

## How Paul Used His Roman Citizenship

Acts 22:22-30; Luke 6:26

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Paul used whatever he could lawfully use to promote the gospel of Jesus Christ among both Jews and Gentiles.

On the one hand, he used the Old Testament ceremonies in order to reach the Jews. Paul circumcised Timothy, took a Nazarite vow, prayed in the Temple in order to reach Jews with the gospel of Jesus Christ. He did so, not because he believed the ceremonies, dietary laws, and holy days of the Old Testament were an obligation for Christians in the New Covenant. He did so because he was free to use these ceremonies during that apostolic, transitional period of time as a means to evangelize his Jewish brethren. Paul called these Old Testament ceremonies temporary shadows that pointed to Jesus Christ (Colossians 2:17) and that were legally abolished and nailed to the cross of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:15; Colossians 2:14). He was not bound to use them, but he was free to use them, and he did.

On the other hand, Paul also used his Roman citizenship as a means to promote the gospel and bear testimony to the Gentiles in our text today. Paul's great burden (which we should mirror in our own lives as well) is found in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. Sadly, it is not until we have lost these blessings that we realize how we have used them for God's glory.

The main points from our text this Lord's Day are: (1) The Reaction of the Jews to Paul's Commission to the Gentiles (Acts 22:22-23); (2) The Reaction of the Romans to Paul's Citizenship (Acts 22:24-30).

### **I. The Reaction of the Jews to Paul's Commission to the Gentiles (Acts 22:22-23).**

A. Paul was granted permission by the Roman commander, who rescued Paul from the Jewish mob in the Temple, to address those Jews who sought to kill him for supposedly polluting the Temple with Gentiles.

1. In his defense (Acts 22:1-21), Paul made clear to the Jews that he was not anti-Jewish; he was second to none in his Jewishness (he was even trained by the most famous rabbi of that time, Gamaliel, and was the arch-persecutor of Jewish Christians to their death). And yet the Jewish Messiah, Jesus Christ, appeared to him in a great light on the road to Damascus, as he sought to arrest Jewish Christians and to bring them back to Jerusalem to face punishment for their faith in Jesus Christ. Paul hated Jesus Christ, and yet the Lord Jesus set His love upon Paul and sovereignly captured him by God's grace. All of us must be captured!

2. At the point in Paul's testimony in which he stated that the Jewish Messiah, Jesus, commissioned him to take the gospel to the Gentiles, we see once again the fury and frenzy of this Jewish mob. It is not because these Jews were opposed to Gentile proselytes (for there were many Gentile proselytes to Judaism). Their fury was rather due to Gentiles being accepted before God without having to become Jews by keeping the Old Testament laws and ceremonies. Paul taught that acceptance before God was only through faith in Jesus Christ; whereas the Jews taught there was only acceptance with God through keeping the Old Testament ceremonies. This jealousy in the heart of the Jews toward the Gentiles was God's very design (Romans 10:19; Romans 11:11).

B. The Jewish mob was incensed at the thought of Gentiles being brought to God without first becoming Jewish proselytes, and they shouted loudly as with one voice ("voices" is singular), "Away with such

a fellow from the earth” (not just away from our presence): for it not fit that he should live” (Acts 22:22).

1. They were saying that Paul had no right to still be alive—they should have killed him when they had the chance, and the Romans that now had him in custody should do the same. Paul’s love and prayers to see his fellow Jews brought to Jesus Christ did not make his testimony effective in bringing that to pass. They hated him with even a more furious passion. The hatred and threats of the world for standing for Christ and His truth reflect not the love and reward of God for His faithful servants. The more intense the persecution is, the more glorious the reward is (“of whom the world was not worthy” Hebrews 11:38). In fact, Jesus warned us that something is definitely wrong when the world speaks well of us (Luke 6:26). If our life and testimony do not offend the world, our life and testimony are too close to the world. There is nothing that sets us apart!

2. Dear ones, our testimony to family members and friends is no guarantee they will trust in Jesus—in fact, at times our testimony for Christ might actually drive them away. It is only the Spirit of God that can make our testimony for Jesus effective to those who are dead in their trespasses and sins. Paul could not save these Jews, nor can we save family member, friends, co-workers, or neighbors. Our job is not to save; our job is to be a faithful witness and to leave the results in saving or hardening to God (Romans 9:15-16). How many sincere Christians have a messiah complex, thinking that unless there are immediate tangible results in the lives of others, they have failed. That is usurping the place of the Holy Spirit. It is a burden too heavy for any of us to bear (we will be crushed under failure and disappointment); and it is burden we should not bear in the first place—it belongs to God to change the hearts of people and save them.

C. We are not only told what the Jewish mob said, but also what they did in Acts 22:23: they cast off their outer garments and threw dust into the air.

1. They were having a collective temper tantrum because they could not have their way with Paul. This was not the ordinary sign of reproach against blasphemy (which was rending and tearing their garments), nor were they picking up stones to throw at Paul. They were yelling at the top of their lungs, pulling off their outer garments and violently shaking and waving them, and picking up handfuls of dust and throwing it into the air. This was no Jewish custom they were following, but was a childish temper tantrum that they were throwing likely to influence the Roman commander to take them seriously and to give Paul to them to execute. Not that they weren’t terribly angry, but this was also for show (like we’ve seen by mobs in Middle Eastern countries before the cameras).

2. Dear ones, what about all the drama that we sometimes use to get the attention of a spouse or parents—tears, slamming doors, throwing things, using vile and profane speech, or the silent treatment and withholding affection, or making the relationship feel as cold as an Arctic wind. And why do we do this? I say this to our shame that we are throwing a temper tantrum to get something we want. It’s a childish performance, not a mature conversation. We find it repulsive to see a child manipulating his/her parents in public by a temper tantrum, and yet it is even more repulsive when adults do so. Dear ones, the Lord grant to each of us the grace to make disagreements not about getting our way regardless of how we act. The behavior of the Jews did not manipulate the Roman commander to play their game and deliver Paul to them. As we shall see, it is the mature and godly behavior of Paul that wins the day. It’s not drama that a marriage needs, but speaking the truth in love, honoring, and serving one another in faithfulness to Jesus Christ.

## **II. The Reaction of the Romans to Paul’s Citizenship (Acts 22:24-30).**

A. Paul’s use of his Roman citizenship is instructive, particularly as we see the reaction of the Roman commander.

1. The Roman commander (Claudius Lysias) is probably in a total state of shock at the

frenzy he had just witnessed from the Jews. He wants answers as to what Paul said to the Jews (in Aramaic) that resulted in such a display of fury. So he takes Paul up the steps to the Castle of Antonia, and without questioning Paul at all, he prepares to get answers by means of scourging Paul (“examined by scourging” Acts 22:24). No man according to God’s law is to be forced or tortured to accuse himself of a crime—one should voluntarily confess and come as his own accuser if he has committed a crime, but if not, due process and the rule of law require that there be 2 or 3 credible witnesses to confirm an accusation against one accused of a crime (Deuteronomy 19:15; Matthew 18:16). Remember the penalty for false witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:16-19). If these two principles were practiced in society today, public accusations and trying people before the court of public opinion would stop. Thumb screw, the rack, fire, and mutilation were all means used in the Inquisition to gain confessions and information from those that were suspected to be adversaries to the Roman Catholic Church (the same was used by the wicked government of Charles II and James II against the Covenanters in Scotland who attended conventicles or gave housing and aid to fleeing Covenanter ministers). It was not right then, and it is not right now.

a. The scourge used by the Romans was not only excruciating in ripping away at the flesh and setting the whole body (back, side, and front) into contortions from the pain, but it also led to the death of many from the loss of blood or even the exposure of vital organs. The Roman scourge consisted of pieces of metal and bone attached to the end of the leather straps that were bound to a strong wooden handle, so that when it was applied with force by those trained to use it, there was nothing in the ancient world that did more damage to the body of a man.

b. In addition to the crown of thorns, the blindfolding, mocking, spitting, punching with the fist, and crucifixion, John 19:1 says the Lord Jesus also endured the cruel punishment of the scourge. Pilate thought seeing Jesus in this bloody condition might gain the sympathy of the Jews in setting aside their envy against Christ, but it was to no avail. This was the cruel punishment that Jesus endured on our behalf in suffering for the sins of His people (1 Peter 2:24).

2. As the Roman centurion was binding Paul and preparing him to be scourged, Paul uses one of the rights granted by the Roman government to its citizens (a divine right from the light of nature), and he respectfully asks, “Is it lawful for you to scourge a man that is a Roman, and uncondemned [Acts 22:25]?” Paul doesn’t fly into a rage, shouting and demanding his rights. Few questions could have caused such a shock and awe among trained Roman soldiers as that one simple question. Paul’s question takes him from being the victim in this situation to being in control of this situation. For the implied answer is, “NO, it is not lawful.” In fact, it was not only unlawful to do so (according to the Valerian and Porcian laws of ancient Rome), but it could also bring about very serious consequences for those responsible. As Cicero of ancient Rome declared, “To bind a Roman is a crime, to flog him is an abomination” (*Against Verres*, 2.5.66).

a. Paul resisted tyranny, he did not comply with it. Romans 13 does not call Christians to passively submit to the tyrant, but rather to submit to the minister of God to thee for good, who fulfils the duties mentioned (who rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked).

b. Sadly, it is the wicked that are so often rewarded and the innocent that are increasingly punished in most nations today.

3. Thus, Paul’s question has the centurion in a panic, who then tells the commander, “Take heed what thou doest: for this man is a Roman” (Acts 22:26). The commander immediately drops whatever he was doing and comes to ask Paul if it is true that he is a Roman citizen—to which Paul answered, “Yes” (Acts 22:27). We are not told whether the commander sought written evidence for Paul’s affirmation, but that is not unlikely (especially when the consequences were so serious).

4. The commander seeks to take control of the situation by declaring that he had purchased his freedom or citizenship with a large amount of money (Acts 22:28, “freedom” does not express the relationship from slave to freeman, but from alien to citizen). The commander looking at Paul, bruised, bloody, and garments torn and ripped by the Jews, thought he might outdo Paul by boasting about the great

sum of money that was paid for his citizenship. But Paul maintains control of the situation by responding, “I was free born” (Acts 22:28). It was a greater honor to inherit citizenship from one’s father.

5. So likewise those who are born into the Visible Church are no less citizens in the Visible Kingdom of God than those who are brought in by way of their confession of faith. That is why God authorized that children be administered the outward sign and seal of their citizenship in the Visible Kingdom of God. Covenant children are federally holy and set apart from the world to the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:14). By birth to believing parents, they have this right from God Himself (see the house of Abraham and Lydia).

6. Immediately, all attempts to proceed with scourging Paul come to a speedy halt, and the commander is himself afraid that Paul might make an issue of this to his superiors (Acts 22:29). As a result, the Roman commander decides to proceed cautiously by first learning what were the accusations the Jews brought against Paul by bringing Paul before the Jewish Sanhedrin on the following day (Acts 22:30).

B. Why did Paul use his Roman citizenship here in Jerusalem before he was scourged when he did not use it in Philippi before he was beaten with rods and imprisoned in stocks (Acts 16:37)?

1. In Philippi, Paul waited until after he was caned and imprisoned so as to preserve the small group of new converts in Philippi (the magistrates for fear of Paul’s charges would leave the newly found church alone for the time). In Jerusalem, it Paul spoke out about His Roman citizenship before being scourged as a testimony to the Roman commander that his position and his life were spared by Paul, who was not filled with vengeance or wrath. This was a testimony to the Roman commander of God’s work of grace in Paul’s life.

2. Paul knew the severity of the Roman scourge (it could lead to death), and though he had previously said that he was ready to die in Jerusalem if the Lord so willed it, he did not have a martyr complex, in hastening his own death. Paul did not run to face suffering for suffering sake. He suffered for Christ and for the sake of the elect (2 Timothy 2:10).

3. Paul had previously said that after his visit to Jerusalem, “I must also see Rome” (Acts 19:21). He was now in the custody of Rome. If he allowed himself to be scourged, he might by his own actions cut his life short and miss his goal to preach the gospel in the Imperial city of Rome. The Lord in the next chapter confirms this very desire of Paul that he shall bear testimony for the Lord Jesus in Rome (Acts 23:11). Paul was going to use every lawful means he could to testify of the Lord’s saving grace in Rome.

Dear ones, just because a nation calls certain acts lawful, or calls them a “right” does not mean we should use them. For example, American citizenship may grant the “right” to practice a false religion, to blaspheme God, to break the Sabbath, to murder unborn children, to divorce on unbiblical grounds, to practice same sex “marriages”, to incorporate with the government, or to celebrate holy days. That which is unlawful may not be used lawfully—only that which is lawful and agreeable to God’s Word. A moral wrong cannot be a civil right! God’s rights (Commandments 1-4) cannot be violated in order to preserve our rights. When God’s rights are ignored and despised, will the true rights of men be ignored and despised. We can only maintain and ensure man’s rights by maintaining and ensuring God’s rights. Our rights must bow before God’s rights.

Paul used all lawful means that he could to make Christ known to Jews and Gentiles. He wasn’t using these means as advantages to promote himself, to promote his fame, to promote the size of his following, or to promote his wealth. He used his Roman citizenship to lawfully preserve his own life, but he did so with even a greater goal in mind—to preserve his life so as to testify to the Jews, to the Roman soldiers, to the Roman commanders, to the Roman governors and kings, and even to Caesar himself that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior, and there is none other. Paul willingly sacrificed all for Jesus Christ. That is not a sacrifice that the Lord only demands from Paul. It is a sacrifice that Jesus demands from all of us (Luke 9:23).