

“I Acquired This Citizenship at a High Price” — What Does It Mean? (Acts 22:28)

Context and Explanation:

This passage takes place during a critical moment in the life of the Apostle Paul. He had just been arrested in Jerusalem, falsely accused of bringing Gentiles into the temple. As the Roman soldiers prepared to interrogate him by flogging, Paul revealed an important fact: he was a Roman citizen.

Let's examine the passage beginning with Acts 22:25:

Acts 22:25-28 (NIV)

25 As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, “Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn’t even been found guilty?”

26 When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and reported it. “What are you going to do?” he asked. “This man is a Roman citizen.”

27 The commander went to Paul and asked, “Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?”

“Yes, I am,” he answered.

28 Then the commander said, “I had to pay a lot of money for my citizenship.”

“But I was born a citizen,” Paul replied.

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What Did Roman Citizenship Mean?

In the first century, the Roman Empire was the superpower of the known world. Roman citizenship was a prized legal status that provided its holders with significant rights and protections under Roman law: A Roman citizen could not be punished without a formal trial.⁵ They were protected from degrading forms of punishment such as scourging or crucifixion. They had the right to appeal to Caesar (Acts 25:11). Roman law required due process and public accusation before sentencing. Because of these privileges, Roman citizenship was highly desirable so much so that people would go to great lengths to obtain it.

Born vs. Bought Citizenship

In verse 28, the Roman commander says, *“I had to pay a lot of money for my citizenship.”* This suggests he obtained it through unofficial or corrupt means. Historical records show that during the reign of Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41–54), Roman citizenship was sometimes sold or awarded in exchange for bribes particularly during census periods when names could be added to the citizen rolls unlawfully.

The commander in Acts, identified in Acts 23:26 as Claudius

Lysias, likely came from a non-Roman background his surname “Lysias” is Greek. His acquisition of citizenship may have involved bribery or financial influence during Claudius’s rule.

Paul, on the other hand, states, *“But I was born a citizen.”* This tells us that Paul’s father or ancestors had legally received Roman citizenship, possibly for services rendered to the Empire. Paul’s hometown, Tarsus, was a prominent city in Cilicia, known for its educational and political importance. It’s possible his family had obtained citizenship as part of a broader imperial grant.

Paul’s Roman citizenship was a providential tool God used to advance the Gospel allowing Paul to move across provinces, receive fair trials, and ultimately appeal to Caesar himself (Acts 25:10-12).

Theological Insight: Earthly vs. Heavenly Citizenship

While Roman citizenship carried immense earthly value, the New Testament presents a far greater and eternal citizenship — citizenship in heaven.

Philippians 3:20 (NIV)

“But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

This heavenly citizenship isn’t earned through birthright or purchased with money. It is granted only through spiritual rebirth, as Jesus explains to Nicodemus:

John 3:3-5 (NIV)

3 Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

4 “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

5 Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.”

Being born again means a person has repented of their sins and placed their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, they are made new, adopted into God’s family, and become citizens of His eternal kingdom.

Paul’s earthly citizenship gave him protection and status but even he knew it was temporary. His true hope, and ours, lies in a greater kingdom that cannot be shaken.

Have you received this eternal citizenship? Have my
Maranatha.

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