

# Why Does the Bible Specify That Paul Was a Roman Citizen?

By Stephanie Hertenberg

Paul states his Roman citizenship repeatedly in the Bible. When he does, the reactions of those around him are very telling. When Paul and Silas are released from prison in Acts 16, Paul declares that both he and Silas are Roman citizens. Paul says that the magistrates “have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves!” When Paul’s words are relayed to the magistrates “they were afraid when they heard that [Paul and Silas] were Roman citizens; so [the magistrates] came and apologized to them.”

Similarly, when Paul is accused of bringing gentiles into the Temple and arrested, he tells the Roman tribune of his citizenship. Paul is about to be flogged and had been “tied...up with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, ‘Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who is uncondemned?’” The centurion fetched the tribune who “asked Paul, ‘Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?’ And [Paul] said, ‘Yes.’” The tribune, still somewhat suspicious, states that “it cost [him] a large sum of money to get [his] citizenship.” Paul, however, states that he was “born a citizen.” The reaction among the Romans was instant. “Immediately, those who were about to flog [Paul] drew back from him; and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him.”

Roman citizens were granted a variety of rights that the rest of the population of the Roman Empire was denied. Among those rights were the right to a trial, the right to appeal decisions and the right to remain safe from torture before conviction. Citizens who were condemned to death were also guaranteed to be spared some of the more gruesome methods of execution practiced in the Roman Empire. Citizens, for example, were largely safe from crucifixion and were often given the privilege of choosing their own method of execution or committing suicide -- which was seen as an honorable choice in Rome. Though crucifixion has come to be indelibly associated with the Roman Empire, Cicero wrote that “the very word ‘cross’ should be far removed, not only from the Roman citizen, but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears...The mere mention of such a thing is shameful to a Roman citizen and a free man.”

Paul’s citizenship acted as a shield against the worst of the Roman Empire’s cruelties. He could not simply be imprisoned, flogged or killed without a trial. He was far from safe, but Rome could not simply make Paul conveniently disappear. Roman officials had to follow official policy when dealing with Paul. This allowed him, in many ways, to be bolder than many other early Christians when it came to spreading the religion. In fact, his citizenship meant that Roman officials had to keep Paul safe even when others wanted him dead. In Acts 23, Claudius Lysias “came with the guard and rescued [Paul]” when Paul was “seized by the Jews and about to be killed by them” after he learned that Paul was a Roman citizen. Claudius Lysias also provided “two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen” in order to transport Paul to Caesarea safely.