



Paul's Voice Still Resounds in His Letters from Prison

JOHN GILLMAN

“**T**he crowd went wild, and . . . erupted into a chant of ‘lock her up,’” the reporter noted.¹ Anyone who followed the contentious 2016 US presidential campaign and its aftermath needs no explanation to contextualize the above chant. The partisan passions of a politically motivated crowd are aroused to a fever pitch. After reading the above news report the day I began to write this piece, I wondered about the chants of protesters in a far different era and in radically different circumstances who may have demonstrated against Paul for the gospel he preached.

It would not have been surprising had the rioting demonstrators incited by Demetrius and other silversmiths in Ephesus demanded similar action when they seized Paul’s traveling companions, Gaius and Aristarchus (Acts 19). Had his disciples allowed him, Paul too would have gone into the crowd and been seized. The threat was economic. Paul’s preaching discredited the silversmith enterprise that depended on making images of the goddess Artemis. If, as Marcion points out in

¹ Adam K. Raymond, “Nearly 500 Days after the Election CPAC Crowd Chants ‘Lock Her Up,’” *Intelligencer*, February 22, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/y9sfzok9>. Raymond was reporting on a meeting of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) that had taken place the previous day.

In dealing with his own imprisonment, Paul’s letters show him in constant communication with the Christian communities around him. They also illustrate how the circumstances of his confinements helped him explore and define the literal and figurative aspects of imprisonment in terms of his understanding of the Christian faith.

his *Prologue*, Paul had been locked up on this or some other occasion during his nearly three-year stay there, this would have marked one of the four times he had been imprisoned; the three others are mentioned below.

Later, when Paul was in the temple courtyards in Jerusalem, the whole city was said to be in turmoil because of Paul (Acts 21:27–36), prompting the cohort commander to rescue Paul. For his safety, soldiers carried him through the rioting mob. They shouted, “Away with him!” (Acts 21:36), recalling the condemnatory shouts—like deafening drumbeats—of the crowd before Pilate at the sentencing of Jesus: “Crucify him” (Mark 15:13–14). Luke reports that Paul was imprisoned in Philippi (Acts 16:16–40), in Caesarea (Acts 23:12–24:27), and in Rome, where he remained for two years under house arrest (Acts 28:16, 30). Although not reported by Luke, Paul may have been imprisoned in Rome once again after his house arrest.

ROMAN PRISONS: NOT THE PLACE TO BE

What were conditions like for Paul in first-century Roman prisons? How did being “in chains/bonds,” the regular expression he uses in his letters, influence Paul’s relationships with individuals and the community? More specifically, in what way did the apostle’s incarceration affect the content and mood of Philippians, Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians—the four letters he writes from confinement?²

Without going into detail, Paul himself refers to the “hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger” (2 Cor 6:4–5) he experienced, even boasting (“talking like a madman”) that he had endured “far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death” (2 Cor 11:23) than had his opponents. Luke devotes almost one-fourth of Acts to Paul’s imprisonment, demonstrating, in spite of this, the apostle’s effectiveness in advancing the Gospel (Acts 21:33–28:31). He used every opportunity to testify about the Christ before magistrates, authorities, and judges; from them he commanded great respect.

Ancient sources portray a dismal picture of Roman prison conditions. They were dark, damp, and disease infected, very filthy, over-crowded, and under-ventilated. Prisoners were provided meager amounts of food and water; they were shamed and dishonored.³ Most prisoners were restrained by chains and stocks.⁴ Echoing these deplorable conditions, Paul speaks about his own trials: “we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless” (1 Cor 4:11).

Although he names them, surprisingly Paul himself does not bemoan the hardships he faces. Rather, through tact and clarity, he manifests a spirit of joy and

² I take all four letters to be authentic, although some argue that Ephesians, and possibly Colossians, are pseudonymous.

³ See Brian Rapske, *The Book of Acts and Paul in Roman Custody* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

⁴ See Angela Standhartinger, “Letter from Prison as Hidden Transcript: What It Tells Us About the People at Philippi,” in *The People Beside Paul: The Philippian Assembly and History from Below*, ed. Joseph A. Marchal (Atlanta: SBL, 2015), 107–40, esp. 114–15.

freely asserts the preeminence of God's grace. He expands with cosmic dimensions his view of Christ and underscores the universal scope of the *ekklesia* (literally *assembly*, usually translated *church*). With the Philippians he rejoices (Phil 4:4–10), and with the Colossians, he even rejoices in his sufferings (Col 1:24); from Philemon, he experiences “much joy and encouragement” (Philippians 7), and to the Ephesians, he reiterates throughout a message of love, grace, and peace. A closer look at each of these letters from prison will manifest how Paul responds with hope and courage.

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PHILIPPIANS: A LIFE HANGING IN THE BALANCE

While imprisoned, probably in Ephesus, Paul writes to the Philippians, the most joyful of all his letters. In the greeting, he calls himself and Timothy not apostles (see 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1) but rather “slaves of Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:1). This has a double nuance connoting both his identity as a servant of Christ as well as a captive of the Roman Empire.

Though confined and restrained, Paul is hardly discouraged. To the contrary, he attests: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13). Indeed, Paul affirms that because of his imprisonment, the gospel has spread to everyone else, even becoming known to “the whole imperial guard” (Phil 1:13). Proclaiming the gospel in such a setting was no doubt risky business (Phil 1:14). Paul does not report why he was put in custody, but he does proclaim that this is “for Christ” (Phil 1:13). This gives him the meaning and purpose that might otherwise elude someone in such dire circumstances.

Using terms of endearment, Paul holds in his heart the Philippians he considers to be partners with him “in [his] imprisonment [literally, *bonds*] and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel” (Phil 1:7). Paul's very life hangs in the balance. Awaiting trial in the Roman legal system, he is uncertain whether he will be acquitted or sentenced to death, whether he will live or die. He explains that “living is Christ and dying is gain” (Phil 1:21), an alternative explained in the following three verses. The former means that he will be released and available for ongoing fruitful labor in the mission field (Phil 1:22a, 24), and the latter that “to depart [is to] be with Christ” (Phil 1:23).

A few interpreters suggest that Paul's comment, “I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two” (Phil 1:22–23), implies that he has a choice. If so, this raises the question whether Paul is contemplating taking matters into his own hand and ending his life by suicide. Such a reading could offer biblical support

for those who advocate the right to end one's life, now sanctioned by several states, including California, which passed the End of Life Option Act in June 2016.

However, this reading of Philippians is hardly consistent with the joyful and upbeat tone of the letter.⁵ Far from being despondent, Paul presents himself as optimistic and grateful. Ministering to Paul, and evidently bolstering his spirit, is Epaphroditus, Paul's brother, coworker, fellow soldier, and messenger from the community (Phil 2:25–30). It is unknown whether this coworker lived with Paul in prison or was arrested when he brought money from the Philippians to support Paul (Phil 4:18).

Whatever the situation, Epaphroditus's faithful service to Paul in chains calls to mind the ministry of two outstanding women in our time, Mother Antonia Brenner and Sr. Helen Prejean. The former was an unhappy Beverly Hills socialite before she gave her life to serve and eventually to live among convicted murderers and gang leaders in the notorious La Mesa State Penitentiary in Tijuana, Mexico. Not only did she bring light to the incarcerated, her very presence among and prophetic challenge to the often-hardened prison guards prompted them to be more humane to those in their charge.⁶ Sr. Helen devoted herself to be that "one loving face" to those on death row before their final walk to the death chamber.⁷ For many years she has been an ardent opponent of the death penalty.

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We know little about Paul's relationship with or influence upon the "whole praetorium" to whom the gospel became well known (Phil 1:13) or "those of the emperor's household" who sent their greetings to the Philippians (Phil 4:22). The former undoubtedly read Paul's letter, a reality that Paul would have been well aware of when he penned the missive. In subtle ways, Paul confronts the worldview of imperial Rome by insisting that one's true citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:10) and by confessing Jesus Christ, not the emperor, as Lord and Savior (Phil 2:11; 3:20).

⁵ See N. Clayton Croy, "'To Die Is Gain' (Philippians 1:19–26): Does Paul Contemplate Suicide?," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 3 (2003): 517–31.

⁶ See Mary Jordan and Kevin Sullivan, *The Prison Angel: Mother Antonia's Journey from Beverly Hills to a Life of Service in a Mexican Jail* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

⁷ See Helen Prejean, *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1994), also made into a film (*Dead Man Walking*, 1995) and an opera (*Dead Man Walking*, 2000). See also Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014). Stevenson, a Harvard-educated attorney and founder of Equal Justice Initiative, has defended many on death row, a number of whom who ended up there through a miscarriage of justice.

COLOSSIANS: NOT WITHOUT SUFFERING

"We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer," wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer during his two-year imprisonment under the Nazi regime, ending in execution by hanging on April 9, 1945.⁸ It was through Paul's suffering that the Colossians came to know him, confined for two years in house arrest in Rome and perhaps a later imprisonment in that city before being put to death at the hand of Nero. Paul was no stranger to suffering. Twice in the concluding chapter of Colossians he refers to his imprisonment and asks to be remembered (Col 4:10, 18).

In one of the most perplexing verses in the New Testament, Paul writes that his sufferings are for "your sake" and that he is "filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ" (Col 1:24). By no means is he suggesting that the atoning death of Christ on the cross is insufficient to bring about redemption, reconciliation, and the forgiveness of sins (Col 1:14, 22). For Christ in his kingdom is "all and in all" (Col 1:13; 3:11) and the mystery of God (Col 2:2; 4:2).

How does Paul understand his sufferings? Is suffering necessary for the gospel to penetrate the hearts of interested inquirers or skeptical bystanders? Generally, for Paul sufferings are a sign of an authentic apostle (1 Cor 4:9–13; 2 Cor 11:21–33; Gal 6:17). Nonetheless, he does not glorify his afflictions. But in what manner do his apostolic sufferings benefit the *ekklesia*, the body of Christ (Col 1:24)?

There is no indication that Paul sees his suffering as part of the Messianic woes, such that the more he endures, the less the community has to, as proposed by some interpreters (see Mark 13:8, 19–20, 24). Perhaps Paul's meaning is multivalent, implying on the one hand the mystical union between Christ and the *ekklesia*, who are closely linked through suffering, and on the other hand the exemplary value of Paul's suffering for the community.⁹ Regarding the latter, by suffering on their behalf, Paul enhances his own status among them and bolsters his authority for the admonitions, ethical demands, and teachings he puts before them (Col 2:8–20; 3:5–4:6).

In their sufferings, both Paul and Bonhoeffer maintained hope in dismal circumstances. The apostle reminds the Colossians that hope is contained "in the word of truth" (Col 1:5), is "promised by the Gospel" they have heard (Col 1:23), is grounded in Christ, their "hope of glory" (Col 1:27), and is "laid up for [them] in heaven" (Col 1:5). Refined in the crucible of his own suffering and firmly reminding them of their hope, Paul urges the Colossians to abandon their empty, seductive philosophy enamored with deceptive "elemental spirits of the universe" (Col 2:8). Evidently, they were led astray by astral power and engaged in novel cultic practices. They forgot that Christ alone is their hope for glory.

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Nancy Lukens, Lisa E. Dahill, and Isabel Best (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 45.

⁹ See Jerry L. Sumney, "I Fill Up What Is Lacking in the Afflictions of Christ: Paul's Vicarious Suffering in Colossians," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 68, no. 4 (2006): 679.

More so than in his other letters, with the exception of Ephesians, Paul's view of Christ is expansive. I am struck by the contrast between Paul's constricted confinement and the vastness of his Christ vision, poetically captured in the marvelous hymn in Col 1:15–20. Recalling the Genesis story of creation where humans are fashioned in the image of God, Christ is proclaimed as the image of the invisible God. Three other ideas follow: through Christ all created things, including the principalities and powers that fascinated the wayward Colossians, came into being. Second, it is Christ, not Paul or any of the pillars in Jerusalem, who is the head of the church. And third, this Christ is the firstborn of the dead, and hence the foundation for the hope reserved for believers in heaven (see Col 1:5).

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PHILEMON: BEING USEFUL IN PRISON

Three times in the shortest letter in the New Testament, Paul mentions his imprisonment (Phlm 1:1, 9, 10, 13). He is a prisoner “of Christ Jesus” and “for the gospel.” The letter to Philemon is closely linked with Colossians. Mentioned in the latter as being from Colossae is the slave Onesimus whose fate is the main theme of the former. Also, in both letters the same five people send greetings: Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke (Col 4:10–14; Phlm 1:23–24). Because of these connections, it is safe to assume that Paul wrote these two letters at the same time and place, probably, as suggested above, during his Roman imprisonment. Also, Paul names Timothy as the cosender of the letter and remarks that Epaphras was his fellow prisoner.

Paul writes to Philemon, a prosperous slave owner and host of the local *ekklesia*, strongly urging him to accept back Onesimus, who had found his way to Paul, “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother” (Phlm 1:16). Although the text does not specify, it is commonly assumed that Onesimus is a runaway slave. If so, Paul would have been obligated to return him to his owner, Philemon.

Having become his father in the faith, Paul developed a close relationship with Onesimus, referring to him as “my own heart” (Phlm 1:12) and “a beloved brother—especially to me” (Phlm 1:16). Paul seems to be doing nothing less than granting status to one without status. In a clever play on the name Onesimus, meaning *useful* in Greek, Paul explains to Philemon that Onesimus formerly “was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to both you and me” (Phlm 1:11). I wonder whether Philemon would have retained a slave that was useless to him. Without demanding that Philemon give Onesimus his freedom, Paul seems to be subtly subverting the commonly accepted criteria of what is useful.

Ironically, the imprisoned Paul has inverted the hierarchical system. He has become the father to the slave master Philemon, having brought him into the faith (Phlm 1:19), as he has become the father to his adopted son Onesimus (Phlm 1:10). By expecting Philemon to accept Onesimus back as a brother, Paul gives them the same status, thus transforming the master-slave power dynamic into a relationship of equals in the *ekklesia*.

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The pressure is on Philemon, for Paul not only tells the leader of the house church to “welcome him as you would welcome me” (Phlm 1:17) but also to prepare a guest room for Paul, for he plans on coming (Phlm 1:22). Would that we had access to the animated discussion that probably took place after Paul’s letter was read in the house church that would have included slave and free, male and female, perhaps even other slave owners.

Paul’s voice is dominant in this brief letter, but what about the hidden voice of Onesimus? Did Onesimus cajole and ultimately convince Paul to intervene on his behalf with his master Philemon? To what extent has Onesimus, “a minor character in the narrative world of Philemon, [played] a major role in subverting the hierarchy of unjust social systems,” particularly that of slavery in the Roman imperial world?¹⁰

The issues and dynamics raised in Paul’s letter to Philemon are not unlike the transformational role that another prisoner, held captive for over twenty-seven years, mainly on Robben Island, South Africa, played in confronting injustice in that country. Allowed to write three letters a month, Nelson Mandela used the power of the pen to engage with those on both sides of the apartheid debate. Through his unrelenting advocacy for reconciliation and inclusion, Mandela went from prisoner to president of an emerging democracy.¹¹ He was honored as a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize (1993). In a very different manner, Paul’s recognition came after his death with his letters being accorded normative status by inclusion in the canon of Christian Scriptures.

EPHESIANS: AN AMBASSADOR IN CHAINS

In a letter more universal and impersonal in tone than his other missives, Ephesians is Paul’s fourth composition written from prison, probably in Rome.

¹⁰ Sung Uk Lim, “Onesimus: Re-Reading Paul’s Letter to Philemon from the Margins,” *Theology Today* 73, no. 3 (2016): 215–29.

¹¹ See Steven Mufson, “Mandela’s Letters from Prison Built a New South Africa,” *Washington Post*, June 28, 2013, <https://tinyurl.com/y7w9kdkm>.

Tychicus is named as a messenger in both Ephesians (6:21) and Colossians (4:7). The syntactical overlap in these verses as well as the letters as a whole—almost half the verses in the former (75 of 155) have parallel passages in the latter—suggests that Colossians was used as a source for Ephesians.

Three times Paul states that he is “in chains” (Eph 3:1; 4:1; 6:20). Similar to the other letters, he is a prisoner “for Christ Jesus” (Eph 3:1) and “in the Lord” (Eph 4:1). Not surprisingly, he is suffering, and he asks the Ephesians not to lose heart because of this (Eph 3:13). As in Colossians, he wants Tychicus to tell them everything about him. For others to be aware of his plight must surely bring a sense of comfort and encouragement. There is a mutuality to the experience, as Paul writes elsewhere: “If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation” (2 Cor 1:6).

In this letter Paul seems to pull back from his egalitarian stance toward slaves reflected in Philemon. Here he commands slaves to be obedient to their earthly masters (Eph 6:5; see Col 3:22). But Paul doesn’t stop there. He elevates their status, calling them “slaves of Christ.” Paul goes one step further, admonishing them to do “the will of God from the heart” and to serve with enthusiasm the Lord (literally *Master*) and not human beings (Eph 6:6–7). Although Paul does not call for an end to slavery, this principle is nothing less than subversive.

Paul then reprimands slave masters, commanding them to “stop threatening [the NABRE translates *stop bullying*] them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality” (Eph 6:9). Contrary to what might have been their previous dehumanizing behaviors, masters are to treat their slaves with respect for both are under the authority of same heavenly Master.

Even while in prison, Paul exercises his authority as apostle for the “holy ones” in Ephesus.¹² He appropriates Roman imperial imagery to articulate a new social context for the *ekklesia*. God, not the emperor, is the supreme benefactor (Eph 1:3–10); Christ is the one who establishes true peace, in stark contrast to the *Pax Romana* (Eph 2:15). Together with the Jews, the gentiles are part of the commonwealth (*politeia*) of Israel (Eph 2:12), fellow-citizens (*sumpolites*) with the holy ones, strangers no longer (Eph 2:19).

With supreme irony, Paul names himself an “ambassador in chains” (Eph 6:20; see “ambassadors for Christ” in 2 Cor 5:20 and the variant reading in Phlm 1:9), a diplomatic title that gives him more freedom than the ordinary citizen. In the Roman political system, ambassadors served as official representatives of the emperor. In stark contrast, Paul is the divinely commissioned courier for the mystery of the gospel, which he endeavors to make known “with boldness” (Eph 6:19).

Similar to the other letters of imprisonment, Paul does not recount the charges that landed him in prison. However, as a fearless spokesperson not for the Roman emperor but for Christ, who is “far above every rule and authority and

¹² The manuscript evidence for reading “in Ephesus” is mixed. The stronger attestation omits “in Ephesus.”

power and dominion” (Eph 1:21), it would not be surprising had he been accused of undermining the Roman imperial cult of emperor worship. Not unrelated to Paul’s run-in with the state is Martin Luther King Jr.’s arrest and imprisonment because of civil disobedience. Charged with demonstrating without a permit, he was thrown in prison where he wrote over fifty years ago what has become his legendary “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”¹³

CONCLUSION

To those who find themselves in discouraging circumstances, faced with daunting challenges, or overcome by unrelenting suffering, Paul’s letters from prison offer encouragement and hope. Surely, he had his dark days when he felt afflicted in every way, yet he does not reflect on those moments. Instead we hear about a joyful spirit sustained by his close relationship with Christ and the communities who cared for him. Never referring to himself as a prisoner of Rome, Paul identifies himself as a prisoner for Christ.

Surely, he had his dark days when he felt afflicted in every way, yet he does not reflect on those moments. Instead we hear about a joyful spirit sustained by his close relationship with Christ and the communities who cared for him.

As a prisoner, Paul was far from isolated. He had fellow prisoners, such as Epaphras, to connect with. He had visitors such as Onesimus, those who ministered to him such as Epaphroditus, and those such as Tychicus who shared news about him with the communities he loved. Paul was the recipient of financial support from the Philippians and was supported in prayer by many. He probably disturbed the conscience of Philemon, raised concern among Roman authority figures, and may have been instrumental in bringing members of the praetorium or Caesar’s household to Christ. While restrained in chains, he remained embedded in the larger community. The testimony from his letters has much to offer to those confined in prison as well as to communities of faith. For the latter, the importance of outreach to the incarcerated cannot be overemphasized.

Beyond the condition of literal imprisonment, the metaphorical sense also arises. Those afflicted with intractable pain, whether physical or emotional, may be hard pressed to have a reason to continue to go on. Those suffering from Parkinson’s may at times feel that their spirit is imprisoned in a slowly deteriorating body.

¹³ Originally written on the margins of newspaper, a transcribed copy of the letter is available on the Online King Records Access, The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://tinyurl.com/y9ul3ejr>.

And those enslaved through the sex trade, trapped in an abusive relationship, or confined to inhuman living conditions may likewise come to believe that there is no escape.¹⁴

Perhaps in these situations, too, one may find hope in Paul's letters and feel support from the community of faith. Whenever experiences come our way that seem to imprison us and quench our spirit, may we be inspired by the message of hope offered by Paul, whose eyes were fixed on the living Christ, the image of the invisible God. ⊕

JOHN GILLMAN is a lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies at San Diego State University, San Diego, California. Among his many publications is a commentary on the Letter to the Ephesians, for the forthcoming Jerome Biblical Commentary for the 21st Century.

¹⁴ Sometimes the metaphorical use of being in prison stretches credulity and may render speechless those who are literally or metaphorically in prison in the ways described above. See the report by Christopher Woody, "Donald and Melania Trump Reportedly Compared Life in the White House to Being in a Venezuelan Jail," *Business Insider*, October 6, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/ycegev3y>.