

THE PRAETORIAN GUARD



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Introduction

- I. The Philippian letter is one of the prison epistles of Paul.
 - A. Sixteen times in just four chapters Paul uses the word *joy* or *rejoice* to speak of our relationship to the Lord and His people.
 - B. This is interesting, for Paul was in a Roman jail cell at the time he wrote.
 - C. The Christians at Philippi were well aware of Paul's circumstances, for Paul said, "you have done well that you shared in my distress" (Phil 4:14).
 - D. Paul tells these beloved brethren that his imprisonment was actually increasing the progress of the gospel (Phil 1:12).
 - E. There were sermons preached while he was in chains (Phil 1:13).
 - F. Even while under house arrest in Rome he constantly made reference to the cause of Jesus Christ (Acts 28:30-31).
- II. Paul's captors would have known he was not being held for normal reasons, i.e., he was not guilty of any real crime.
 - A. His situation naturally sparked interest and discussion among his captors.
 - B. In this way, the message of the gospel was being made known to "the whole palace guard" (Phil 1:13).
 - C. The word *palace* in this passage is *praetorium*, which refers to the *Praetorian Guard*.
 - D. Paul refers to these elite guards because he knew that his readers in Philippi were very familiar with them.
- III. The city of Philippi was a Roman colony, and without doubt many of his readers would have had family members who were veterans of the Roman army.
 - A. In no other epistle does Paul mention this elite guard.
 - B. "The town of Philippi became a Roman colony as *Iulia Victrix Philippi*. An inscription reports a veteran of *legio XXVIII* settled there, and coins indicate the presence of members of the old Praetorian cohorts, now released." (Lawrence Keppie, *The Making of the Roman Army*, 121)
 - C. "Philippi, then, was a Roman colony. As such it was a Rome in miniature, a reproduction on a small scale of the imperial city. Its inhabitants were predominantly Romans, though the natives lived alongside of them and gradually coalesced with them. The Roman citizens naturally took great pride in being Romans. Moreover, they enjoyed all the rights of Roman citizens everywhere, such as freedom from scourging, from arrest except in extreme cases, and the right to appeal to the emperor. Their names remained upon the rolls of the Roman tribes. Their language was Latin. They loved to dress according to Roman style. The coins of Philippi bore Latin inscriptions. Each veteran received from the emperor a grant of land. Upon the entire community, moreover, the *Jus Italicum* was conferred, so that the inhabitants of this city enjoyed not only economic privileges, such as exemption from tribute and the right to acquire, hold, and transfer property, but also political advantages, such as freedom from interference by the provincial governor, and the right and responsibility to regulate their own civic affairs." (William Hendricksen, *New Testament Commentary, Philippians*, 6-7)

IV. In this lesson I would like to discuss the importance of the Praetorian Guard and how they had an impact on the life of Paul and the growth of the New Testament church.

Discussion

I. What Was The Praetorian Guard?

- A. The Praetorian Guard was established by Octavian in 27 B.C. as the Imperial Guard (*cohortes praetoriae*) of the city of Rome.
1. Although its numbers fluctuated until it was disbanded in A.D. 312, during the first century it had nine cohorts of up to 500 men each.
 2. Six cohorts were stationed in other Italian towns, and three cohorts stayed in Rome and were in constant attendance on the emperor.
 3. The guards in Rome typically appeared in civilian dress due to the traditional senatorial aversion to having troops stationed within the city limits (their civilian clothing was worn over their uniforms).
 4. The Praetorian Guard's primary role in the New Testament age was to protect the emperor and imperial family and to quash any potential rebellions, and they were the only military force allowed in the capital.
 5. Prisoners sent to Rome from the provinces in appeal cases were entrusted to the care of the prefect of the praetorian guard (Tacitus, *Ann.* 3.14; 13.15).
 6. "The body was instituted by Augustus and was called by him *praetoriae cohortes*, praetorian cohorts, in imitation of the select troop which attended the person of the praetor or Roman general. Augustus originally stationed only three thousand of them, three cohorts, at Rome, and dispersed the remainder in the adjacent Italian towns. Under Tiberius they were all assembled at Rome in a fortified camp. They were distinguished by double pay and special privileges. Their term of service was originally twelve years, afterward increased to sixteen... They all seem to have had the same rank as centurions in the regular legions. They became the most powerful body in the state; the emperors were obliged to court their favor, and each emperor on his accession was expected to bestow on them a liberal donative. After the death of Pertinax (A.D. 193) they put up the empire at public sale, and knocked it down to Didius Julianus. They were disbanded the same year on the accession of Severus, and were banished; but were restored by that emperor on a new plan, and increased to four times their original number. They were finally suppressed by Constantine." (Marvin Vincent, *Word Studies In The New Testament*, 3:420)
 7. "Their splendid uniforms, much higher pay, and pampered lifestyle made them the envy of the legions..." (David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*).

8. “The praetorians were privileged above other soldiers. They always had an exceptionally good chance of catching the right eye and obtaining promotions, for example to legionary centurionates. Moreover, whereas the length of service required of legionaries was at first sixteen years and then twenty.. the service of praetorians was twelve years and then sixteen. And, in spite of this shorter service, they were paid considerably more than the legionaries. At first their wages were probably 375 *denarii*, while the legionaries were given 225. But then, already before the end of Augustus’s reign, they were receiving as many as 750 *denarii*. Their bonuses, too, were the largest in the army. In the early part of the reign they received land settlements like other soldiers. Later, when lands were replaced by cash gratuities, they were allocated 5,000 *denarii*, as against the legionaries’ 3,000. In Augustus’s will the differential was increased, since he left the legionaries 300 *denarii* each, but the praetorians 1,000. They were treated with this additional generosity in the will because, as the events during the next half-century were to confirm in no uncertain fashion, it was they above all others whose help would be needed to see the new ruler safely into the saddle.” (Michael Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, 92)
- B. In time the Praetorian Guard almost became the Emperor’s private bodyguard—and in the end they became very much a problem.
 1. They were concentrated in Rome, and there came a time when the Praetorian Guard became nothing less than king-makers.
 2. Inevitably it was their nominee who was made Emperor every time, since they could impose their will by force, if need be, upon the populace.
 3. One historian claimed that the Praetorian Guard “was the first symptom and cause of the decline of the Roman empire” (Edward Gibbon, *The History Of The Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire*, 2.136).

II. Paul In Chains

- A. Upon Paul’s entrance into the city of Rome, “Julius, a centurion of the Augustan Regiment” (Acts 27:1) handed Paul over to the *Prefect* of the Praetorian Guard {the commanding officer} (Acts 28:16).
 1. The official duty of the *Prefect* was to keep in custody all accused persons who were to be tried before the Emperor.
 2. “The prisoners were put in the charge of an escort under the command of a centurion named Julius of *the Imperial Regiment* (“the Augustan cohort”). This has been identified as the Cohors I Augusta, a regiment of auxiliaries attested by inscriptions to have been in Syria after A.D. 6 and in Batanea (Bashan, east of Galilee) in the time of Herod Agrippa II (ca. A.D. 50–100). A detachment of the cohort may have been stationed at Caesarea. The duty assigned to Julius normally fell to centurions.” (David J. Williams, *Acts*, New International Biblical Commentary 5)
 3. “With the aid of his soldiers, Julius served as a military courier with special authority to escort and protect prisoners. Presumably he was a member of Nero’s bodyguard who had been sent on a special mission to Caesarea and now was returning to Rome.” (Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*, Baker New Testament Commentary)

- B. “Now when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard; but Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him.” (Acts 28:16)
1. It is interesting that Luke uses the phrase, “*the* captain of the guard,” since there were usually *two* Prefects (captains) in the Praetorian Guard.
 2. However, between A.D. 51 and 62, during the reigns of Claudius and Nero, there was just one Prefect and his name was Sextus Afranius Burrus. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/85837/Sextus-Afranius-Burrus>>
 3. It is believed by most scholars that Paul arrived in Rome around A.D. 60.
 4. It is also interesting to note that by the end of the second century the work of the Praetorian Prefect was highly elevated.
 5. “The command of these favored and formidable troops soon became the first office of the empire. As the government degenerated into military despotism, the Praetorian Prefect, who in his origin had been a simple captain of the guards, was placed not only at the head of the army, but of the finances, and even of the law.” (Edward Gibbon, *The History Of The Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire*, 1:159)
- C. Paul had been delivered to the Praetorian Guard to await trial before the Emperor.
1. Paul is twice referred to as having been “bound in chains,” where the Greek word *halusis* is used (Acts 28:20; Eph 6:20).
 2. The *halusis* was a short length of chain by which the wrist of a prisoner was bound to the wrist of a soldier who was guarding him, so that escape was impossible.
- D. Though allowed some freedom, Paul was still under constant guard.
1. In the course of two years one by one Praetorian Guards would be on duty with Paul.
 2. But these guards were also under the constant influence of Paul and the gospel!
 - a) They could not help overhearing what Paul taught others.
 - b) They would hear him pray and sing praises to God.
 - c) They would have noticed that Paul was no ordinary prisoner, brought to Rome to entertain the crowds in the Circus Maximus.
 3. He was an uncondemned Roman, one who had appealed to Caesar.
 4. It is certain Paul would have tried to teach his “captive audience.”

- E. Paul's imprisonment had opened the way for preaching the gospel to the finest regiment in the Roman army!
1. "Paul was under constant guard (cf. Acts 28:16, 20). The guards relieved each other. In this way ever so many of them came into contact with this apostle to the Gentiles. They took note of his patience, gentleness, courage, and unswerving loyalty to inner conviction. They were deeply impressed. Yes, even these hardened soldiers, these rude legionaries, who presumably would be the very last to be affected in any way by the gospel, were deeply moved by what they saw and heard and felt in the presence of Paul. They listened to him as he talked to friends who came to visit him, or to his secretary to whom he dictated his letters, or to his judges, or to God in prayer, or even to themselves. It is not difficult to imagine that at first they listened with a measure of disdain or hardly listened at all. But after a while they became interested, and then ... enthusiastic. And what they learned they began to spread. 'We are guarding a very remarkable prisoner,' they would say, 'and we are firmly convinced that his imprisonment is not for any crime he has committed but solely for his connection with the Christ whom he proclaims.' And so the news spread, from guard to guard, to the families of the guards, to Caesar's household (see on Phil. 4:22), and thus to 'all the rest,' the inhabitants of Rome, in general. Paul's case and, even better, Christ's cause, became 'the talk of the town.'" (William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Philippians*. Baker New Testament Commentary)
 - a) All the Praetorian Guard knew why Paul was in prison—and many of them were touched by the gospel.
 - b) No wonder Paul declared that his imprisonment had actually been for the furtherance of the gospel!
 - c) The news spread from guard to guard, to the families of the guards, and then to Caesar's household!
 - d) This very sight had to give great comfort and fresh courage to the brethren at Philippi.
 2. Paul ended the Philippian letter by saying, "All the saints greet you, but especially those who are of Caesar's household" (Phil 4:22).
 - a) "Paul sends special greetings from the Christian brothers who are of Caesar's household. It is important to understand this phrase rightly. It does not mean those who are of Caesar's kith and kin. Caesar's household was the regular phrase for what we would call the Imperial Civil Service; it had members all over the world. The palace officials, the secretaries, the people who had charge of the imperial revenues, those who were responsible for the day-to-day administration of the empire, all these were Caesar's household." (William Barclay, *The Letters To The Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, 87)

- b) “The ‘household of Caesar’ could refer to anyone in the Roman civil service directly dependent on Caesar, including all his slaves and freedmen; it always indicated great prestige. It most likely refers here to the Praetorian Guard; if Paul was in Rome at this point, anyone who guarded him would naturally be exposed to his teaching. Even Caesar’s slaves wielded more power and prestige than most well-off free persons; the Praetorian Guard itself held the prestige of the Roman military’s elite, often rewarded by Caesar himself. Paul’s greeting would impress his readers: his imprisonment has indeed advanced the gospel.” (Craig Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*)

Conclusion

- I. Being in protective custody gave Paul free rein to preach the gospel to guards and his visitors!
 - A. While in Rome he was saved from many of the hardships, persecutions, and afflictions that had often attended his preaching in the cities of Greece, Macedonia, and Asia Minor.
 - B. From his rented quarters he wrote five New Testament epistles (Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, Philemon, and possibly Hebrews).
- II. Luke ends the book of Acts with still living in a rented house (Acts 28:30–31).
- III. “We wonder why Luke never told us what happened to Paul, whether he was executed or released. The reason is that this was not Luke’s purpose. At the beginning Luke gave us his scheme of Acts when he told how Jesus commanded His followers to bear witness for Him in Jerusalem and all over Judaea and Samaria and away to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Now the tale is finished; the story that began in Jerusalem rather more than thirty years ago has finished in Rome. It is nothing less than a miracle of God. The Church which at the beginning of Acts could be numbered in scores cannot now be numbered in tens of thousands. The story of the crucified man of Nazareth has swept across the world in its conquering course until now without interference it is being preached in Rome, the capital of the world. The gospel has reached the center of the world and is being freely proclaimed—and Luke’s task is at an end.” (William Barclay, *The Acts Of The Apostles*, 193)
- IV. What can we learn from the treatment of Paul?
 - A. There is nothing in the gospel that we should ever be ashamed of.
 - B. The gospel has not lost its power to save and change the hearts of men and women.



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