

A brush with the law

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[0 : 00] In your Bibles at Acts 16. If you want to, you could also look at 1 Peter chapter 2,! It's not even kind of optional extra.

It is actually our spiritual duty. So let me read this short passage to you. It's 1 Peter 2 verses 13 to 17. Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men, whether to the king as the supreme authority, or to governors who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.

For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil.

Live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone. Love the brotherhood of believers. Fear God. Honor the king.

Strange last sentence that, isn't it? Love the brotherhood of believers. Yeah, we can see that. Fear God. Then he says, Honor the king. Sorry. It's like a technical hitch here.

[1 : 41] Get back on the right page. It's better. So, okay. So Peter's quite clear on this issue. But one might say, well, how do we work that out in practice?

As you're probably aware, that questions of late have run various ways, run foul of the law. There was those bakers in Northern Ireland.

There have been various people in the National Health Service who have had problems. And though we don't know the details of that and the rights and wrongs of that, there is a story of this family in Norway who have had their child taken away.

So how would we deal with this? How should we work in practice when we come up against the law? Well, there's a lot I think we can glean from this passage of what Paul, the way that Paul behaves, Paul and Silas behave, when they're unreasonably arrested.

Sorry, I didn't mean to put that back. So where does this take place? Well, I've skipped over the first part of Acts 16. But if you look back, you'll see that they're now in Philippi, which is a Roman colony in northern Greece.

[2 : 55] So they left Asia Minor and they're now in Europe, in Greece. They've linked up with this woman, Lydia, who seems to have been a rich, business, God-fearing businesswoman, probably a Jewess herself, who's sort of providing them a base.

And you also notice that if you look back to Acts 15, 7, the pronoun that you use there is they. They did this.

But if you look on to verse 10, suddenly Luke starts saying we. So it's clear that Luke has linked up with them there in Philippi.

And in fact, for much of the rest of Acts, we find that Luke says we. He was actually along with Paul and Silas. So they're in Philippi. It's in Europe, in northern Greece, but it's a Roman colony, a sort of particular center of Roman power and influence.

And, well, we can see what happened here. That's where the action takes place. And it's worth saying that the Romans actually had a great respect for the law.

[4 : 12] Now, having said that, of course, people at all levels of society would try and abuse it, as they do with the law. But that's actually only possible because of that underlying view that it was Roman law, as much as the Roman legions that held the empire together.

The Romans did have a real respect for the law. In fact, they understood that without law, a stable society is impossible. Certainly an empire of the size of the Roman empire.

Without a proper respect for law, it's just impossible to run a society in a workable way. You do get people occasionally who deny this, call themselves anarchists, but really nobody, anybody of any common sense at all can say that this is just not workable.

It's essential to have a respect for the law. The law is what keeps citizens, as they say, good fences make good neighbours. It's the law that keeps us on good terms with our fellow citizens.

However, they were rather draconian in their penalties sometimes, the Romans, and in particular, the penalty exacted on the guards if a prisoner escaped. They could expect to be executed.

[5 : 33] This is exactly what happened, of course, to the guards in the case of Peter's escape, as we saw earlier. The jailer would have expected the same penalty. In fact, as we saw in the passage, he was going to commit suicide, which would have been a Roman way, perhaps of preserving his honour and perhaps lessening the impact on his family.

He wouldn't have wanted his family to be sold as slaves or whatever. By taking the honourable way out, as the Romans would have seen it, then he was going to lessen the impact and preserve his honour in that way.

And you can see that what Paul and Silas did here is somewhat different to what Peter did, but Peter, if you remember, really had very little choice in the matter. He was more or less dragged out of the prison by an angel.

And it says that he didn't even realise it was happening. He thought this was just a dream or a vision until he found himself out in the street. I suppose he could have gone back and saying, I'm out here, please re-arrest me, but he didn't.

It was clear that the Lord wanted him, God wanted him to remain free. But the situation here is slightly different because, as we can see, that Paul and Silas actually had the opportunity to escape, but they didn't actually take it.

[6 : 56] We might, well, let's look in a bit more detail at this and examine those attitudes to the Roman law that we find here. So, I thought we'd do that in three bits. We'll look at the passage in three parts.

First of all, the charge and the arrest. Secondly, the imprisonment itself. And then thirdly, the release and what happened afterwards.

Because actually, that tells us quite a lot about the attitude that Paul and Silas had to the law and indeed that the other people had to the law. So, let's look first of all about the arrest itself.

We've read the passage there. And we can see from verse 19 that the primary motivation here was the primary motivation was economic.

These slave owners were rather miffed that their slave girl was no longer going to be earning them lots of money. So, it was partly economic and partly racist in verse 20.

[8 : 03] You get that, see that coming through, don't you? These are Jews. You know, they're advocating things that are un-Roman. And this was certainly a misuse of the law.

But of course, like all the most effective lies, this charge has a grain of truth to it, of course. Paul was preaching a different king. But he was preaching a king whose kingdom was not of this world. So, he wasn't in any sense preaching revolution against the Roman authority. Quite the reverse, in fact. And also, of course, it's true that if Paul's preaching was unlawful, then actually so was that of the slave girl because she was actually, basically had the same message, didn't she?

She said she was saying to listen to what Paul has got to say. So, the charge really didn't make a lot of sense in many ways. There was nothing illegal at all about what Paul was doing.

If there had been, I'm sure he would have been a lot more circumspect about it and not been quite as public. They were Jews, of course. And actually, the Jews had certain exemptions under Roman law to practice their religion and even to spread it.

[9 : 17] So, the charge didn't really make a great deal of sense. It was a trumped-up charge, really. And the arrest itself was actually illegal in many respects.

It's interesting what the charge says. It says that it was expressed in such a way that Paul is advocating things that are unlawful for us Romans to practice or carry out.

But no actual evidence of this was presented. And there was no actual attempt to put Paul and Silas on trial, was there? I mean, even the magistrates must have realised that that was never going to fly.

There just was no case to answer, really. The magistrates were simply reacting to the mob in verse 22. But, of course, Luke's reporting of that phrase, unlawful for us Romans, is rather ironic, isn't it? Because, of course, Paul and Silas were actually Roman citizens. Verse 37 tells us that. And as they were Roman citizens, their treatment was actually illegal.

[10:31] Roman citizens could not be flogged without a trial. So, in just throwing them in jail and ordering them to be flogged, the magistrates were actually flouting the law. They may not have known that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, but they really should have found out first before they gave in to the mob rule.

And so, actually, if anyone was advocating unlawful practices, un-Roman practices, it was actually the bringers of the charge and the magistrates themselves who had flouted the law, ordered an illegal beating, and neglected the due processes of the law.

Instead, they're given in to political pressure and mob rule. So, you might have thought, well, Paul and Silas are not going to take this very seriously, are they?

They're going to try and escape. But let's look at what actually, this actually tells us. Oh, sorry, that was a slide. I should have moved the slide on there. Yeah, sorry.

How did Paul and Silas actually behave? Behave. So, there they were. They'd been illegally flogged. They'd been put in irons. What's their reaction?

[11:42] Well, the reaction is to pray and sing hymns, isn't it? You notice there the reference to the other prisoners. They weren't alone in the jail. Now, we don't know who these prisoners were.

Were they just drunks who had been thrown in the clink overnight? Or were they serious criminals or terrorists? We don't know. But whatever they were, we're told remarkably that they listened to Paul and Silas.

That's quite surprising in itself, isn't it? If you think about it. Presumably, these were men who put little trust in either religion or law. They flouted the law.

There's no suggestion that they were there for any other than a good reason. They'd flouted the law. And they were probably now engaged in cursing their own gods for letting them get caught.

Imagine that's what they might well have been doing. But Paul and Silas don't do that, do they?

They don't even, as far as we know, pray to be released. They simply sing hymns.

[12:49] They do pray. And they sing hymns to God. But there's no cursing of God here. Rather, they are rejoicing in that the Lord has allowed them to suffer in this way.

In spite of their obvious injustice, they were actually expressing their faith and trust in God through hymns and prayer. And this was enough to impress even those hardened criminals who were there in the jail.

And then, remarkably, in verse 26, God offered them the opportunity to escape. There was an earthquake and the door was broken down and their irons fell off.

They could have just walked out of there. But the remarkable thing is that Paul and Silas didn't take that opportunity. They could have said, oh look, God has opened the door for us.

Let's go. We're off. But they didn't. And remarkably, even more remarkably, perhaps, not only did they stay, but they'd so impressed the other prisoners that they didn't run either.

[14:04] This answer to Paul's prayer, well, it's an answer to Paul's prayer, but notice it says, everybody in verse 26 and all in verse 28. It seemed God had answered their prayers, but they didn't.

In spite of their illegal imprisonment, they actually entrusted themselves to the process of Roman law. And we might ask, why was this?

Well, we might suggest a few reasons based on what happened next. First, first, they did appear, they did respect the Roman law, notwithstanding its misuse.

They were Roman citizens themselves. They knew that what had happened was illegal, and they had, nevertheless, in spite of the misuse and abuse and flouting of the law, they still respected the law.

And, secondly, perhaps, they did want an opportunity to point out that their imprisonment was illegal.

[15:06] If they had just run, then that would have amounted to an admission of guilt, wouldn't it? They would have said, yeah, we were guilty, but we've got away with it. But, they wanted to say, no, we've done nothing illegal, we're not here for any good reason, and we're not going to run away, because we want to point out that an opportunity for the, you know, to show that what we're doing is not illegal.

And, thirdly, perhaps, I would guess they probably did have some sympathy and compassion for the jailer, who would have landed up, if they had run, would have landed up either having to kill himself or being put to death.

So, that is probably why they acted as they did, why they didn't take this opportunity to run, and why their force of character and what they'd done was so impressive that the other prisoners didn't run either.

And, that's what Luke tells us, everybody in verse 26 and all in verse 28. Paul says, look, we're all still here. Presumably, that was the case. So, did they achieve anything by this stance?

That might be the next question to ask. So, let's look at the release where they got away. I'm not going to be very long tonight. We've got communion afterwards, but I think it's worth looking at these things.

[16:33] Well, what did they achieve? We can list a variety of things, can't we? Certainly, they must have persuaded the other prisoners to have more respect for the law than they had beforehand.

they stayed, they didn't run. Whereas, if they had, if they'd escaped, then the other prisoners would have just run off as well and the law would have been flouted.

Second, the most obvious result, in a sense, was the conversion of the jailer and his family. We noticed that the jailer had some idea of the message that Paul had been preaching.

His plea in verse 30 when he says, what must I do to be saved, actually echoes that message of the slave girl in verse 17, doesn't it? Paul had indeed been telling people what they must do to be saved and the jailer having now had his life saved, realizes that that's not enough.

He needs his soul, if you like, saved as well. He needs to make his peace, not just with the Roman authority, not just with his Roman bosses, but with the most high God.

[17:48] God. And so, he asked Paul this question, what must I do to be saved? Not saved from the Roman authority, he'd already done that, but saved from that, to be right with the most high God.

Just note in passing, by the way, this is not a block baptism. Sometimes people have argued that this is a case for baptizing children. I have to say as a Baptist, I would not go there, because it clearly says in verse 33, it says the family were all baptized.

Why? Because in verse 31 and 34, because they all believed. They weren't, you know, it wasn't the jailer believed and had everybody else baptized, it says they all believed, so I might just note that in passing.

What about the magistrates? They knew that the charge was really without foundation, otherwise they wouldn't have just ordered their release the next morning, would they?

They knew they were on a sticky wicket. They would have put Paul and Silas on trial. But Paul, in this case, wasn't about to go quietly. It says in verse 37, why not?

[19:07] Well, I think one thing was because he wanted to establish a legal precedent. He wanted to make clear that what they had been preaching was not illegal, while their treatment was illegal.

The civil law is not always an enemy. It is to be respected when it preserves the freedom of the citizens. It preserves the peace so that the gospel can be freely proclaimed.

Of course, if the law had really banned preaching in the name of Jesus, the missionaries might have adopted a different attitude. They would have been more circumspect and indeed there are usually ways that can be found around some of these things, but here they were doing nothing illegal at all.

They shouldn't have been. The Roman law was supposed to allow freedom. Paul wanted to make the point to the magistrates also that the law should not be flouted, should not be used for their own purposes, but rather that law is king, as Samuel Rutherford wrote a book, *Lex Rex*, law is king, that the law should indeed, that they are all subject to the law, including the magistrates themselves. But some people have said, well, hang on a minute, didn't Jesus say something about turning the other cheek? So it's worth looking at that, what did Jesus actually say?

[20:40] It's Matthew 5, 38-42, if you want to look it up, but I haven't got it on the screen, but I'll read it out to you. It's Matthew 5, 38-42.

You have heard that it was said, eye for eye and tooth for tooth, but I tell you, do not resist an evil person.

If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him, the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.

If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Now I would suggest to you that Paul and Silas had done exactly that in fact. They'd been arrested illegally and yet they hadn't run.

They didn't actually get the magistrates into trouble, which they could have done of course, they could have gone and complained to the Roman governor. And then the magistrates would have found themselves in trouble.

[21 : 45] So far from actually not turning the other cheek, that is exactly what they had done. They'd not made that much fuss about an illegal beating.

They'd not really got the magistrates into trouble. They'd not got the jailer into trouble when they could have done. They'd actually done precisely what Jesus said. And yet at the same time, they'd also established the importance of the rule of law and that business should be conducted according to the civil law.

So I would suggest that far from not carrying out Jesus' command to turn the other cheek, that is exactly what they had done. This isn't a matter of revenge or insisting on one's rights at all costs. verse 37 was an insistence on the proper process of law and that's something that's of benefit to all honest citizens. So what did they actually achieve?

Well, at the end they did achieve an apology which would have protected the rights of those of Christians who were going to remain in Philippi and they made a quiet and peaceful exit.

[23 : 00] They actually did exactly what the magistrates had asked them to do. They didn't even insist on hanging around in Philippi. They did move on. So they did exactly what the magistrates had asked them to.

So what can we make of this? I think it's an example of how we can both obey our Lord's command to turn the other cheek. At the same time we can respect the law, not regard the law as enemy but as Peter tells us something that we do need to submit to.

So we get it, among the deacons we find so much of our time nowadays is spent up on issues of compliance, health and safety, children safeguarding, workplace pensions, all things to do with even this business of not having too many deacons who are paid by the church.

They're all issues that come under the heading of compliance actually obeying the civil law and it's right that we should do these things. The law is there to protect the freedom and to protect the peace of the land and it's right that we should respect it as Peter tells us.

Ultimately of course we may find ourselves in the position of having to obey God rather than men but we shouldn't make that an excuse as Peter says don't use your freedom as an excuse for license and living in an evil way.

[24 : 27] So I think it is good to just think about what Paul and Silas did here and what they achieved by not flouting the law but rather by saying yeah we will work within the law we will work through the law and what they achieved by doing that.

Thank you.