

This article by Douglas A. Campbell will provide some valuable insights into Roman prisons at the time of St Paul's visit to Philippia and his imprisonment there.

Insights in the Dark

Prisons, and everything that goes with them

We usually fail to notice just how caught up with prisons Paul was for most of his life. We are looking now at a cluster of three letters he wrote during an imprisonment. His letter to the Philippians was also written from an imprisonment, taking the total number of letters in the New Testament that Paul wrote from prison to four out of ten—a full 40 percent! Clearly this uncomfortable location was a key context for his letter-writing.

Prisons are quite specific environments with a number of unique dynamics. I never noticed any of this until my wife became involved with one of our son's friends after he had done something terrible. As she walked alongside him during his pre-trial imprisonment, trial, and subsequent incarceration, I was drawn in with her in a supporting role and my eyes were opened. Spending time in courts and prisons in the US opens up new perspectives on the courts and prisons that Paul spent much of his time in. It is difficult to understand a prison until your body is inside one. Then a lot of things begin to clarify. The situation Paul was in was admittedly different from the situation of most people who are imprisoned in a modern western country today. But they are not so different that they don't relate to one another. When the state locks you up, for whatever reason, you are confined and under its coercive control. The basic experience doesn't change. However, there are differences too.

In Paul's day, law-enforcement as we know it did not exist. There was no police force and no general rule of law. The rulers of towns and cities wanted to preserve public order, and they acted to suppress any sort of disorder, seizing perceived troublemakers. Acts has a nice example of this when Paul is grabbed by Roman soldiers during a riot in the temple precincts in Jerusalem and then held and interrogated (21:27–36). The relevant officials would hold detainees in a secure environment until they were ready to interrogate them. There were no purpose-built prisons or prison cells, so a room had to be found, and usually this meant the least desirable one—a space such as an empty cistern or well—that was often dank and dark. Some legal codes of the time specify that prisoners should receive half an hour of exercise a day, rather as prisoners in a modern high-security segregation cell are allowed half an hour of daily exercise in a small cage open to the air and the sky. But, then as now, this was often overlooked, so prisoners spent long periods of time in one room together, perhaps crowded, probably very dark, in unsanitary conditions. They were environments characterized by darkness, lice, hard floors, damp, and stench. The rooms were not purpose-built and were not very secure. Security was maintained through something like an iron fetter or stocks. High-status

prisoners might have been treated better, perhaps enjoying their own room or something like the house arrest that Acts speaks of for Paul in Rome (28:16). But ancient government was highly discretionary and often corrupt. Those people with status might be looked after; those with money probably were. But an official could throw anyone into a dark hole during detention, leave them there for a very long time until they could be bothered interviewing them, perhaps encouraging cooperation through flogging, holding them secure with harsh physical restraints, and ignoring their requests and the requests of their friends to support them. It was a lottery, and Paul doubtless knew its fickle probabilities well.

I won't go into all the new questions that these basic realizations raise here.³ Nevertheless, three important features of prisons apparent in Paul's letters to the Colossians and to Philemon are worth highlighting.

1. *Celebration*. We often view prisons as places of deprivation and are drawn to characterize their occupants as victims (that is, if we do not think of convicted people as morally defective and dangerous). There is some truth in these insights and they need to be maintained. But if we begin here, we risk framing the imprisoned in a patronizing way when they are already being stripped of their dignity by their carceral environment. It is better to begin somewhat counterintuitively, by recognizing that prisons are also places of celebration and of opportunity.

Christians are already in prison. The church is already there. God is present. In my experience God loves showing up in prison, not within those who visit or guard as much as in those who are being visited and guarded. Paul's letter to the Colossians reminds us that God is present in prison primarily by way of those who are imprisoned, and here in the person of nothing less than an apostle. God is in prison with the prisoners. The church is already there, and the job of Christians on the outside is, first of all, to recognize this. Moreover, because God is there and Christians are there, the basic Christian truths can be celebrated and enacted in worship, teaching, prayer, and discipleship.

2. *Opportunity*. Two of Paul's letters from his Apamean imprisonment reveal that a congregation has been founded by proxy in Colossae. It met in the house of Archippus the veteran, and another congregation is meeting in the house of Nympha at the town of Hierapolis, which lay farther down the road. Epaphras, a slave, has somehow met Paul and his circle of friends while Paul is doing his time, has converted, and then has converted this network of households in these towns that were a few days' walk down the road. This is a classic instance of strange friendship in an unexpected place evolving into network conversions. This is also a major step forward in our understanding of

how Paul evangelized. We must now add a fifth web to our list of key networks. Paul works family, Jewish, patronage, handworker, and prison connections (and a link with veterans might now be detectable as well).

Paul has enhanced this small network by converting Handy, and he has tried to contribute to a more harmonious one by addressing his conflicted relationship with his master, Philemon. Paul's solution won't satisfy most of his modern western readers who are fortunate enough to live in a world where slavery has been massively delegitimized. However, it is worth noting that Paul is overtly countercultural in the moral pressure he places on those with power as he asks them to receive Handy back with respect and care. He draws the leader of the small community, Archippus, into the situation, commanding him to carry out his ministerial duties; he sends personal representatives; he sends a rhetorically powerful personal letter, which was to be read out in the presence of the rest of the congregation; and he promises to arrive shortly in person, with checkbook—and presumably rod—in hand to see if his new child in Christ is all right.⁴

We learn here, then, that prisons are seldom isolated experiences of removal as we might first suspect—a rather modern perception of a prison, and still an incorrect one. They are intensely social environments that allow a great deal of networking to take place (albeit, not always positive). Hence they are places of great opportunity for new friendships and community work. Moreover, these connections immediately spill out into the rest of their locales through the myriad relationships that flow to and away from incarcerated people. God is at work in prisons. They are hubs of unexpected activity.

3. *Support.* At the end of Colossians Paul sends greetings to his Colossian listeners from a group of friends: Aristarchus, Mark (yes, the same Mark that Paul dumped when he headed out from Syrian Antioch with Silas in 39 CE, obviously now back in the fold), Jesus/Justus, Epaphras, Luke, and Demas (4:10–18). A more abbreviated list can be found at the end of Philemon (v. 23). The lists are the same, with slight variations in order, but, in a curious moment, the roles of Aristarchus and Epaphras switch. In Colossians Aristarchus is a “fellow-POW” of Paul's, and in Philemon Epaphras is a “fellow-POW,” not Aristarchus. What is going on?

Some scholars think this is a telltale mistake made by a forger while creating a letter to the “Colossians” in Paul's name, basing the details on Philemon, which is genuine. He makes a small slip with the final names here when most people are not paying attention, making the wrong person a fellow-prisoner.

I am not convinced by this explanation. More likely is a phenomenon that is well attested later on in church history as more and more Christians

were sent to prison. But modern scholars who are not attuned to the practicalities of prison life might not think of this.

The officials detaining people in the ancient world had little interest in their welfare, and less accountability. They provided few if any resources—things like water, food, fresh clothing, bedding, and so on. Prisoners might hope for a daily cup of water and a slice of bread from their jailers and that was it, and they didn't always get even this. People in prison in Paul's day were primarily supported by their friends and family on the outside. But this was expected, and facilitated by bribes, and Christians developed a reputation for being involved with their imprisoned brothers and sisters to a positively irritating degree. Lucian, a cynical Roman writing in the second century CE, wrote the following about a Christian leader who had been imprisoned: "from the very break of day aged widows and orphan children could be seen waiting near the prison, while their officials even slept inside with him after bribing the guards. Then elaborate meals were brought in, and sacred books of theirs were read aloud, and excellent Peregrinus—for he still went by that name—was called by them 'the new Socrates.'"⁵ In view of this practice, a likely explanation for the epithet "fellow-POW" switching between Aristarchus and Epaphras in Colossians and Philemon is that the two men are taking turns sitting with Paul through his incarceration and probably staying overnight, thereby sharing in its conditions.⁶ When he wrote Colossians 4:10 Aristarchus was staying with him; when he wrote Philemon 23 Epaphras was.

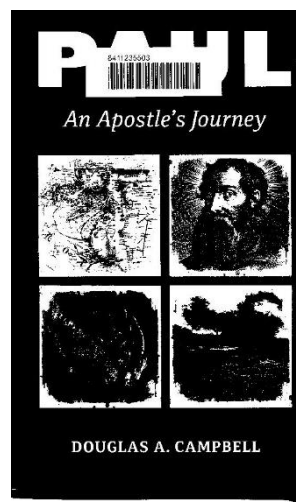
We need to recall now that prisons are still places of pain. God and the church are there; they are places of unexpectedly rich opportunity. But they are also a crucible. They are designed to intimidate, immobilize, and degrade. Consequently, the smallest degree of support by those willing and determined enough to gain access to them is deeply significant. Paltry sums of money can contribute surprisingly large increases in well-being for people who are imprisoned. Even today small sums can buy stamps to send a letter, to change out a pair of worn sneakers, to replace a broken radio, to get a magazine subscription, or to buy some books. And they can pay for a visit to a doctor or a dentist, bearing in mind that an appointment might cost seven dollars, which is a week's wages in the upholstery shop if someone is lucky enough to have this coveted job.

Paul's letters speak subtly of the support he needed and received during his incarceration. We have just noted his companions. But another way in which Paul received support was help writing letters. It is doubtful that he took a small writing desk, a lamp and oil, rolls of papyrus, ink and ink pots, trimming knives, and pens into his detention room with him. These things all

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either had to be supplied to him by those visiting him or used by those who had visited him to write down outside what they had memorized while they were sitting with him in the dark.⁷ If this was the case, they brought drafts of the developing letters back to Paul for his revision, and then for his final approval and signature.⁸ Scholars sometimes forget what practical difficulties attend letter-writing in a prison. Martin Luther King's famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail" was smuggled out of his cell written on scraps of newspaper concealed in his visitors' shoes, and then written on his lawyer's legal pad while they were supposedly consulting. The final letter was edited together from these fragments and published not by King himself but by Rev. Wyatt Walker and Willie Pearl Mackey.⁹ Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians are Paul's "Letters from Apamean Jail," and they attest to the support he received from Christians outside while he was there. They also attest to how a little generosity can go a long way for people who are doing time. Without that support in Paul's day we would be missing a lot of the New Testament!

But we have yet to look in much detail at the third of these letters, Ephesians, and as we do so, another significant feature of prison settings will become apparent.



Paul, An Apostles Journey. Pp 79 – 83.
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