

1 Augustus

The Boy who Became Emperor

At the age of 17, Octavian had a chance to prove his worth to his uncle Julius Caesar by going to war with him in Spain. One of the men he met in the camp was a powerful warrior named Marcus Agrippa, the namesake for the Agrippa's in the Bible.

Agrippa's brother had fought on the opposite side in the war. He had been captured and was about to be executed. Agrippa approached Octavian and asked him to speak to his uncle about the brother. He agreed and Julius Caesar spared the brother, which was something unusual for the man. That one act made Marcus Agrippa loyal to Octavian for the rest of his life. This was an act of God because without Marcus Agrippa, Octavian would never have become Emperor.

Caesar had no children, so he used the Roman custom of adopting an heir. He decided to give it to his nephew Octavian. Up to that point, the honor had gone to Mark Antony, but he had fallen from Caesar's good graces. The honor might have eventually moved back to Mark Antony, but before it could, Julius Caesar was assassinated in Rome.

Mark Antony was shocked when he found out he had been passed over for an 18-year-old boy. This started a rivalry between the old soldier and the young heir that lasted for years.

In time, Mark Antony moved to Egypt and started living with Cleopatra. He became more loyal to Egypt than he was to Rome. The armies of Octavian and Marcus Agrippa defeated Antony on the battlefield. After that, he and Cleopatra committed suicide.

Octavian claimed the prize of owning the entire country of Egypt, which made him one of the wealthiest men in history. He was only 33 years old.

At this point, the genius of this young man was able to shine, with the help of Marcus Agrippa. Octavian worked with the Senate rather than beating them down (as past leaders had done). They gave him two new titles, 'First Citizen of Rome' and Augustus, which means 'Illustrious One.' It was a name he used for the rest of his life.

His power slowly increased until 27 BC when he finally changed the constitutional status of the Republic and his position within it. This official ended the Roman Republic, which had lasted for 500 years. It was the beginning of the Roman Empire, which lasted another 500 years.

Augustus dramatically enlarged the empire, instituted a system of taxation, developed a network of roads, and established a standing navy, which brought peace to the Mediterranean for the first time in history. Two big problems in the cities were crime and fires, so he established an official police force and fire-fighting services.

He changed the army, so soldiers became loyal to him, more than they were to their generals. He did this by instituting pensions for veterans, care for the wounded, and many other reforms. This brought peace because military leaders could no longer fight against one another to gain power in the Empire.

Augustus always dressed in common clothes. He refused to wear royal purple or showy symbols of power, like a scepter or a golden crown.

The people loved him until he died at 76 years old (14 AD). He had the title of Emperor, but he never used it himself. Though, he did claim the title "son of a god" having made his adopted father a god. Augustus is one of the five most significant people to ever live.

Without knowing it, he set up the western world for the spreading of the Gospel. He did this with peace, roads, common language, no borders, stability, and the Jewish exemption. This exemption had to do with the law that said people could worship their own gods but couldn't claim they were the only one. He knew Jews believed their God was the only one, so he gave them an exemption. At that point, they could go anywhere in the kingdom and establish communities with synagogues. These became the seeds for churches all across the Empire.

Without knowing it, we remember him every summer. The month of July was named after Julius Caesar, and August was named after Augustus.

2 Tiberius

A Dark and Reclusive Ruler Who Never Wanted to be Emperor

The mother of Tiberius divorced his father to marry the future emperor, Augustus. She was ambitious and wanted her son to become the next emperor. Her son then married the daughter of Marcus Agrippa and loved her dearly.

When it looked like Tiberius would be the next emperor, Augustus had to make sure he was qualified. So, he required his stepson to get a divorce and marry his daughter.

This was devastating to Tiberius. He truly loved his former wife, and his new wife was scandalous! He was humiliated by her nighttime escapades in the Roman Forum. He found himself in the middle of three women. The woman he loved (but wasn't allowed to see), the woman he had to marry (whom he despised), and his mother (who continued to kill his rivals) – even though he really didn't want to be emperor.

Tiberius was finally adopted as a full son of Augustus since he was the sole surviving heir. All the others had somehow died.

When Augustus died, Tiberius was 55 years old. His first years in power were stable, prosperous, and peaceful. He would have been celebrated as a model emperor if he had died within the first 10 years of his rule.

Augustus made sure Tiberius' son and his nephew would become co-emperors after Tiberius' death. Both men were highly qualified for the job. But in time, Tiberius became more and more suspicious of his nephew even though he was loyal to the emperor. Still, he was becoming so popular that the emperor feared he would take over. Eventually, he followed the example of his mother and had him poisoned. This made his son the next in line.

After doing this, Tiberius continued following his mother's actions. He started killing people who could possibly claim his throne. This produced a major change in his life. He became increasingly cruel and suspicious.

In time, he wanted to leave Rome, so he started handing administrative duties to a trusted official named Sejanus. This gave the emperor more time at his retreat at Capri. Finally, he gave the man ruling powers, which meant he could totally leave Rome and move to Capri. What he did there is not known for sure, but it was commonly believed his conduct involved sexual perversion, abusing children, and murdering his victims.

In reality, Sejanus was a calculating and ruthless man. His overall goal was to murder his way to becoming the emperor, and he almost succeeded. He systematically reduced potential successors to the throne, including the son of Tiberius.

Sejanus hated Jews. Among many other anti-Jew policies, he appointed Pontius Pilate to be governor of Israel. He gave him permission to rule over them with a strong brutal hand.

He also controlled all communication between the emperor and Rome. Still, one letter slipped by him. Tiberius had a trusted sister-in-law, whose opinions he trusted. She sent a secret letter that made its way to Tiberius. It described Sejanus' plots in convincing detail.

Tiberius responded by demanding the Senate arrest the man. Since they knew about what Sejanus had been doing, they quickly arrested him and had him executed.

Tiberius then altered Sejanus' policies, including the ones concerning the Jews. All officials appointed by Sejanus were under suspicion, including Pilate.

This gives new meaning to what happened at the trial of Jesus. When Pilate hesitated about executing Jesus, the Jewish leaders said, "If you let this man go, we'll tell Caesar you are no friend of his." Pilate's association with Sejanus made him nervous about that threat. So, to keep them quiet, he had Jesus crucified.

Most of the heirs of Tiberius had been killed by Sejanus. One of the few that was left was his nephew, Caligula. He adopted the young man and made him the heir to the throne. He then had him move to Capri to be a part of his activities.

Shortly after this, Pilate committed one more act of cruelty. Then, he and his wife were called back to Rome to stand trial before Tiberius. It was assumed he would be asked to commit suicide.

Fortunately, the emperor died before Pilate got to Rome, so he didn't have to stand trial. Various traditions talk about what happened to him and his wife.

3 Caligula

Most Infamous Emperor in Roman History

When you think of Caligula, imagine a 25-year-old immature youth who suddenly realized he had absolute power. He could do anything he wanted, and no one could stop him. That is who he was, and that is what he did.

He loved gruesome torture, watching people dying slowly. He organized killing parties. Once he started laughing. Those around him asked what was so funny. He said, "I suddenly realized I could demand all of your throats to be slit, and it would be done."

He used the wives of other men, and they were required to think it was funny. He attended a wedding and suddenly got up and took the bride into another room and had his way with her. The groom could not display any dismay.

For the fun of it, he made his horse a state official. He married several times, and some of those lasted for only one night. His most famous marriage was to his sister. They lived together for some time until she died. He then made her a goddess and forced people to worship her.

Later, he met the woman he wanted to keep. She was as immoral and wild as he was. He often put her on display naked in front of soldiers and friends. His way of teasing her was saying he could have her tortured and killed whenever he wanted to. They had a daughter that he named after his dead sister.

The soothsayer of Tiberius had said that Caligula being an emperor was as impossible as riding a chariot across the Bay of Bauli, which is three miles wide. So, Caligula took cargo ships and lined them up across the bay.

Lumber was then placed across the ships so the emperor could drive his chariot from one side of the bay to the other. Soldiers stood along the way in full armor. He repeated riding his chariot across the Bay over several days. When he got bored, he had fun hitting some of soldiers as he went along. They would fall into the water and immediately sink to the bottom. He was using ships that were needed to transport grain from Egypt to Rome. So many boats were put out of action that Rome suffered a grain shortage.

At one of the public games, he became bored because there were no more prisoners to be eaten by the wild beasts. So, he ordered his guards to move an entire section of the audience into the arena so they would be consumed by the animals.

Caligula made a declaration that he was the sun god. He demanded that his statue be placed in all temples, which included the Temple in Jerusalem. This offended Jews across the Empire.

Herod Agrippa who ruled in Galilee was a friend of the emperor. He realized that something needed to be done quickly to avert a major revolt. After careful consideration, he took his life into his hands and went to his friend. To the amazement of everyone, Caligula backed down and said he would make an exception for the Temple in Jerusalem.

Sometime later, he changed his mind and took steps toward putting his statue into the Jerusalem Temple. He was killed before he could do it. It happened during the intermission of a public game and drama. He went beneath the palace to speak to an acting troupe. Once there, his personal guards surrounded him and started stabbing him. He ended up with 30 stab wounds and was then buried in a shallow grave.

When news of this got back to the senate, they were determined to remove his name from history – to make it like he never existed. They started by removing all his statues.

Caligula became the most infamous emperor in Roman history. After 2,000 years, his name is still a byword for cruelty and perversion. He is known as the most crazy of all the emperors.

4 Claudius

Rome's Underestimated Emperor

Claudius had been born a sick, feeble child with mysterious disabilities. As he grew, he walked with a limp, talked with a stammer, and was slightly deaf. His head twitched oddly, and he drooled. His right side was weak, so his knees occasionally gave way under him. He slobbered when he got excited, and his nose ran. His mother said he was “not finished, but merely begun by Lady Nature.” His grandmother refused to talk to him but wrote him harsh notes instead. At dinner, the family threw food at him, laughed, and mocked his disabilities.

He was given a tutor who was a former mule-driver and he tried to beat his disability out of him. He was convinced that the boy's condition was due to laziness and a lack of willpower.

One day, Augustus, his grandfather, noticed that Claudius loved reading. He hired a different tutor who was a scholarly historian. The new tutor gave the boy a stack of books, encouraged him to write, and even helped him prepare and deliver speeches. It was discovered that Claudius was not an idiot but was insightful and intelligent – a born academic.

Finally, his family began to take notice of his scholarly interests. Even though they recognized his strengths, they kept him from holding any public office. He decided to pursue a career as a historian, like his tutor.

When his nephew Caligula became emperor, as a joke he put Uncle Claudius in a position in government. He then treated him like a court jester. Claudius became sickly and thin by the end of Caligula's reign due to stress and abuse.

Suddenly, Rome was in chaos. Caligula was assassinated by the Praetorian Guard, and his wife and daughter was killed by the Senate. Some wanted to return to the Roman Republic, and others wanted to be the next emperors. Either way, they needed to kill Claudius because he was the last adult male of the line of Augustus. He hid behind some heavy curtains in hopes they wouldn't find him.

Suddenly, one of the guards pulled back the curtain. Claudius fell to his knees and started begging for his life. When he looked up, the guard bowed before him and hailed him the new emperor. He was then quickly taken to the Praetorian camp and put under their protection.

While this was going on, the Senate was arguing over what to do. Suddenly they heard that Praetorians had claimed Claudius was the new emperor. They immediately demanded he be handed over to them for approval. King Herod Agrippa told Claudius that it would be dangerous for him to go. The plan was for Agrippa to go and speak to the Senate.

He went and told why Claudius should become the next emperor. He said, "No matter what you think of him as a person, all of you will agree that he is a mature man who was known for his intelligence, organizational skills, and character." He then pointed out that the Praetorian Guard had surrounded the Senate and it was expected of them to approve the appointment of Claudius. The Senate was not united enough to stop the Guard, so they gave their approval. Little did they know he would be a great emperor next to Augustus and one of the greatest rulers in Roman history.

5 Nero

The Artistic Emperor

Nero's rule can be broken into three parts. With the help of his mother, the first part comprised the "golden years" of Roman history. It lasted for five years.

The second part started when Nero killed his mother. This was the beginning of his decline as emperor, and it lasted for six years.

The third part was where he went insane after killing his second wife and child. This was at the beginning of his last three years on the throne.

Nero was 16 when he became emperor. At the time, he really didn't want to be made the ruler of the world's most powerful empire. He was more interested in drama, music, and poetry. Still, his mother, Agrippina, made it happen, and she was at his side to help him rule. Royal coins and statues show her putting the crown on Nero

She oversaw the job of ruling the empire while Nero studied poetry, music, painting, and sculpture. She accomplished many great things while he studied singing and musical instruments. This devotion to the Arts was socially unacceptable for a Roman upper class, as well as to his mother, Agrippina.

He became involved with a married woman named Poppaea. She sought to remove the influence of Agrippina from his life. She pointed out he was "a mommy's boy," and an emperor should be independent. Nero knew his mother would greatly oppose him divorcing his wife and marrying Poppaea, so he decided to kill his mother.

Killing his mother started the decline of his rule as emperor. He lost all sense of right and wrong and was totally gullible when people flattered him. He panicked when he had to make decisions on his own during times of crisis.

He decided to live two parallel lives, an imperial life and that of an artist. He started making public appearances as an actor, poet, musician, and charioteer. This scandalized the aristocrats of Rome. These occupations were usually reserved for slaves and public entertainers with shameful reputation. Still, Nero's involvement with this type of entertainments made him popular among lower-class citizens.

Then came Rome's Great Fire, which drove his popularity even lower. No one knew how the fire was started. The city was a collection of wooden shacks that had been put up without any central plan. It had always been vulnerable to fires, but this one was fanned by strong winds. The fire burned for over seven days before it stopped, then it started again and burned for three more days. It destroyed three of Rome's 14 districts and severely damaged seven more.

It is often said that Nero played the fiddle while Rome burned. That wasn't true. He wasn't even in the city at the time. He returned to Rome to organize a relief effort, providing for the removal of bodies and debris, and paid for this from his own funds. After the fire, Nero opened his palaces to provide shelter for the homeless and arranged for food supplies to be delivered to prevent people from starving.

All of this would have helped his popularity if he hadn't used part of these funds to build himself a new palace complex in an area cleared by the fire. It included lush artificial landscapes and a 120-foot-tall statue of himself.

Some Romans thought the fire was an accident, while others claimed it was arson committed on Nero's behalf. They believed he wanted it to clear the land for his "Golden House." This rumor quickly spread throughout Rome.

Nero panicked and thought of a way to move the attention away from himself. He arrested a few prominent Christians and slowly tortured them until they confessed to starting the fire. He then rounded up Christians and brutally executed them by feeding them to wild beasts and crucifying them. At one point, he burned some of them alive to light up his garden parties.

In the middle of all of this chaos, he got into a fight with Poppaea, who was pregnant with their second child. He knocked her down and viciously kicked her. She died while having a miscarriage. Realizing he had brutally murdered his wife and child drove him insane, which was the beginning of the last phase of his rule.

In time, the Senate declared him a public enemy, so he put on a disguise and went to a villa located four miles outside of the city. Suddenly he heard horses approaching, so he grabbed a knife and killed himself.

6 Vespasian

The Mule Breeder who became Emperor

When Claudius invaded Britain, he chose Vespasian to be one of the generals to go with him. That's where Vespasian distinguished himself as an amazing general. As a reward, he was given a Triumphant Entry into Rome.

He was sent to northern Africa to serve as governor for one year. Men were given one-year assignments so they could accumulate wealth as a reward for their service to Rome. They did this by raising taxes for themselves, accepting bribes and tribute money. Vespasian was different. He rejected corruption and chose to secure friendships instead. This proved to be far more valuable in the years to come. He governed with great justice and high honors, which sent him into bankruptcy. He mortgaged everything he had to his brother and went back to Rome.

Nero insisted that Vespasian go with him on his tour of Greece. Unfortunately, he offended Nero during his musical performances. He often arrived late or left early. Worse than that, he had a tendency to fall asleep during the performance, which made Nero angry.

Vespasian was kicked out of the inner circle and banished from the imperial court. He was sent into retirement – which was a mercy. Nero could have had him killed. The general went back to his home area and once again took up the mule trade. His nickname back in Rome was “Muleteer”.

While he was in retirement, the Jewish Revolt started. Nero called Vespasian out of retirement and sent him to Judah. Vespasian's son, Titus, joined him and became second in command.

He started by invading Galilee with 60,000 soldiers. After that, he slowly moved towards Jerusalem, strengthened his supply lines, and planned out each move carefully.

Suddenly, he got news that Nero had died. This started a time of civil war in Rome, called ‘The Year of Four Emperors.’

After the two of them were killed, and the third emperor was in place, Vespasian knew what he needed to do. To save Rome, he needed to become emperor himself. He carefully planned his moves. He left Titus in Judah to deal with the rebellion there. He sent some generals to Italy to recruit Roman legions to his side. He didn't go to Rome but went to Egypt instead. There, he took control of Rome's food source. This is where his honesty and integrity from years before finally paid off.

While he was there, other legions around Europe proclaimed their allegiance to him. They marched on Rome and captured it for their new emperor. The Senate voted unanimously to make Vespasian their ruler.

Vespasian was a common man who became emperor. He had many starts and stops. But through it all, he was honest and sincerely hated corruption. He was steady and reliable. He was also a rock-like man who, like other Roman commanders, could be heartless and cruel. He was known for his realism and common sense and brought stability to the Empire, when it was about to crumble.

He strengthened its economy. Still, he undertook many ambitious building projects because Rome was still in shambles, caused by the great fire. He tore down Nero's Golden House and built a house for the people. It's called the Colosseum. It could seat over 50,000, being the largest structure in the ancient world.

He ruled Rome for 10 years, but faithfully served Rome for 50 years. He died when he was 69 years old; the second emperor to die of old age. But he was the first emperor to be succeeded by a natural-born son – Titus. When the feeling of death overwhelmed him, he said, "Oh my, me thinks I'm turning into a god!"

7 Titus

The Man who Destroyed the Temple

Titus was asked by his father help put down the Jewish Revolt. It was there that he distinguished himself as a skilled general.

The campaign to end the Jewish Revolt started in Galilee. Once he subdued that area, the Roman army moved south toward Jerusalem. It stopped when they received news of Nero's death. This started the Year of the Four Emperors. Vespasian decided in order to save the empire, he needed to become the new emperor. He laid out a plan, which included putting Titus in charge of ending the Jewish Revolt.

Titus put Jerusalem under siege, which lasted for four months. The Passover Festival happened during the siege, so non-rebel Jews approached Titus and asked permission to go into the Temple for the celebration. He allowed them to enter the city, but once festival was over, he refused to let them to leave. Doing this put pressure on the food and water supplies within the city.

The Romans eventually broke through the first and second walls of the city. They then began an attack on the front gates of the Temple. They finally broke through and set the Temple and the city on fire. After the fire, Titus gave the order to destroy the remainder of the city. His intent was to erase all memory of the name Jerusalem.

Titus refused to accept a wreath of victory. He claimed that he had not won the victory on his own. He felt he had been a tool used by the Jewish God to display his wrath against his people.

Later, his victory was celebrated in Rome with the building of the Arch of Titus, which is still in Rome today. It shows the treasures taken from the Temple, including the Menorah and the trumpets of Jericho.

Titus quickly settled in to helping his father rule. Vespasian died after a 10-year reign. Titus immediately became emperor in his place. He was the first Roman emperor to follow his own biological father to the throne. Titus proved to be an effective ruler. He was well loved by the population.

Titus became known for his generosity. One day, he realized he had not been a benefit to anyone for the whole day. In despair he said, "I have lost a day."

In his two-year reign, Titus had no major military or political conflicts. Still, he faced several major disasters. The first happened only few months after he became emperor. Mount Vesuvius erupted. This destroyed the cities and resort communities around the Bay of Naples, Pompeii being one of them. The earthquakes that followed caused a tsunami in the Bay of Naples.

During his second visit to the area, a fire broke out in Rome and burned large parts of the city for three days and nights. The damage wasn't as bad as the Great Fire of years before. Still, a great number of important public buildings were destroyed. Then a plague caused by the fire struck Rome.

All these disasters happened during his two-year reign, a volcano, an earthquake, a tsunami, a fire, and a plague that broke out because of the fire. The Jewish people of that day believed God was judging Titus for destroying the Temple.

In addition to everything else, Titus found out that his brother Domitian was plotting against him. He refused to believe it, so he didn't have him killed or banished.

Titus set out to visit one of the territories. He fell ill at the first posting station and died of a fever. It was the same place his father had died.

8 Domitian

A Ruthless but Efficient Emperor

Domitian was given the title, “lord and god,” but he dropped the “god” part. Like Augustus, he proclaimed he was “a son of god” since his father and brother were declared gods when they died. He believed that since he was a son of a god, he didn’t need the Senate to help him bring in a glorious kingdom.

To support this divine position, he needed a key city to become a “temple warden” for the “imperial cult of his family.” Ephesus was chosen because it was the center between the east and the west. The city was honored, so they built him a huge temple. It had a 27-foot tall statue of him standing on the second floor being supported by all the other gods. It was the first thing a ship saw when coming into port from the west, and the first thing travelers saw when coming from the east.

It was important to Domitian that everyone in Ephesus recognize his lordship. This led to the second persecution of Christians. It was caused by a policy started by Augustus. He stated people could believe in any god they wanted, as long as they recognize Caesar as lord. Jews were given an exemption to this rule.

In the past, no Caesar had an interest in enforcing this law. But Domitian had the organizational skills to do just that. He used the fact that the shopping area for every city was called the Agora (“gathering place”) It was the place for selling, buying, politics, meeting friends, giving speeches, etc.

Before entering the Agora, people had to acknowledge Domitian was lord. He made it simple. Small incense stands were set up at each entrance. To enter, people had to burn a small amount of incense to the Caesar. An ink mark was then put on the person that allowed him entrance into the Agora. Without that, he couldn’t buy or sell. It also kept them from visiting with friends and family.

This became a controversy among Christians. The Nicolaitans felt Christians should just go along with it. They said, “You know you don’t mean it in your heart, so what does it matter?” Most believers disagreed. They refused to openly recognize anyone as their Lord, except Jesus.

Domitian tried to reason with John, the pastor of the church in Ephesus. But, he refused to submit to the emperor’s wishes. This angered Domitian, so he ordered him to be boiled in oil. But John didn’t die! In fact, he wasn’t harmed. The emperor was amazed and shaken. He decided since he couldn’t kill John, he would exile him to the island of Patmos.

Domitian then returned to Rome, not knowing he would be dead in a year and a half. Once he got to Rome, he found that his cousin and niece were atheists, a term used for

Christians because they didn't believe in many gods. Domitian had his cousin executed and sent his niece into exile.

It is a mystery of history as to why his persecution of Christians ended so abruptly. The story is told about the grandsons of Jude, the half-brother of Jesus.

It is said that Domitian became concerned when he heard that a descendant of King David would set up a world kingdom on earth. Because of this, he decided to kill all the descendants of David.

He then heard about two brothers living near Rome who were from the line of David. He had them brought to him. When they arrived, he asked, "Are you descendants of David?"

"Yes, we are."

He asked them how much they were worth financially. They said all their earthy worth was invested in the land they farmed. "From what we earn, we pay our taxes and live on what is left." They showed the emperor their rough hands to prove they were hard-working farmers.

He asked if they knew about the teaching that a descendant of David would someday rule the earth.

"Yes, but he has already come. His name is Jesus, the half-brother of Jude, our grandfather. His kingdom is not of this world. It is a spiritual kingdom. He is Lord, and lives in the hearts of his followers."

Domitian sent the two farmers home and brought his niece back from exile. This stopped his persecution of Christians. In time, Domitian was killed by some servants and members of the Praetorian Guard. The Senate hated him so much that they tried to remove all memory of him. 30 years after his death, Ephesus was 85-90% Christian.