

## Born Free: Acts 21: 37 – 22: 29



Before he was taken into the Roman garrison, Paul asked the commander of the soldiers if he could speak to the crowd. He was granted permission to do so, probably because the commander hoped that this would help him find out what was the “crime” of which Paul was being accused.

Paul addressed the Jews in their own language, thus affirming his own Jewish credentials. He began his address with the same words that had been used by Stephen, when he, too, was falsely accused of attacking the Jewish faith (Acts 7:2). Then Paul went on to give what amounted to a personal testimony of his call, conversion and commission, taking advantage of the situation to declare the reason for his faith in Jesus Christ. This was to be a characteristic of his life as a prisoner in the years that lay ahead. He would make the most of every opportunity to proclaim the Gospel, notably in some of his appearances before high officials of government.

I have written previously about Christians who found new ways of sharing their faith during the first coronavirus “lockdown”. Many people have taken advantage of social media, Zoom, Facebook, YouTube and other digital means of spreading the message of God’s love in Jesus Christ. Others have used the telephone to give encouragement and support to lonely people, or even resorted to good old-fashioned pen and paper. I think St Paul would have approved and applauded their efforts. He certainly did not let his own experience of “lockdown” prevent him from “publishing the sinners’ friend” (Singing the Faith 661).

Still unclear about what offence Paul was supposed to have committed, the commander ordered that he should be whipped, in the hope of extracting a confession from him. Just before this could happen, however, Paul announced that he was a Roman citizen, which

gave him a number of rights, including the avoidance of several forms of torture and punishment. The commander told him that he himself had paid a lot of money to become a Roman citizen (probably because he had had to bribe one or more officials in the process). Paul replied that he was a citizen by birth. Realising that he had seriously overstepped the mark by ordering him to be whipped, the commander had Paul released from his chains.

In the Authorised Version, the commander says, "With a great sum obtained I this freedom", and Paul responds, "But I was free born." These words were the inspiration for the title of Joy Adamson's book about how she and her husband, George, released Elsa, a lioness they had reared from a cub, back into the wild. The book was published in 1960 and later made into an award-winning film, starring Virginia McKenna and Bill Travers. It was called *Born Free*.

**A prayer:**

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the freedom we enjoy in this country to practise our faith openly. We pray that you will guide and strengthen those in other countries who do not enjoy that freedom. And when our own freedom is restricted, as it is now by coronavirus regulations, help us to find new and different ways to worship you and share your love with our neighbours. We ask these things in the name of your Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. **AMEN**

**- Rev John Barnett**

**Image:** Virginia McKenna as Joy Adamson in the film "*Born Free*".