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Paul's Ministry from Prison

RONALD D. WITHERUP, PSS

When invited to write this article, I happened to be doing research on a nineteenth-century missionary who is renowned in Detroit for his remarkable achievements. Gabriel Richard (1767–1832) was a French Sulpician priest who was sent to the Detroit area to minister to French-speaking immigrants and Native Americans. He is known as the second founder of Detroit, the first priest to serve in Congress, the cofounder of what became the University of Michigan, a zealous pioneer in ecumenism, and an enlightened missionary among the indigenous Americans. He was also a beloved pastor of the historic parish of St. Anne's in Detroit. It is in his role as pastor that his life is pertinent to this article.

On one occasion, Father Richard angered a prominent parishioner who was involved in a scandalous marriage by excommunicating him. The parishioner sued Richard for libel, which landed the priest in prison. Refusing on principle to pay bail, Richard wrote a letter to his parishioners, which expressed these sentiments:

> But although I am held a prisoner, I would say to you in the words of St. Paul when he was a prisoner like me for having done his duty: "The word of God is not bound." *Verbum Domini non est alligatum*. And although I am separated from you by these walls of four feet thickness

Paul's letters from prison give us an insight into how his ministry and his understanding of the gospel were shaped by his own frequent experiences of imprisonment. This article examines the Pauline prison epistles and the ways in which they illustrate Paul's understanding of his task and his theology.

> and by these iron bars, in which I glory, I can still continue to address to you the word of God.[1]

I could scarcely believe my good fortune. Here was a nineteenth-century ancestor from my priestly community writing from prison and quoting Saint Paul as having done the same! Even more remarkably, Richard's short passage captures the essence of Paul's experience in prison and his desire to keep in touch with his congregations and preach the "good news." The separation and the suffering were not in vain. The word of God could not be chained.

My task is to address Paul's prison letters. While there is a modern tradition of writing letters from prison—Mahatma Gandhi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., to name a few—Paul the apostle is certainly the most famous among Christian writers of antiquity. Father Richard quotes him for good reason. To explore the significance of Paul as model letter-writer from prison, I will proceed in four stages. First, we will examine the reality of prison in the first century. Second, we will set forth aspects from two of Paul's letters from prison, Philemon and Philippians. Third, we will suggest a blend of pastoral and theological insights that still resound today in the Christian assembly. Finally, I provide some summary observations on Paul's purpose in writing letters from prison.

Roman Prisons

To establish the parameters of our study, we need to clear away preconceptions about prisons in Paul's day.[2] The entire experience of prison does not match our modern conception. In our day, prisons are quite diverse, ranging from small-town jails to high-tech facilities with state-of-the-art fences and electronic surveillance. I still remember with some humor that in late 2017 newspapers recounted how Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia "imprisoned" suspected white-collar criminals—some even from the royal family—in a five-star hotel in Riyadh during an anti-corruption campaign. One was even interviewed on television and gave a tour of his jail suite.

Prisons in Paul's day bore little resemblance to such modern experiences. For one thing, the Roman Empire did not have a police force whose job was to keep the law and public order. Confinement was a military obligation and, more importantly, being put in prison was mostly not for the purpose of serving a sentence but for awaiting judgment from the proper legal authority. The experience of prison was also highly dependent upon social status rather than the alleged crime one had committed. The higher one ranked in society, and the wealthier one was, the higher the quality of confinement could be. There were also considerable

[1] Frank B. Woodford and Albert Hyma, *Gabriel Richard: Frontier Ambassador* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1958), 123. The original letter is in the archives of the archdiocese of Detroit.

[2] Two important studies are Craig S. Wansink, *Chained in Christ: The Experience and Rhetoric of Paul's Imprisonments* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 27–95; and Richard J. Cassidy, *Paul in Chains: Roman Imprisonment and the Letters of St. Paul* (New York: Crossroad, 2001) 37–43, 69–76.

differences for Roman citizens as compared to foreigners, a fact the Acts of the Apostles alludes to in describing Paul's imprisonment (Acts 22:25–27). But we are getting ahead of ourselves. What exactly was a Roman prison like?

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Generally, the Romans maintained three main types of imprisonment. The most serious, called a *carcer* (prison), was an abandoned quarry where hardened criminals or enemies of the state could be incarcerated (note the root) and easily guarded. This could also involve hard labor.

A second type was military confinement (*custodia militaris*), which involved being placed in a restricted environment under military guard. Since there were no such things as jails, this could be a room in a house or public building. However, in order to control prisoners' movements, they were usually chained to a military guard in order to prevent escape. It was a serious offense for a military guard to allow a prisoner to escape; penalties could be severe. The story of Paul's imprisonment in Philippi, as recorded in Acts, alludes to this very real threat (Acts 16:23–34). Once Paul and Silas are miraculously released from their chains, the jailer "drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped" (Acts 16:27). The jailer knew well that he could be severely punished for allowing such a breach of security.

A third type of Roman imprisonment was more lenient, the *fideiusoribus committenda*, which means being released into someone else's custody. This was reserved for high-ranking individuals who had connections.

If we ask how Paul was imprisoned, we might be tempted, on the basis of the conclusion of Acts, to think of the third type of imprisonment. Paul seemingly is under a kind of "house arrest" in which he apparently has access to many visitors and is able to preach the gospel freely, as Acts describes:

> He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. (Acts 28:30–31)

But two factors should give us pause. One is that the description of Paul's ability to preach and teach "with all boldness and without hindrance" is a typical description that conforms to the portrayal of Paul and his companions throughout Acts as persevering in their mission under all sorts of adverse circumstances. A second factor concerns the circumstances of his confinement. The text does not indicate he can move about freely. He welcomes visitors during a two-year period, but there

is no hint that he himself has mobility. A more likely explanation is that Paul is undergoing the second kind of custody, being "chained" under military guard, which would still permit him to have visitors. Reinforcing this idea is the fact that Paul glories in his imprisonment for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ; he literally makes reference to his "chains." Notice Paul's explanations: "I am bound with this chain [ἅλυσιν = handcuff]" (Acts 28:20) and "I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become such as I am—except for these chains [δεσμῶν = fetters, chains]" (Acts 26:29). Even more telling is that Paul's letters refer to the vocabulary of chains. The Greek root literally means *bind* (δεσμ-), and its cognates mean *chain* (δεσμός) or *prisoner* (δέσμιος). In the first verse of the Letter to Philemon, Paul proudly identifies himself as "a prisoner of Christ Jesus" (δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησου), a designation repeated in verse 9. There is irony in Paul's experience of being chained for the sake of Jesus, for prior to his Damascus Road conversion he admits that he was engaged in hunting down and shackling Christ followers of "the Way" (Acts 22:4, δεσμεύων).

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Such imprisonment, being chained and held in military custody, was hardly an easy experience. Prison in ancient Rome was not a place to go for three square meals a day and no heavy lifting. Prisons were notoriously filthy, lacked fresh air and opportunity to bathe and groom oneself, and provided no food. (Note that Acts 16:24 indicates Paul at Philippi was held in an interior room—the one providing the most security and least access to windows.) Prisoners had to rely on family and friends to bring them food and the other necessities of life (Acts 24:23). This could include reading and writing materials, since outside communication in such circumstances was usually permitted. Prisoners were awaiting judgment and perhaps preparing their defense, not serving sentences. Occasionally they were placed in protective custody (Acts 21:34–36). But being chained to a guard or having one's feet staked to the ground could pose health risks. Chains chaffed and rusted, and lack of movement could damage muscles. In addition, we should not forget the aspect of shame involved in being imprisoned. Prisoners were often stripped and flogged (Acts 16:22–23), which was intended both as a punishment and as a humiliating spectacle for others. They were also often coerced into offering bribes (Acts 24:26). So, prison was no "walk in the park," even if prisoners could commiserate in song and prayer (Acts 16:25).

Paul's Prison Letters

We now turn to Paul's own letters for some testimony about the experience of imprisonment. Of the thirteen New Testament letters that bear Paul's name, five

are considered "prison letters": Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Timothy, and Philemon. Of these, two are undisputedly from Paul—Philippians and Philemon—but scholars debate the authenticity of Paul's authorship of the remaining three. For our purpose, we can prescind from this technical debate because all five fall clearly in the Pauline tradition. Even if the three disputed letters come from the hand of a disciple of Paul, there can be little doubt of the connection with the Pauline churches and the legacy that Paul left them, including his tradition of writing letters from prison.

Nonetheless I will focus on Philippians and Philemon, invoking the other three only if useful.

Why did Paul write from prison and what did it mean to him? Let's begin with Paul's shortest letter and one of his most personal—Philemon. According to Acts, Paul was imprisoned in at least four different places: Philippi (16:23–30), Jerusalem (21:27–23:30), Caesarea Maritima (24:27–25:32), and Rome (28:16–31). Philemon likely dates late in Paul's apostolic career, perhaps during his Roman imprisonment. We noted above that Paul twice calls himself "a prisoner of Christ Jesus" (Phlm 1:1, 9), but there is even greater emphasis than that title itself would convey. The entire letter is impregnated with imprisonment references that Paul uses to great effect. In this instance, the letter is written to three individuals (Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus) and the "church" at their house. These are obviously fellow believers and colleagues of Paul. Timothy, Paul's beloved companion, is listed as a coauthor (Phlm 1:1), perhaps also in prison or simply in contact with Paul. The letter concerns a slave named Onesimus ("Useful," a common slave name) whose status is not clear. Is he a runaway, thus subject to severe punishment if he is returned to his owner, Philemon? Did he steal something from Philemon? In any case, Paul announces that he has become Onesimus's "father" during the experience of imprisonment (v. 10). Apparently the slave was with Paul in prison, heard him preach the gospel, and became a believer. Through a series of creative puns in the original Greek text, Paul puts pressure on Philemon to take the slave back "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother" (v. 16). To add even more leverage to this forceful request—slaves were valuable, if expendable, property in Roman culture—Paul notes that Philemon "owes" Paul his very self, though the explanation of this startling assertion is absent. What is clear is that Paul is even willing to "repay" (v. 19) this request, and he indicates that he hopes to come for a visit, perhaps subtly warning Philemon that he plans to follow up on the matter. Paul clearly sees his unusual request as participating in "the fellowship of faith" (au. trans., ἡ κοινωνία τῆς πίστεώς, v. 6). His letter from prison is a kind of *tour de force* in which he places his own suffering for the sake of the gospel on the front line in order to promote more profound fellowship in the community.

A second principal letter from prison is Philippians. Scholars debate the exact circumstances of this letter, but some take the reference to the "imperial guard" (Phil 1:13) and to the "emperor's household" (4:22) as evidence that Paul is imprisoned in Rome awaiting his trial and verdict. The entire letter is imbued

with references to Paul being in "chains" (1:7, 13, 14, 17), and this experience helps to shape Paul's advice to his "partners" (συγκοινωνούς, 1:7) in Philippi. By sharing his imprisonment and his earnest desire to continue the mission of evangelizing, Paul is essentially reinforcing the bonds between himself and this community that he founded and that had helped him in difficulties, even when no one else did (4:15–16). Paul is expressing his gratitude to them.

But the letter also hints that Paul may well be reflecting on his possible death. After all, sitting in prison affords one a lot of time for reflection. Paul knew well that one possible outcome of his imprisonment could be a death sentence. Yet throughout the letter, Paul seems to be proud of his experience of suffering, "knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel" (1:16). Paul expresses satisfaction that his suffering is a sharing in Christ's own suffering (1:29). Other hints that Paul is reflecting on his demise include references to our true "citizenship" being in heaven (3:20), to wanting to "depart to be with Christ" (1:23–24; cf. 2 Cor 5:8), and to his possibly being "poured out as a libation" (2:17) through this suffering. He also references his autobiographical background as a zealous Pharisee whose new-found faith makes all that pale in comparison to what he has gained in Christ (3:4b–11).

In recounting this personal history, Paul emphasizes that his sharing in the sufferings of Christ, even to the possible point of death (3:10), is one way in which he is being faithful to the Lord who has called him to this difficult ministry that has landed him in chains. This may be one reason he cites the famous Philippians hymn (2:6–11) as a reminder to himself and the Philippians that God ultimately made Christ victorious in his suffering and that therefore one should imitate his voluntary sacrifice, confident of being vindicated.

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Does this reflection make Paul sad or depressed? By no means! What is most striking in Philippians—as all commentators note—is the constant upbeat tone that is sounded throughout the letter, with the vocabulary of rejoicing and joy (1:4, 18, 25; 2:2, 17–18, 28–29; etc.). Paul not only calls upon the Philippians to remain joyful, even in the midst of the challenges that they may face because of their faith, but he himself claims to be joyful as he awaits his fate. In part, the letter functions as testimony that Paul has not lost faith during his confinement and suffering; rather, it has been reinforced because it is a participation in the sufferings of Christ, whose "slave" he now is (1:1). There is surely some paradox here. Paul's letter affirms the Philippians' faith in this way:

> For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well—since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have. (1:29–30)

Timeless Insights

Even limiting ourselves primarily to these two moving letters from Paul, we can glimpse the connection between Paul in prison and the enduring value of his advice from that context. Paul would have had access to visitors because in Roman prisons, families and friends were the ones who had to bring the bare necessities of life to those imprisoned, including food and clothing. In addition, they were often allowed communications, which of course is the function of all letters. Paul could learn the state of affairs of his beloved, and sometimes troubled, communities. At the same time, his letters afforded him opportunity to continue his pastoral role as their spiritual father, whose personal experience of suffering and imprisonment could strengthen their resolve to remain faithful even when under severe pressure.

The *context* of the prison letters is as important as the *content* of the letters themselves. Paul uses his own personal experience to give pastoral advice and evangelize. He also uses it to impart profound reflections from the viewpoint of faith about our ultimate destiny as followers of Jesus Christ. Note that there is no hint of self-pity in these letters. Paul is not writing to solicit the empathy of his communities, though one imagines they earnestly prayed for his safety and release. Paul expresses gratitude for their concern and assistance (e.g., Phil 4:10, 14), but at the same time he reveals his contentment with whatever will happen: "for I have learned to be content with whatever I have" (Phil 4:11b).

What he desired was to remain faithful to his apostolic call. His prison letters provide the most eloquent testimony to this. They show that his being a prisoner was for the sake of the gospel. It was part and parcel of his apostolic mission.

What do Paul's letters from prison teach us? Certainly nothing in them suggests that Christians are to seek persecution as an easy path to glory. Paul knew the shame that was attached to being imprisoned. He testifies to the large number of beatings, scourgings, stonings, and imprisonments he had in the course of his evangelical ministry (2 Cor 11:23–28). His ministry could produce considerable anxiety and hardship. But it was not what he sought. What he desired was to remain faithful to his apostolic call. His prison letters provide the most eloquent testimony to this. They show that his being a prisoner was for the sake of the gospel. It was part and parcel of his apostolic mission. He is portrayed as evangelizing in prison (Acts 24:24; 28:23). He also defends his innocence and appeals to Caesar

with his rights as a Roman citizen (Acts 25:10b–11) not because he wants to escape suffering but because of his integrity. His imprisonment is for the sake of the gospel (Phlm 1:13) and its defense (Phil 1:16), even though ostensibly his opponents got him arrested for alleged politic activity against the empire (Acts 17:7).

As Paul's legacy developed in later centuries, his imprisonments for the sake of the gospel became a major part of his image. First Clement (ca. 95–98 CE), for instance, speaks of seven imprisonments and other sufferings as well (1 Clem. 5.5–7). The point is that Paul was not only remembered for his thirteen extant letters but also for the personal witness that he gave through his sufferings and eventual martyrdom, probably being beheaded in Rome in the late 60s, as ancient Christian tradition claims. In the end, Paul's long final imprisonment recounted in Acts (28:30–31) reached its climax in a final judgment in which Paul's desire to join his Lord in the glory of heaven finally happened.

Summary Observations

On the basis of this short exposé, we can conclude that Paul's letters from prison served multiple purposes. First, they were an exercise in mutual communication. They enabled him to remain in contact with his communities and vice versa, and to exhibit mutual encouragement in the faith (e.g., Col 4:7–9). Second, these letters allowed him to still exercise his pastoral role. He could impart advice from a distance and reassure them of his constant affection and prayerful concern. Third, they witness to his ability to continue evangelizing with fervor, and encouraging his communities to do likewise (e.g., Phil 1:14). In particular, they allowed him to deepen the meaning of the gospel message especially as it was tied to the cross of Christ, Paul's constant reference point (1 Cor 1:17, 23; Gal 6:14). His own prison experience allows him to identify even more closely with the crucified Savior he proclaimed as the model for spiritual self-emptying (Phil 2:5–11; cf. Phil 3:10 and Gal 6:17), and it allowed him to witness concretely that faith, hope, and joy were still possible even in the most adversarial conditions. Finally, the prison letters provide a paraenetic model for his communities. Paul's own life, in imitation of Christ, gives his communities a concrete image to emulate.

In short, the prison letters are intimately tied to the mission of proclaiming the gospel, in and out of season. One can imagine how precious these letters must have been when received and read aloud. Nineteen hundred years later, my distant Sulpician ancestor Gabriel Richard picked up that model. It seems that time has never dimmed the apostle's shining example. ⊕

RONALD D. WITHERUP, PSS, is superior general of the Society of Saint Sulpice (Sulpicians), a community of Roman Catholic diocesan priests founded in Paris in 1641 for the formation of priests. His recent publications include Mercy and the Bible: Why It Matters! *(Paulist, 2018) and* The Paulist Biblical Commentary *(Paulist, 2018), for which he served as a principal editor.*