

Title: Acts 16-17: Paul's Roman Citizenship and Thessalonian Turmoil

Author: Dr. Craig Keener

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Abstract

This lecture examines Acts chapter 16, verse 19 through chapter 17, verse 9, exploring the legal, cultural, and spiritual struggles of Paul and Silas in Philippi and Thessalonica. Dr. Craig Keener analyzes their public stripping, beating, and imprisonment in Philippi, followed by a dramatic midnight earthquake that resulted in the salvation of the jailer and his household. He discusses the significance of Paul's Roman citizenship, addressing skeptical scholarly objections and explaining why Paul used it to secure the fledgling church's safety. Finally, the lecture tracks their arduous journey along the Via Egnatia to Thessalonica, detailing the conversion of prominent women, the incitement of a marketplace mob, and the treason charges brought against Jason before the local polytarchs.

Outline

I. Continuing Conflict in Philippi (Acts 16:19-24)

A. The Slave Owners' Grievance

Owners of the slave girl are furious that she was liberated from the Pythian spirit.

Loss of financial profit from her fortune-telling.

No direct legal charge for casting out spirits; owners file a base property damage and nuisance suit instead.

B. Trial before the Roman Magistrates

Dragging Paul and Silas to the Roman forum (the central agora of Philippi, 230 x 485 feet, intersected by the Via Egnatia).

Magistrates: Greek title strategoi representing the Latin duo viri (or praetors).

The base charge: 'These men being Jews teach customs that are unlawful for us being Romans.'

Fueling local xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and Roman pride (Philippi as a Roman colony).

Recent context: Emperor Claudius's recent expulsion of Jews from Rome (c. 49 AD).

C. Public Beating and Imprisonment

Mob action and public stripping of Paul and Silas.

Beaten with rods by lictors (magistrates' attendants carrying rods in bundles).

Public stripping and beating served to humiliate Middle Eastern Judeans, who were highly sensitive to public nudity (cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:2, 'humiliated in Philippi').

Imprisonment: Put in the dark inner prison and secured in heavy wooden stocks fastened to the floor.

Terrible hygiene: lack of sanitation, cold floors, and infected wounds.

II. Divine Deliverance and the Jailer's Conversion (Acts 16:25-34)

A. Midnight Worship

Paul and Silas praying and singing hymns in their suffering.

Singing at midnight fulfills Psalm 119:61-62.

Other prisoners were listening to them, indicating an immediate spiritual influence.

B. The Earth-Shaking Deliverance

A massive earthquake shakes the prison foundations, opening all doors and releasing all bonds.

Earthquakes were widely viewed in antiquity as divine activity or judgment (Greeks associated them with Poseidon).

Precise divine action: no one is injured, and only bonds are loosened.

C. Thwarting the Jailer's Suicide

Jailer wakes and prepares to commit suicide, assuming prisoners escaped.

Roman law and cultural honor: Suicide was viewed as a noble alternative to execution for allowing escapes.

Paul yells, 'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!'

D. The Conversion of the Household

Jailer falls down asking: 'Sirs (kurioi), what must I do to be saved?'

Reversal of lordship: Paul directs him to 'Believe in the Lord (kurios) Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household.'

Romans culturally expected the entire household to follow the religion of the head of the house.

Washing and baptism: The jailer washes their wounds, and they wash him and his household in water baptism.

High-risk hospitality: The jailer takes them to his home and feeds them a meal (table fellowship with Gentiles, crossing non-kosher barriers).

III. The Revelation of Roman Citizenship (Acts 16:35-40)

A. Morning Release Order

Magistrates send word to let the prisoners go quietly.

Possible reasons: The earthquake as an omen, or private negotiation by the wealthy Lydia behind the scenes.

B. Paul's Assertion of Rights

Paul refuses to slip away quietly, revealing that he and Silas are Roman citizens.

The Julian Law (Lex Julia) strictly forbade binding, putting in chains, or beating Roman citizens without trial.

Falsely claiming citizenship was a capital offense, ensuring that claims were highly credible.

C. Addressing Skeptical Objections to Paul's Citizenship

Objection: Paul's letters do not mention his citizenship.

Rebuttal: Paul boasts only in his sufferings, and citizenship was irrelevant to his theological letters. It is, however, implied in Philippians 1:7 and 1:30.

Objection: Citizenship was reserved only for elite municipal non-Jews.

Rebuttal: Ephesian and Roman inscriptions show thousands of Jews and freed slaves achieved citizenship.

Objection: Citizenship would require pagan practices.

Rebuttal: Philo and Josephus document large, thriving communities of Jewish Roman citizens in Rome who were exempt.

Objection: Paul was beaten with rods despite being a citizen.

Rebuttal: Corrupt governors (e.g., Florus and Verres) frequently violated citizen rights in distant provinces when they could get away with it.

Objection: Why didn't Paul reveal his citizenship before the beating?

Rebuttal: It would have initiated a prolonged legal battle. By waiting, Paul gained the legal upper hand over the magistrates.

D. Arguments Supporting Paul's Citizenship

The Roman cognomen Paulus (usually held only by citizens).

Paul's legal appeal to the Emperor, which was a unique right of Roman citizens.

The lengthy Roman custody in Judea and Rome, which Luke would not have invented due to its cultural shame.

Descendant of freed slaves from Tarsus (associated with the Synagogue of the Freedpersons).

E. Pleading and Departure

Magistrates are terrified when they realize they violated Roman law.

They come in person to plead with and escort the apostles out, protecting their own political offices.

Paul and Silas visit Lydia's home to encourage the church before departing.

IV. Arduous Journey Along the Via Egnatia (Acts 17:1)

A. The Route and Distances

Amphipolis: 33 miles (50 km) past Philippi.

Apollonia: 27 miles (40 km) further.

Thessalonica: 35 miles (55 km) further.

A grueling, multi-day walk of over 95 miles with fresh, painful back wounds.

B. The Via Egnatia

A major, paved Roman military highway (no more than 20 feet or 6 meters wide).

Provided a secure, engineered connection between Rome and the East.

V. The Mission and Turmoil in Thessalonica (Acts 17:2-9)

A. Social and Religious Profile of Thessalonica

Largest port and capital of Macedonia's second district.

Residence of the Roman provincial governor.

Sizable population (~200,000) with diverse religious cults (Egyptian Isis/Serapis, Mysteries of the Kiberi).

B. Preaching in the Synagogue

Paul spends three weeks lecturing in the synagogue, demonstrating the Messiah from scripture.

Supports himself through manual labor and financial gifts sent from Philippi (95 miles away).

Conversions of Gentile God-fearers and prominent, wealthy Macedonian women who became patrons.

C. Incitement of the Marketplace Mob

Jealous Jewish opponents enlist 'idle' and unemployed marketplace workers.

High unemployment was a documented problem in Thessalonica (addressed in 1 and 2 Thessalonians).

The mob forms a riotous assembly to attack Jason's house.

D. Treason Charges before the Polyarchs

Mob drags Jason and other believers before the polyarchs (local officials of the free city of Thessalonica).

The accusation of treason (maiestas): 'These men are acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king, Jesus.'

Astrological predictions of a new king were viewed as predicting the current emperor's demise.

Jesus had been crucified under the exact same charge of sedition before Pilate (Luke 23:2).

E. Posting Bond and Sending Paul Away

Polytarchs choose a lenient political resolution rather than execution, forcing Jason to post a financial bond.

The bond guaranteed that Jason would keep the peace and prevent Paul from returning.

'Satan hindered us' (1 Thessalonians 2:18) likely refers to this legal restriction remaining in place during the polytarchs' term of office.

Paul is sent away at night to Berea, where he receives a more open-minded reception.