

In the Apostle Peter's first letter, he reminds believers that they are **"a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people."**ⁱ Christians, he insists are not Romans or Jews, Ugandans or Americans. In Christ, we are now a holy nation, the Israel of God. As such, we are resident aliens on earth, dispersed among the nations, waiting in exile for our homeland. Peter urges us to live properly in during our temporary residence in host countries.

Dear friends, I urge you as strangers and exiles to abstain from sinful desires that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that when they slander you as evildoers, they will observe your good works and will glorify God on the day he visits.

Submit to every human authority because of the Lord, whether to the emperor as the supreme authority or to governors as those sent out by him to punish those who do what is evil and to praise those who do what is good. For it is God's will that you silence the ignorance of foolish people by doing good. Submit as free people, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but as God's slaves. Honor everyone. Love the brothers and sisters. Fear God. Honor the emperor.ⁱⁱ

This morning's passage provides a wonderful illustration of what it looks like to live this way.

We've been following Luke's lengthy recounting of Paul's final visit to Jerusalem. Paul took four men to the temple and, after purifying themselves, made an offering. While there, a mob seized him, accusing him of defiling the temple. The whole city joined in, dragging Paul out to lynch him. When the Roman commander heard, he went, bound Paul, and began to take him away. At Paul's request, the commander allowed him to address the crowd. Paul shared his testimony of conversion to faith in Jesus, which incited further chaos. So the commander brought him to the barracks for interrogated by scourging. As they prepared, Paul asked about the legality of whipping an uncondemned Roman citizen. It was illegal, which frightened the commander and halted the scourging.

Wanting to find out what Paul had done, the commander brought him before the Sanhedrin to be tried. Paul declared he was a Pharisee being judged because of the hope of resurrection. The Sanhedrin devolved into a violent dispute. So the commander brought Paul back to the barracks for his safety. The next day they learned of a conspiracy to assassinate Paul.

This account reminds us how complex the web of relationships is that Paul must navigate. By birth, Paul was a citizen of both Rome and Israel by birth. By second birth, through faith in the Messiah, Paul is foremost a citizen of the Kingdom of God. Israel held significant sway in Jerusalem. Rome was the political superpower. They had a tenuous relationship at best, each suspicious of the other but willing to cooperate when mutually beneficial. Paul is at home in neither one. As he tells the Philippians, **"Our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly wait for a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ."**ⁱⁱⁱ That citizenship informs and controls how he lives as a Jewish and Roman citizen.

Followers of Jesus are the true citizens of God's Kingdom. Paul makes this point in our text: **"But I admit this to you: I worship the God of my ancestors according to the Way, which they call a sect, believing everything that is in accordance with the law and written in the prophets."**^{iv} He insists that he worships the same God as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He worships **"according to the Way,"** referring to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Jews call this "a sect"—a breakaway, splinter group. Worshipping "according to the Way" means **"believing everything that is in accordance with the law and written in the prophets."** In other words, the law and prophets (interpreted correctly) point us to Jesus, God's Messiah. Therefore, the only proper way to believe the whole

Hebrew scriptures is to put your hope in Jesus Christ. Thus, followers of Jesus the Messiah are the true citizens of the Kingdom of God. So, what does it look like to live as a citizen of the Kingdom of God while also a citizen of an earthly nation? Luke presents Paul as a model for navigating such tensions with faithfulness to King Jesus.

Kingdom citizens ask for and accept outside help. Paul repeatedly receives and seeks the help of Rome. This is not a failure to trust in God. It honors God who grants us "common grace" in the people and institutions of this world, including the government. In Romans 13, Paul writes that the state's authority is instituted by God as his servant. Provided it does not conflict with Christ's commands, we are to obey the state. To resist is to oppose God and bring judgment. The state carries out God's vengeance, bringing wrath on wrongdoers—a terror to bad conduct and to approve what is good.

We see it function this way in our passage. When the mob was about to tear Paul to pieces, the Roman soldiers and authorities intervened. Upon learning of an assassination plot, Lysias called for soldiers to escort him safely to Caesarea. At trial, Paul asks the governor to make a just judgment based on verifiable evidence. Two years later, in Acts 25, Paul will appeal to Caesar. Paul does not resist or refuse help from Rome—he seeks it. Even though Christ promised Paul he would preach the gospel in Rome, that does not mean the state is not God's means of getting Paul there alive.

God's common grace blesses us through government, criminal and civil justice, education, medicine, science, trade skills, military, etc. When we refuse to receive help from these because they are "of the world," we dishonor God who gave them to us for our good. Insofar as they speak and do what is true and good, they are in harmony with the Kingdom of Christ.

Kingdom citizens are good citizens in this world. That is likely why Luke includes this account as he writes to the "honorable" Theophilus, who likely held a government position. Luke is documenting that Christians are not traitors to Israel or Rome. Instead, believers (like Paul) seek to honor both.

The Jews accused Paul of defiling the temple, being a plague, and agitating the Jews everywhere he went. Paul denies the charge and invites the governor to examine the evidence for himself. He had been in Jerusalem for twelve days—plenty of time for evidence. But they didn't find him arguing or causing any disturbance in the synagogue, the temple, or elsewhere in the city. His claims are verifiable, he says, whereas they are incapable of proving their charges.

Then he declares a mantra for Christian citizenship on earth: "**I always strive to have a clear conscience toward God and men.**"^v He only believes, teaches, and does what he understands the Scriptures to teach. He treats people in a manner consistent with the law of Christ. Paul will write to the Romans, "**Give careful thought to do what is honorable in everyone's eyes. If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.**"^{vi} Insofar as it depends on them, Christians seek to be at peace with all, whether theological or political opponent, family or stranger, enemy or friend.

Because his conscience is clear, he appeals to Rome to investigate his claims. He invites the governor to call the Jews who seized him to appear and make their case. If not them, then those present should state what wrong they found in him when tried by the Sanhedrin. The only thing he did was shout, "Today I am on trial before you concerning the resurrection of the dead." That is no

offense because the members of the Sanhedrin tolerated differences in belief about the resurrection.

Paul isn't afraid of examination because he isn't afraid of truth. He's confident Christ changed him, enabling him to live an honorable life. But if he is found to violate the law, he welcomes proper punishment. He's demonstrated his willingness to repent. He doesn't fear being found guilty because he has a Savior who removed his guilt before God and clothed him with his own righteousness. Examination will never uncover anything worse than what the cross has already addressed.

Kingdom citizens are free to look out for the interests of others and not their own. We find a stark contrast between Paul and the others involved. When Lysias sent Paul to Felix, he included a letter focused entirely on what he had done as the commander but conveniently omitted certain facts. Lysias reports he arrived with troops; he learned Paul was a Roman citizen; he rescued him. He investigated; he discerned the nature of the accusation. He learned of the plot; he sent Paul with a military escort; he ordered the accusers to make their case before the governor. Lysias presents himself as an ideal Roman commander. Obviously, the type of leader that Felix should commend!

Lysias does *not* mention that the entire city of Jerusalem, for which he was responsible, was in chaos—or that a second violent dispute broke out while he had Paul in custody. He fails to mention he bound an uncondemned Roman citizen and order his interrogation under torture. These details would not communicate competence as a Roman commander. Lysias is more interested in maintaining his reputation before an authority than he is in the safety of Paul.

The Jews involved are liars and would-be murderers. When the high priest, some elders, and their lawyer arrive, they present their case before Felix. After an overt statement of flattery, they call Paul **"a plague, an agitator among all the Jews throughout the Roman world."** Everything we've read in Acts would indicate this is a lie. They claim Paul **"tried to desecrate the temple."** Paul did the opposite, showing respect for the temple law. The mob attempted to lynch an innocent man based on unsubstantiated speculation. Their lawyer says Felix will be able to discern the truth by examining Paul, but they offer no verifiable evidence, no eyewitnesses. They are liars, lusting for the conviction and execution of an innocent man, more interested in their own interests than real justice.

Then there is Felix, the governor. Though there is no reason to condemn Paul, he delays a verdict on the grounds of wanting to hear from Lysias firsthand. Over two years, he repeatedly calls for Paul to appear before him under the guise of wanting to hear about Jesus Christ. But Luke tells us that Felix keeps bringing Paul back in hopes that he might offer him money.

Felix was not an upright man in any way. His morals were publicly scrutinized; he was infamous for tyranny and malice. His then nineteen-year-old wife, Drusilla, was famous for her beauty. Two years earlier, Felix conspired with a magician to seduce her away from her first husband. Felix is a self-obsessed leader, known for meanness, controlled by his sexual and financial lusts. The gospel declares that Jesus died for our sins to set us free to live in righteousness. So Paul's words about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come frightened Felix. He was more interested in clutching at power and pleasure than ruling in righteousness. This is why, when replaced two years later, Felix left Paul in prison as a favor to the Jews, wanting to remain in their favor for the sake of his reputation.

The Jewish and Roman leaders look out for themselves at the cost of others because their kingdoms depend on things of this world. Jewish leaders devoted themselves to a system that relied on works of righteousness, which they often (hypocritically) did not do. In the Roman Empire, power, pleasure, and prestige depended on pleasing superiors. So justice and righteousness were dispensable when they jeopardized the position and power of Felix or Lysias. Contrast that with Paul. What was he doing when seized by a Jewish mob and almost killed? **“After many years, I came to bring charitable gifts and offerings to my people. While I was doing this, some Jews from Asia found me ritually purified in the temple, without a crowd and without any uproar.”**^{vii} He’d come to serve those in Jerusalem with charitable gifts—and offering them, they seized him. Even after they’d tried to kill him, he sought a second chance to share the gospel, which resulted in a second attempt to kill him.

Paul now stands on trial alone and vulnerable between a political power and a religious power, one of which could execute him and the other that wants to. What does he do? He professes hope in the resurrection of the dead, founded upon the fulfillment of the law and prophets in the person and work of Jesus Christ. When called to speak before the Felix, who had the power to execute him, he preached the gospel in a way that spoke directly to the governor’s sin. In every situation, Paul risked life and freedom so that others might hear about Jesus and be saved. Such love, concerned for others before self, is only possible if you believe God has forgiven your sins and promised to raise you from the dead unto imperishable glory. It is only possible when you are a citizen of the Kingdom of Christ.

So where is your hope this morning? Is it in your reputation, wealth, power, or safety in an earthly family, nation, or institution? Or is your hope in Jesus Christ, whose life is counted as your righteousness, whose death atoned for your sins, whose resurrection guarantees your forgiveness, whose ascension keeps this salvation safe until he returns to raise you from the dead to reign with him forever? Is your hope in something that you must work for and preserve, something that can decay or be stolen? Or is your hope an eternal inheritance kept safe for you in heaven?

If your hope is as secure and eternal as the Savior seated at God’s right hand, how does that play out? Are you a glad recipient of all God’s graces—including the rule of the government? Are you free to honor leaders, even when they do not honor you or your faith? Are you free to live with a clear conscience before both God and man, knowing that because you already possess the fulness of riches in Christ you never need to slander, steal, exaggerate, lie, hoard, or disobey. Are you free to **“do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than [yourself], looking not to [your] own interests, but rather to the interests of others?”**^{viii}

Brothers and sisters, if God did not spare his own Son but offered him up for us all, will he not also with Christ grant us everything?^{ix} We have everything in Jesus. This means we are free to be humble, to be helped, to honor everyone, and to lay down our lives for others—knowing that we have already died with him and so, with him, we shall rise.

ⁱ 1 Peter 2:9-10

ⁱⁱ 1 Peter 2:11-17

ⁱⁱⁱ Philippians 3:20

^{iv} Acts 24:14

^v Acts 24:16

^{vi} Romans 12:17–18

^{vii} Acts 24:17–18

^{viii} Philippians 2:3–4

^{ix} Romans 8:32