

WHIPBACKLASH

ACTS 22:23-30 JANUARY 6, 2021

2020 was a remarkable year when it comes to the topic of law and freedom. In just a few short weeks we found that many rights that we assumed were guaranteed weren't really ours to enjoy any longer, at least not in certain parts of the country. The infringement of rights and government officials breaking the rules at whim are common topics of discussion these days, which makes a passage like the one before us all the more compelling.

It's been a little while, so let me get us back up to pace with the story. Paul had gone to Jerusalem. While in the Temple he was attacked by a mob and was being beaten to death until the Roman garrison intervened. While being ushered out, he asked to speak to the crowd. The Roman Commander (named Lysias) allowed it and Paul tried to preach to the angry Jews who had tried to kill him. When he dared to mention the word "Gentiles," the scene exploded and a riot began once more. Paul was saved from the violent mob, but we will find him out of the frying pan and into a fire.

In this famous scene the apostle will invoke his rights as a Roman citizen in order to escape a terrible suffering and the Commander is the one who suddenly finds himself in a world of hurt.

Tonight we can see two pictures to ponder. The first is a picture of our spiritual reality as Christians. The second is a picture of the unsuspected emergency every unbeliever is in.

But what about the civic freedom of it all? Isn't this a passage that shows us how to claim our rights? One beloved commentator frames the story as teaching us that it is our *duty* to exercise our protected rights as citizens in whatever country we find ourselves in.¹

The Bible gives us a lot of direction when it comes to how to interact with the political systems of the world. There's nothing categorically wrong with enjoying the rights and freedoms that are made available to us in a nation like ours. But, we can't very well look at this incident and say it presents to us a doctrine of how and when to claim our rights, because *Paul did not always do what he does in this passage!* In a very similar setting, back in chapter 16, he allowed himself to be illegally bound, illegally beaten and illegally imprisoned. He didn't say a single word until many hours later. In that case, he specifically refused to claim his rights when he could have exercised them. So what was the difference between these two illegal arrests? And what does it mean for us in a time when we're feeling a mounting pressure against churches and religious freedom?

Though Paul's choices can hardly be described as prescriptive for us, as usual the way in which he carried himself should inspire us as we run our own races. So let's begin in verse 23.

Acts 22:23-24 - ²³As they were yelling and flinging aside their garments and throwing dust into the air, ²⁴the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, directing that he be interrogated with the scourge to discover the reason they were shouting against him like this.

The scene outside the barracks was total mayhem. The crowd no longer cared that there was a contingent of armed soldiers there who would have no problem cutting them all down. These Jews were blinded by their fury and hatred.

¹ H.A. Ironside *Acts*

Despite everything that happens in this section - the injustice, the corruption and persecution, we *never* see Paul vent any anger or cynicism or hostility toward anyone. Rage is *not* a fruit of the Spirit. It's fashionable these days, it's the currency that's used online and in political discourse, but we are not to be a raging people. We're not to be hostile combatants. As a Christian, you are a *medic*, not a sniper. You're a rescue diver, not a door gunner. And in this world, everyone's mad about something. What *better* time to be full of God's joy and His peace. What a dramatic *difference* that will be compared to the angry, fearful, hatred that permeates our society today.

Now, Lysias had a problem. Not only was he responsible to keep the peace in Jerusalem, but if there was a riot like this, he could be held personally responsible for any property damage that resulted.² We'll find that he had a lot of power. At the end of the chapter *he* convenes the Sanhedrin and the Chief Priests. It's like an army captain telling the Supreme Court they have to come into session and hear a case that he wants them to hear. But, as we watch Lysias, we'll see he doesn't go and talk with the Temple police. He doesn't have any interview with the Temple officials who had been on duty. Instead he goes straight to the easiest method in his arsenal: torture. It's not fair, it's not due process. It's not necessary, but hey, it gets results, right?

This scourging that Paul was about to endure was the same our Lord suffered before He was nailed to the cross. Paul had been beaten with rods before - for example in Philippi - but *this* was the Roman flagellum. Many people died before their scourging was over.

There's a reminder here for us: Our hope *cannot* be in human governments or systems. Paul was no dummy, but it's *possible* that, once the soldiers came and rescued him he thought, "Oh good, I don't have to be beaten to death today! Now I'm safe because the government has stepped in." Maybe he didn't think that, but I think it would've crossed *my* mind. But once out of Temple he was not at *all* safe. Instead of being *beaten* to death he was quite possibly going to be *scourged* to death!

As David said:

Psalm 20:7 (ESV) - Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.

The problem with chariots is that *sometimes* they run you over. In this era we tend to have a lot of our anticipation and confidence wrapped up in political systems and candidates and parties, but our hope is in God alone. He *alone* is our Rock and our salvation.

Acts 22:25 - ²⁵As they stretched him out for the lash, Paul said to the centurion standing by, "Is it legal for you to scourge a man who is a Roman citizen and is uncondemned?"

This is an amazing scene. There's Paul, bruised and battered from the beating he had endured. They bring him in, remove his shirt. They take his hands and stretch them out, tying him down onto what *might* become his death bed. The soldiers get the scourge from it's storage space, probably some linens for wiping off the blood and chunks of flesh that would splatter onto their uniforms. And, at the *last* possible moment, Paul casually turns his head and says, "Quick question..."

Why did Paul wait so long? We can't be sure. We don't know Paul to have a flair for the dramatic, he's a pretty straightforward guy. Maybe he was waiting for the Spirit to lead him. Maybe he was

² Ivor Powell *The Amazing Acts*

doing the ministry math in his head. I think we can notice some important differences between *this* situation and the similar one in Philippi back in Acts 16. First, in Philippi, he was beaten with rods. Though that would've been truly awful, there was little chance he was going to die. Here, there was a *very strong* chance he would die. In Philippi there was a brand new church being started, the *very first* in Europe. And through his suffering he was able to secure a period of peace for that church. In this situation, going through with the scourging would do nothing to improve the standing of the church in Jerusalem or the government's pressure against Christianity. So, on that *ministry* level, there's no benefit for this suffering, which *could* be avoided.

Throughout Church history we find that there are some who believe that suffering should be wholeheartedly embraced. We think of monks whipping themselves or doing other self-harm. The idea is that if you suffer more you are automatically less sinful and more Christ-like. It's not just a medieval idea. One best selling Christian author who leans more toward asceticism in his attitude and teaching wrote in one of his latest books that though we shouldn't suffer just for the sake of suffering we should "desire" it.³ His reasoning is that suffering will always accompany true Christianity and that suffering helps us to become Christlike. We agree with both of those statements. And I think, as a church, we spend a *lot* of time talking about suffering and how, in this age, God's strength is shown through our weakness. But we do not see Paul *always* embracing suffering when he could have. Whether we're called to endure suffering at the hands of the Lord's enemies or whether we're able to escape it is up to God's will and provision. Sometimes Christians are James and sometimes they're Peter. Sometimes they find themselves in Acts 16 and sometimes in Acts 22.

Now, we remember that Paul had most definitely been promised that he would suffer a *lot*, right from the beginning when Ananias came and restored his sight. We, too, are promised suffering in this world for the cause of Christ. The world hated Jesus, they're going to hate us too as we live out our faith. But, the point of Paul's life was not to set a world record for suffering. Neither is ours. So, while we believe the Bible when it says we should expect it and not think it a strange thing when it happens, while we trust God in it and rejoice if we're able to share in Christ's sufferings, we also recognize that there *are* times when God *does* rescue people out of suffering and allow them to avoid it. We don't need to become *self*-flagellating monks in order to become Christlike. But neither is it Christlike to expect to always be healthy and wealthy and free to do whatever we want.

Back into the text. Paul says he's a citizen and in our modern age of easy lies it's surprising that they take his word for it. There are a couple of reasons why they wouldn't have much doubt. First of all, to falsely claim to be a citizen of Rome was a capital offense.⁴ Second, citizens would sometimes carry small wooden tablets that acted like a passport which could prove their citizenship.⁵

In Paul's wording we see a beautiful picture of our spiritual reality. If you are a Christian, you are an uncondemned citizen in the court of heaven. Your guilt has been washed away. Your name has been added to heaven's roll. There is *no* condemnation for those in Christ. How does a person receive such an amazing gift? John writes, "Anyone who believes in the Son of God is not condemned."

In Rome there were all sorts of classes of people. There were slaves, peasants, citizens, soldiers, aristocrats. As believers, when the Bible says we are uncondemned and that we are citizens, it's hard to grasp just how much God has done for us. He not only freed us from slavery, but He has granted us a forever home in heaven. On top of that, we're allowed to serve the King. On top of that,

³ Francis Chan *Letters To The Church*

⁴ Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary

⁵ CSB Study Bible Notes

Jesus has made us His *friends*. On top of that, we have been *adopted* as sons and daughters and included in the full inheritance that belongs to Christ. And, along the way, God has fully, finally dealt with our sin, removing them from us as far as east is from west, remembering them no more.

Of course, as citizen sons and daughters, we are called to a life of worthy obedience to our God and Father. And, as we all know through personal experience, we fall short of the standard. Take this comfort from 1 John:

1 John 3:20 - whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart.

Don't live under condemnation. Live in the amazing realities of your spiritual citizenship.

Acts 22:26 - ²⁶When the centurion heard this, he went and reported to the commander, saying, "What are you going to do? For this man is a Roman citizen."

Centurions are always interesting characters. They are shown as men of decision and thoughtfulness and integrity. As a devotional thought, we should take note of this man's courage. His commander had been playing fast and loose with the law and the centurion sticks his neck out, not only for Paul, but also to help save *Lysias* from a really bad mistake. He wasn't just going to go along and say, "I was just following orders." When we find ourselves in a situation where something like this is going on, we should also take courage, show integrity and stand up for what is right.

Acts 22:27-28 - ²⁷The commander came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" "Yes," he said. ²⁸The commander replied, "I bought this citizenship for a large amount of money." "But I was born a citizen," Paul said.

We notice that Paul was *still* not aggravated or vindictive. He's not screaming for their badge number or gloating that he's going to get them all fired or killed. He's not smug or enjoying the fact that they had made this mistake. He speaks peaceably. These guys were actively wronging him, but Paul does not categorize them as enemies! He wanted these guys to be *saved!* In fact, even though *Lysias* was totally in the wrong, Paul never goes after him. He never reveals what really happened that day.

There were different ways you could become a Roman citizen. We don't know who in Paul's family had won that privilege or for what reason, but it was now part of Paul's inheritance. He was born into it. This shows us more of our spiritual reality. You cannot merit membership in God's Kingdom. You can't buy it or earn it or win it. To have it you must be *born*. Born again.

1 John 5:1 - Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father also loves the one born of him.

Lysias had bought or bribed his way in, which would've been quite a feat, especially if he had started off as a slave. But all his work, all his gains, all his status was now forfeit. Not only could he lose his job for what he's done, had he gone through with this scourging, he may have been *executed*. His whole life of effort, all the money he paid, all he had given to Rome as a soldier, it was all for nothing. One mistake cancelled it all out. And everyone there knew just how serious this was.

Acts 22:29 - ²⁹So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately. The commander too was alarmed when he realized Paul was a Roman citizen and he had bound him.

They didn't know they had just done something they would be condemned for. Did you know that you probably commit about 3 felonies a day?⁶ It's true, technically, even if you have no idea you're doing it. For example, if you ladies have ever visited Carmel, California wearing high heels without a permit, you broke the law.⁷ I couldn't find it in the municipal code online, but multiple outlets (including *Ripley's Believe It Or Not*) cite a Hanford rule which states that, in our fine town, it is against the law to interfere with kids jumping in puddles.⁸

Those are silly examples, but when we apply this to the *spiritual* picture it becomes very serious. The unbelievers around us, in many cases, have no idea that they are condemned to eternal death because of their sin. They've missed the mark. They've made mistakes. They choose to do wrong. And because of it, they are on a crash course with judgment.

Here's what that means for us as Christians: People need to be told that they are sinners. We're not to celebrate their guilt or relish in telling them about hell. Rather we should have the kind of urgency and compassion Paul had for the lost.

Sometimes today we'll see prominent preachers say things like, "I want people to feel uplifted when they hear my messages." And so there is a de-emphasizing of sin. But people need to know that they are in serious trouble. They're headed for a sentencing date and they are most definitely guilty. Commander Lysias realized this and was understandably afraid. What would he do? Would he fall down before Paul, as the Philippian jailer had and say, "What must I do to be saved?"

Acts 22:30 - ³⁰The next day, since he wanted to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews, he released him and instructed the chief priests and all the Sanhedrin to convene. He brought Paul down and placed him before them.

Ah, Lysias, it's too late to be legal now. But we'll see he tries to scheme his way out of this mess. I wonder how long he lived in fear that Paul would reveal what he had done. Listen, if you're an unbeliever, you're like Lysias. You are guilty of a serious crime, not against Rome but against God. And no matter what you've tried to buy or earn or trade, you cannot pay the fee for your guilt. There's no hiding from God's wrath. No scheming your way out of it. It doesn't matter if you have power and influence and wealth and position, like Lysias, it will all vanish in a moment. The *only* way to be saved from your condemnation is to be born again. No one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again. You must become a child of God, be adopted into His family in order to be saved. How? By believing in His Son, Jesus Christ. He, and He alone, has made it possible for us to become uncondemned citizens of heaven, giving us "a living hope and an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for us."⁹ If you're not a Christian, won't you accept this free gift that God offers you?

For we who *are* believers here tonight, a closing thought: Being uncondemned does *not* mean we will be undisturbed. We face trials and troubles, setbacks and sufferings as we walk with God. Perhaps the Lord will allow us to avoid some of them, but often not. Look at Paul: While the whole city was shaking with rage, while Lysias' world was coming crumbling down, Paul is at peace. He's not foaming at the mouth. He keeps his calling and purpose in focus. In *this* case, the Lord gave him

⁶ <https://ips-dc.org/three-felonies-day/>

⁷ <https://www.carmelcalifornia.com/fun-facts-about-carmel.htm>

⁸ <https://twitter.com/ripleys/status/250620699910230016?lang=en>

⁹ 1 Peter 1:3 (ESV)

leave to escape the scourging, but not so he could go on the attack himself, rather so he could continue to preach the Gospel. And, along the way, he showed completely undeserved grace to these soldiers. Our spiritual reality gives us present priorities. Even when we believers start to feel pressure from a God-hating world, we remember that God has brought us into a spacious place, leading us on a straight path which leads to fullness of glory and sanctification. A path on which we grow to become more and more Christlike in our thought and affection and behavior and in the fellowship of His sufferings. We've been made free, uncondemned, lifted up above the circumstances of earth so that we might not only enjoy our relationship with God, but help others receive His salvation as we go.