

## Peter Remembers 26

**Tacitus, *Annals* 15.38** — There followed a disaster, whether due to chance or to the malice of the sovereign (*dolo principis*) is uncertain — for each version has its sponsors — but graver and more terrible than any other which has befallen this city by the ravages of fire.

It took its rise in the part of the Circus touching the Palatine and Caelian Hills; where, among the shops packed with flammable goods, the conflagration broke out, immediately gathered strength, and driven by the wind, swept the full length of the Circus: for there were neither mansions screened by boundary walls, nor temples surrounded by stone enclosures, nor obstructions of any description to impede its progress.

The flames, which in full force overran the level districts first, then shot up to the heights, and sank again to harry the lower parts, outran all efforts to quell it, the harm moving fast, the city being an easy prey because of the narrow, twisting lanes and formless streets typical of old Rome. In addition, shrieking and terrified women; fugitives stricken or immature in years; men consulting their own safety or the safety of others, as they dragged the infirm along or paused to wait for them, combined by either their delay or their haste, to impede everything. Often, while they glanced back to the rear, they were attacked on the flanks or in front; or, if they had made their escape into a neighboring quarter, that also was involved in the flames, and even districts which they had believed remote from danger were found to be in the same plight.

At last, irresolute what to avoid or what to seek, they crowded into the roads or threw themselves down in the fields: some who had lost the whole of their means — their daily bread included — chose to die, though the way of escape was open, and were followed by others, through love for the relatives whom they had proved unable to rescue. No one tried to combat the fire, as there were repeated threats from a large number of persons who forbade its extinction, while others were openly throwing firebrands and shouting that they were authorized (*sibi auctorem vociferabantur*) — whether as a license for looting or because of an order.

**Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 6.38** — But he showed no greater mercy to the people or the walls of his capital. . . . For under cover of displeasure at the ugliness of the old buildings and the narrow, crooked streets, he set fire to the city so openly that several ex-consuls did not venture to lay hands on his chamberlains although they caught them on their estates with tow and firebrands, while some granaries near the Golden House, whose space he particularly desired, were demolished by engines of war and then set on fire, because their walls were of stone. 2 For six days and seven nights destruction raged, while the people were driven for shelter to monuments and tombs. ...Viewing the conflagration from the tower of Maecenas and exulting, as he said, in "the beauty of the flames," he sang the whole of the "Sack of Ilium," in his regular stage costume. Furthermore, to gain from this calamity too all the spoil and booty possible, while promising the removal of the debris and dead bodies free of cost he allowed no one to approach the ruins of his own property; and from the contributions which he not only received, but even demanded, he nearly bankrupted the provinces and exhausted the resources of individuals.

**Tacitus, *Annals* 15.39** — Nero at this time was at Antium [Anzio] and did not return to Rome until the fire approached his house, which he had built to connect the palace with the gardens of Maecenas. It could not, however, be stopped from devouring the palace, the house, and everything around it. However, to relieve the people, driven out homeless as they were, he threw open to them the Campus Martius and the public buildings of Agrippa, and even his own gardens, and raised temporary structures to receive the destitute multitude. Supplies of food were brought up from Ostia and the neighboring towns, and the price of corn was reduced to three sesterces a peck. These acts, though popular, produced no effect, since a rumor had gone forth everywhere that, at the very time when the city was in flames, the emperor appeared on a private stage and sang of the destruction of Troy, comparing present misfortunes with the calamities of antiquity.

**Tacitus, *Annals* 15. 40** — At last, after five days, an end was put to the conflagration at the foot of the Esquiline hill, by the destruction of all buildings on a vast space, so that the violence of the fire was met by clear ground and an open sky. But before people had laid aside their fears, the flames returned, with no less fury this second time, and especially in the spacious districts of the city. Consequently, though there was less loss of life, the temples of the gods, and the porticoes which were devoted to enjoyment, fell in a yet more widespread ruin. And to this conflagration there attached a greater disgrace, because it broke out on the Aemilian property of Tigellinus, and it seemed that Nero was aiming at the glory of founding a new city and calling it by his name. Rome, indeed, is divided into fourteen districts, four of which remained uninjured, three were levelled to the ground, while in the other seven were left only a few shattered, half-burnt relics of houses.

**Tacitus, *Annals* 15.41** — . . . . Some persons observed that the beginning of this conflagration was on the 19th of July, the day on which the Senones had captured and burned Rome. . . . **15.42** — Nero meanwhile availed himself of his country's desolation to erect a mansion in which . . . the fields and lakes, with woods on one side to resemble a wilderness, and, on the other, open spaces and extensive vistas. . . .

**Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44** — . . . The next thing was to seek ways of propitiating the gods, and recourse was had to the Sibylline books . . . But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiations of the gods, did not stifle the report that the conflagration was the result of an order. Consequently, to put a stop to the rumor, Nero declared guilty, and then inflicted the most extreme tortures on, a class hated for their abominations, whom the populace called Christians (*vulgus Christianos appellabat*).

Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the death penalty (*supplicio adfectus erat*) during the reign of Tiberius, under one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a destructive superstition (*exitiabilis superstitio*), thus checked for a while, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular. Accordingly, they arrested those who openly confessed (*fatebantur*) [this superstition]; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred of the human race (*odio humani generis convicti sunt*).

Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burned, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a carriage. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed.

