

## What Lies Ahead

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One of the easily overlooked historical details found in the New Testament is the presence of several Roman colonies: Corinth, Antioch of Pisidia, Troas, and Philippi are a few examples (see **Acts 16:12**). Roman colonies were important for many reasons, among which was the function they served in securing the peace of Rome. The Empire situated its colonies at strategic points in its sophisticated road system. Retired Roman soldiers settled in the colonies and were available to secure the roads from threats quickly. Because of their strategic importance, Roman Colonies were in the most privileged position in the Empire. They were, for all intents and purposes, miniature Romes:

Wherever they were, these colonies were little fragments of Rome, and their pride in their Roman citizenship was their dominating characteristic. The Roman language was spoken; Roman dress was worn; Roman customs were observed; their magistrates had Roman titles and carried out the same ceremonies as were carried out in Rome itself. They were stubbornly and unalterably Roman and would never have dreamt of becoming assimilated to the people amidst whom they were set (William Barclay, *Introduction to the Book of Philippians*, p. 4).

Do you remember what happened when Paul cast a demon from a young woman whose Philippian masters profited from her divination skills? The slave-owners hauled Paul and Silas before the local Roman magistrates. Consider their words (and remember Philippi is a Roman colony): “*These men, being Jews, exceedingly trouble our city; and they teach customs which are not lawful for us, **being Romans**, to receive or observe*” (**Acts 16:20-21**). Do you hear their pride? Do you hear their patriotism? Do you hear the condescension and prejudice seeping from their words? “We are Romans. These men are Jews.” Like all other Roman colonies, Philippi was a Rome away from Rome.

The Philippian magistrates command Paul and Silas to be beaten and thrown in jail. The next day, when the magistrates sent for Paul and Silas, Paul accused them of unlawfully beating two Roman citizens. In Paul’s day, Roman citizenship was a precious distinction: citizenship could be conferred as a reward for service to Rome, it could be purchased, or one could be born into a family of Roman citizens (Paul was born a Roman citizen). Rome went to great lengths to guarantee its citizens certain rights and protections. For example, Roman Law explicitly forbade any degrading form of punishment such as beating with rods, scourging, or crucifixion. To have treated Paul and Silas in this way, the magistrates were guilty of a crime worthy of death under Roman Law. Roman citizenship had its privileges, and Paul took advantage of those privileges on more than one occasion.

Is it possible that Philippi’s distinction as a Roman colony, along with Paul’s experiences during the formative days of the Philippian church, were on his mind when he wrote **Philippians 3:20-21**?

*For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.*

In a city like Philippi -- with its deep sense of Roman nationalism, its patriotism, its identity as a “Rome away from Rome,” with, perhaps, former soldiers of the Roman legions numbered among the saints -- remembering to Whom you belong could be a challenge.

Paul could certainly relate. His distinguished pedigree as a Jew “*circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews,*” made him susceptible to fleshly feelings of nationalistic pride (**Philippians 3:5**). He goes on,

*But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ, (Philippians 3:7-8).*

Paul sacrificed his lineage and national identity so that he could “*know (Christ) and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead*” (**Philippians 3:10-11**). And so the apostle urges the Philippians to mature in Christ by “*forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead,*” to aspire to Christian maturity, to set their minds on things above not “*on earthly things*” (**Philippians 3:13, 15-17, 19**). And yes, part of that meant remembering, “*our citizenship is in heaven.*”

What a challenge this must have been for patriotic Philippian citizens who had spilled their blood for the glory of Rome, or who sat at dinner tables with empty chairs where fathers or sons or husbands should be, or who grew up with the pageantry and pride of the national festivals. How might one feel if he had fought valiantly for Rome in the past, but in the present, he must decide, “*Shall I serve Caesar or Christ?*” Imagine how natural feelings of patriotism, fraternity, and national identity might complicate matters when the local magistrate took notice of the Christian assembly and applied passive or aggressive pressure. If you were a Christian and a Roman citizen of Philippi, you might well feel your allegiance torn in two.

Jesus warned, “*No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other*” (**Matthew 6:24**). Though Jesus warned against attempts to serve God and money, the principle rings true in multiple respects. No earthly kingdom is the kingdom of God, therefore we do not owe our ultimate allegiance to anyone but God. We pray “*that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence*” (**1 Timothy 2:2**). But should the day come when we must choose between God and man, there really is no choice (**Acts 5:29**). The kingdom of God is not of this world, our citizenship is in heaven, we cannot obey men rather than God, and we cannot serve two masters. I pray that such a day with such choices lies far off in our future. But should it come sooner rather than later, I pray we all can forget those things which are behind and press forward to those things which are ahead.