The emperor Augustus (pronounced au-GUSS-tuss) was born Gaius Octavius (pronounced GY-us ok-TAY-vee-us) in 63 B.C.E., and later was called Octavian (pronounced ok-TAY-vee-an). His great uncle, Julius Caesar, had the strongest impact on his life. In 44 B.C.E., when Octavian was only 19 years old, Caesar gave him an important military command position. However, before Octavian took his new position, he learned that Caesar had been murdered. Caesar’s death plunged Rome into a bloody civil war. After 13 years of fighting, Octavian emerged as the unquestioned victor. In 27 B.C.E. the Senate awarded Octavian the title Augustus, which means “highly respected.” He was now head of state and supreme military commander. His new title and greater powers allowed him to become Rome’s first emperor.

Throughout his reign, Augustus lived a remarkably simple life. Despite his enormous wealth and power, his public image was that of a hardworking and strict but honest father figure. He gained popular support with the people, for he had a good sense of humor and was tolerant of criticism.

As emperor, Augustus first sought to prevent civil war from occurring again. He gained allegiance from senators by asking for their advice on important political matters. Because the Romans feared the power of kings, he never asked for that title. Instead, he referred to himself as “First Citizen.” To ensure loyalty of the army, he had every soldier swear allegiance to him, rather than to the Senate. Finally, he established the Praetorian (pronounced pray-TOR-e-an) Guard. These nine special units, made up of 500 to 1000 soldiers each, were solely responsible for protecting him.

To show the prosperity of his reign, Augustus began a program to make Rome safer and more beautiful. This program included restoring 82 temples and building new statues, theaters, and a large outdoor arena, or forum. The most famous of these buildings was the spectacular Pantheon, built to serve as a temple to all the Gods of Rome. So proud was Augustus of his efforts that he himself claimed, “I found Rome a city of brick and left it a city of marble.” Augustus also undertook other projects to improve the quality of life in Rome. For example, he made sure the city’s water system was repaired and two new water channels, or aqueducts, were constructed, and he established a fire department and a police force. Augustus placed an increased emphasis on learning and the arts, and he built Rome’s first library. He also encouraged many of his wealthy friends to provide complete financial support for—or patronize—writers and artists. Famous writers such as Virgil, Horace, and the historian Livy created their greatest works during this period.

Augustus’s emphasis on city improvements and the arts were welcomed by the Romans. However, he also pursued a strict moral crusade that was largely unpopular. Marriage,
divorce, and child-rearing were strictly private affairs before his reign. Augustus made family matters public by having laws passed to promote marriage and childbearing. The state offered rewards—such as political privileges and tax relief—to couples who stayed together and had many children, while unmarried adults and childless married couples lost the right to inherit money and property. Unmarried childless women had to pay a special tax on any property they owned. Augustus also issued laws, or edicts, that attempted to ban immoral public displays. For example, theater audiences had to refrain from rowdy behavior. Actors could not engage in conduct that might offend family values.

Augustus ruled the rest of the Roman Empire with organization and efficiency. The system for governing Rome’s many distant provinces was badly in need of reform, and Augustus provided it. He appointed governors to longer terms in office, allowing them to develop better policies and programs for the provinces. He also paid them better salaries. In addition, he ordered a census of the empire’s population, the first in more than 40 years. This made collecting taxes more efficient. Finally, he had new roads built to improve communications and trade between the provinces and Rome.

Despite his many accomplishments in governing Rome, Augustus failed to maintain the empire’s security in one critical area. At the beginning of the first century C.E., the Romans spent several years fighting the Germanic tribes that were threatening the empire’s northern border. At last the Romans appeared victorious. Confident of success, Augustus decided to organize the northern area near the Elbe River into a province. Unfortunately, in 7 C.E., he appointed an arrogant and brutal man named Quintilius Varus (pronounced kwin-TIL-ee-us VAR-us) as the new province’s governor. Varus treated the people there as if they were Roman slaves, and taxed them heavily. Two years later, a huge army of Germanic tribes surrounded the Roman troops and completely wiped them out. Fifteen thousand soldiers died, the worst Roman army defeat in 200 years. Discouraged, Augustus withdrew his forces back to the empire’s previous border. As a result, the Germans remained a strong force and a dangerous threat against Rome for many years.

At the time of this disastrous defeat, Augustus was 72 years old and knew he probably would not live much longer. Since there was no system for selecting a new leader, Augustus decided to choose someone as his heir, and then persuade the Senate to accept his choice. Since Augustus had no sons, his only option was his stepson Tiberius (pronounced ty-BIR-ee-us), the son of Augustus’s third wife, Livia Drusilla (LIV-ee-a droo-SIL-a). Augustus did not particularly like Tiberius, but Livia strongly influenced him, making sure her son remained close to the emperor in his declining years. Augustus eventually legally adopted Tiberius and began to share both military and civil powers with him. Tiberius proved to be an able and hardworking individual. When Augustus died in 14 C.E., the power of the emperor transferred smoothly to Tiberius.