists will come to this city to see the "Basilica of Saint Peter." Are you serious?! Peter?! He's just an uneducated fisherman who was martyred because he was a follower of an obscure carpenter from a remote province of the Roman Empire, under the directive of the glorious Emperor Nero! But someday, this cathedral will be built on the very site of Nero's Roman circus, where thousands of Christians were put to death – and on top of the catacombs where many of them were buried! It will not be a cathedral built to honor Nero – it will be built to honor a follower of Jesus!

(I'm not promoting Catholicism, by the way – I know that religion is full of false, manmade doctrines. I'm just saying, what are the astronomical historical odds of a building being built in Rome to honor any Christian?!)

Someday, countless buildings around the world will be decorated with crosses, not as a symbol of the triumph of the Roman Empire, but as a symbol of one single crucifixion of the one we call Jesus!

WOULD THEY HAVE BELIEVED YOU? ABSOLUTELY NOT!

And yet today, there is a cross standing in the Emperor's entrance to the Roman Colosseum – right where Caesar used to sit! Right where the Emperor used to give his "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" on human lives!

2 Corinthians 4:7-9 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; **cast down, but not destroyed;**

Christianity didn't survive because the Christians were so strategic, or so smart, or so well funded, or so politically connected. That Christianity survived at all is the greatest miracle of human history. Everything Jesus said, everything He did, everything He taught was rooted in the Jewish Scriptures. The Jewish Scriptures were rooted in the city of Jerusalem and in the Temple. But on August 6, AD 70, the Jewish Temple and the city of Jerusalem were totally wiped out by the Romans! But Christianity still survived! How?! Because it was all in God's plan, and it was never about the earthen vessel anyway – it was about the TREASURE inside!

We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed ...
We are perplexed, but not in despair ...
We are persecuted, but not forsaken ...

And then Paul reaches right into the heart of the Roman Empire and their beloved Arena of Death, the Colosseum. And he reaches right over to that Imperial Box where the nobles and the masses are fawning over the Roman Emperor. And he reaches right to that arrogant Emperor himself, thinking he is so important, thinking he holds the very power of life for the little Christian laying in agony on the bloodied sands below in the tip of his right thumb ...

We are cast down, but not destroyed!

Every once in awhile we get knocked down by the enemy in the arena of life, and we are laying there bloodied, exhausted and nearly dying ... but at that moment there is a hand ... not the hand of a Roman Emperor, but the hand of Jesus ... and He never turns "thumbs down" on His church!

AND TODAY, THERE IS A CROSS STANDING WHERE THE EMPEROR USED TO SIT ON HIS THRONE IN THE ROMAN COLOSSEUM!

The Roman Empire has fallen into ruins – but the church is alive and well! And this is not just the story of a religious institution outlasting a political institution – this is the story of a spiritual force surviving unbelievable odds! It is the story of believers who shouldn't have survived the first century spread around the globe on every continent in the twenty-first century, and victoriously expecting the soon return of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Peter didn't hold the keys to the "political and spiritual" power of the Roman Catholic Church – Peter held the keys that unlocked the door of salvation on the day of Pentecost – repentance, baptism, and the Holy Ghost!

Peter wasn't the rock upon which the church was built – his revelation of who Jesus actually was is the rock upon which the church is built! Peter didn't even survive past the first century, but there are millions of people today who know the One True and Living God whose name is JESUS!

Peter isn't worthy of worship – JESUS is worthy of worship!

Matthew 16:16-19 And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

If there is a CROSS standing right where the emperor once sat in the Roman Colosseum ... if that is possible, then ANYTHING is possible!

I told the church in Italy this week ...

- The first Gentile to be filled with the Holy Ghost was an Italian (Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian band – Acts 10:1)
- There was a thriving first century Apostolic church in the country of Italy (they of Italy salute you – Hebrews 13:24)
- There was a thriving first century church right in the palace of Caesar (they that are of Caesar's household – Philippians 4:22)
- The book of Acts ended in Italy (Paul imprisoned in Rome)