Justinian’s Big Challenge

Like most leaders, Justinian faced many challenges during his reign. While he made many popular decisions, there were decisions that were not accepted by his subjects. When Justinian became Emperor in 527 CE, he was filled with ambition and great ideas. He collected a huge body of Roman laws and simplified their language. He made new laws that protected women. He tried to lessen the power of corrupt businessmen.

Despite his great plans, Justinian was unable to accomplish all that he had hoped to. By 532 CE, many people were frustrated and unhappy with his rule. As the public became more dissatisfied, they decided to riot in hopes of removing him from power. As a mob stormed his palace, Justinian became frightened and started to run for an escape ship. His wife, Theodora, refused to leave. She said, “Yonder is the sea, and there are the ships. Yet reflect whether, when you have once escaped to a place of security, you will not prefer death to safety.”

Justinian was convinced to stay because of Theodora’s bravery. What did she mean by her words? Imagine you were giving Justinian that same advice today. Using language we can easily understand, rewrite those words of advice. Then tell me what you would have done if you were Justinian.