

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 17, Acts 16-17

6-Min. Video Overview

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Okay, picture this. We're in Philippi, a city in Macedonia that is Roman to its core. A seemingly small religious argument is about to explode into a legal and political firestorm, and it's all going to hinge on one single, hidden fact that will test the very limits of Roman law.

So this is the official charge thrown at two missionaries, Paul and Silas. They get dragged into the city center, and this accusation is hurled at them in public. Notice the language.

It's sharp, and it's meant to get a reaction. It's all about us Romans versus these Jews. And that right there is the real heart of the issue, because behind this very public, very official charge of messing with Roman culture, there's a much simpler and, you know, much more profitable motive.

That whole accusation, it was just a smokescreen. All right, so let's set the scene. What really happened was Paul had just freed a slave girl from what was essentially spiritual exploitation.

Now, here's the problem. Her owners were making a ton of money off her supposed fortune-telling abilities. So when Paul freed her, he didn't just perform a miracle.

He tanked their entire business. You can see the disconnect right here, can't you? The owners could have taken Paul to court for damaging their property, but that would have been a private civil case. Instead, they got clever.

They weaponized public prejudice. They took their financial problem and dressed it up as a huge threat to the Roman way of life. And wow, did this charge land in fertile ground.

Philippi was obsessed with being Roman. We're talking about a city where Roman laws, Roman traditions, and the Latin language were everywhere. On top of that, the emperor had just kicked all the Jews out of Rome itself, so you've got this powder keg of xenophobia just waiting to go off.

The charge, Jewish, not Roman, wasn't just an accusation. It was like lighting a match. So, as you might expect, the crowd goes wild.

The city officials, probably just trying to stop a riot, completely skip any kind of trial and go straight to the punishment. And for anyone who wasn't a Roman citizen, that punishment was public, it was brutal, and it followed a script. This whole process was called *coercio*, and it was designed to do two things: inflict pain and humiliate you.

So, they're stripped naked in front of everyone, beaten with heavy wooden rods by official enforcers, and then chunked into the deepest, darkest, most disgusting part of the prison. To top it all off, their legs are locked into wooden stocks, which could be used to force them into incredibly painful positions. And yet, in this moment of just absolute degradation and pain, something pretty extraordinary happens.

It's the middle of the night, they're wounded, they're locked up, and they're not cursing their luck; they're singing. Then, an earthquake hits. But this is no ordinary earthquake.

The building stands; nobody gets hurt, but somehow in this incredibly precise event, every single prisoner's chains are broken, and all the doors swing open. It's... strange. Well, the jailer wakes up, sees the open doors, and is about to kill himself, assuming he's failed and everyone's escaped.

But Paul stops him, tells him they're all still there. This act of grace leads to the jailer's conversion, but the story is far from over. The next morning, the magistrates, maybe a little spooked by the earthquake, just want the problem to go away.

They send a message to quietly let them go. And that is when Paul plays his trump card. He refuses to just sneak out the back.

Instead, he drops a bombshell. He and Silas are Roman citizens. This one sentence changes absolutely everything.

It turns a story about persecution into a lesson in legal strategy. So, what was the big deal? What did being a Roman citizen actually get you? Roman citizenship was basically the ultimate legal shield. It meant you could not be tied up, you could not be beaten, and you absolutely could not be thrown in prison without a proper, formal trial.

This was taken so seriously that if you falsely claimed to be a citizen, you could be executed for it. So those magistrates hadn't just roughed up some travelers; they had illegally assaulted citizens of the Roman Empire. Now, to be fair, some scholars have questioned whether Paul really was a citizen.

They'll point out he never brings it up in his own letters, and citizens weren't supposed to be beaten like that. But as research from scholars like Dr. Keener shows, those objections don't really hold water. Arguing from silence is always tricky.

We know for a fact thousands of non-elites had citizenship. And yeah, corrupt officials absolutely broke the law and beat citizens all the time. So it all comes down to the timing.

Why didn't Paul just yell, I'm a Roman citizen, before the beating started? Well, because by waiting, he gained all the power. He flipped the script. The lawbreakers were no longer Paul and Silas; the lawbreakers were the magistrates.

They had violated the rights of Roman citizens, a crime that could end their careers. Now they had to come down to the prison themselves and publicly escort Paul and Silas out. Talk about a humiliating reversal.

Paul uses this legal victory to give the new church in Philippi some breathing room. But his own journey? Well, it's about to get even more dangerous. He and Silas, probably still covered in runes, hit the main Roman highway, the Via Ignatia.

And look at this trip. We're talking nearly 100 miles on foot. Three long, hard stretches of travel, which probably took days, all while trying to recover from a severe beating.

Their destination? Thessalonica, the capital city of Macedonia. So they get to Thessalonica, this massive port city, and the trouble starts all over again. But this time, his opponents aren't just going to accuse him of breaking some local customs.

No, this time they're going to go for the jugular. A new mob gets stirred up. This time, they grab the man who's hosting Paul, a guy named Jason, and they drag him in front of the city officials.

And the accusation they make is literally the most serious charge you could make in the entire Roman Empire. Treason. Plain and simple.

To say there is another king was a direct challenge to the authority and the majesty of the emperor himself. This was a capital offense. We've moved way beyond a local squabble.

This is now an accusation of sedition against the state of Rome. And here's a really cool historical detail. The officials in Thessalonica are called polytarchs.

Now that's a super specific local title that was used almost exclusively in this part of the world. And it's been confirmed by actual ancient inscriptions found right there. It's a tiny detail, but it adds a whole lot of credibility to the story.

So the polytarchs, who probably don't take this charge all that seriously, but really need to calm down the mob, find a way out. They make Jason post a bond, which is basically a promise to the court that Paul won't cause any more trouble. And the result of that? Paul and Silas are forced to flee the city in the middle of the night.

So let's just step back for a second. What began as an argument over a slave girl's profitability in Philippi has now spiraled into a charge of treason against Caesar himself in Thessalonica. What does digging into all this context really tell us about the story? Well, it just completely changes the narrative, doesn't it? This isn't just a simple story about faith and miracles anymore.

It's a legal drama about the power of citizenship. It's a sharp look at the realities of xenophobia, and it's a political thriller where raw financial greed gets hidden behind public outrage and the ultimate threat of treason hangs over everything. And this really brings us to a final thought.

When we start digging into the law, the politics, the culture of a time period, a simple story can reveal these incredible hidden layers. It just makes you wonder, doesn't it? How many other truths are hiding out there in plain sight, just waiting for us to uncover their context?