

Vignettes from the Life of Paul: Paul the Prisoner  
T. David Gordon

Introduction. Imprisonment in the ancient world was not, ordinarily, punitive. Ordinarily, prison was a holding facility (like most jails today), where people were detained until either their guilt or their penalty could be determined. Penalties included lashing/flogging, exile, or death (recall that John the Baptist was beheaded). Many died in prison, because little or no sustenance was provided, and one's friends or relatives were expected to bring clothing and food. When Jesus said, "I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me" (Mat. 25:43), note that he probably was not referring to a social visit, but to personal, bodily, health, which is why he paired "in prison" with "sick."

I. Imprisonment was a common part of the New Testament narrative; the language for it appears over 80 times (22 in the gospels, 34 in Acts, 23 in the epistles [19 in Paul], 2 in Revelation). The typical pattern in the NT was this: Jews regarded Christians as polytheists and/or blasphemers, who ought to be put to death according to the law of Moses. The Romans did not permit the Jews to employ capital punishment, so the Jews would bring charges against the Christians, such as Paul, before the Romans. Paul had previously participated in such activity: "But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison" (Acts 8:3). Acts routinely recounts apostolic imprisonment (chapters 5, 12, 16, 20, 21, 23-24, 28), and when Paul left Ephesus, he expected more imprisonment: "And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me" (Acts 20:22-23).

II. Paul routinely referred to imprisonment in his letters

A. He referred to himself and his ministerial co-laborers as "prisoners."

Rom. 16:7 Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my *fellow prisoners*. Eph. 3:1 For this reason I, Paul, a *prisoner* of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—Eph. 4:1 I therefore, a *prisoner* for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy; Col. 4:10 Aristarchus my *fellow prisoner* greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas...2Tim. 1:8 Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his *prisoner*—Philem. 1 Paul, a *prisoner* for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, Philem. 9 yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a *prisoner* also for Christ Jesus—10 Onesimus, whose father I became in my *imprisonment*...13 I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my *imprisonment* for the gospel,...23 Epaphras, my *fellow prisoner* in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you

B. When recounting his hardships (especially to the Corinthians), he referred to his frequent imprisonment.

2Cor. 6: 3 We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, 4 but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, 5 beatings, *imprisonments*, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger;

2Cor. 11:23 Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, *far more imprisonments*, with countless beatings, and often near death.

Phil. 1:7 I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my *imprisonment* and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

Phil. 1:13 so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my *imprisonment* is for Christ. 14 And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my *imprisonment*, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

Phil. 1:17 The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my *imprisonment*.

Col. 4:3 At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in *prison*—

III. Eventually, not only the apostles and ministers were persecuted, but the believers were persecuted also, especially towards the end of the NT era.

A. Religion was a public matter in the ancient world, not a private matter. To embrace a religion different from the state-sponsored religion was regarded as an act of sedition.

“Let their affidavit be read: it contains something of this kind: It says that Socrates is a doer of evil, who corrupts the youth; and *who does not believe in the gods of the state, but has other new divinities* of his own. Such is the charge; and now let us examine the particular counts.... I suppose you mean, as I infer from your indictment, that I teach them *not to acknowledge the gods which the state acknowledges*, but some other new divinities or spiritual agencies in their stead. These are the lessons by which I corrupt the youth, as you say.... I do not as yet understand whether you affirm that I teach other men to acknowledge some gods, and therefore that I do believe in gods, and am not an entire atheist, this you do not lay to my charge, but only you say that *they are not the same gods which the city recognizes*-, the charge is that they are different gods. Or, do you mean that I am an atheist simply, and a teacher of atheism?” (Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, XI, XIV)

B. Christians were expected to make *vocal public* profession, and they were eventually persecuted for doing so. The initial Christian public creed: “Jesus is Lord” (Κύριος Ἰησοῦς) was regarded as a denial of the oath of allegiance to the Roman emperor: “Caesar is Lord.”

Mat. 10: 32 So everyone who acknowledges (KJV “shall *confess*” ὁμολογήσει) me before men, I also will acknowledge (ὁμολογήσω) before my Father who is in heaven, 33 but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

John 9:22 His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should *confess* Jesus to be Christ (ὁμολογήσει χριστόν), he was to be put out of the synagogue.

Romans 10:9: if you *confess with your mouth* (ὁμολογήσης ἐν τῷ στόματί σου) that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes and is justified, and *with the mouth one confesses* (στόματι δὲ ὁμολογεῖται) and is saved.

1 Cor. 12:2 You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. 3 Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says “Jesus is accursed!” (Ἀνάθεμα Ἰησοῦς) and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” (Κύριος Ἰησοῦς) except in the Holy Spirit.

Pliny the Younger to Emperor Trajan:

I have never participated in trials of Christians. I therefore do not know what offenses it is the practice to punish or investigate, and to what extent.... I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; ... those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished.... An anonymous document was published containing the names of many persons. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, *when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me*, offered *prayer with incense and wine to your image*, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and *moreover cursed Christ--none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do--*these I thought should be discharged. Others named by the informer declared that they were Christians, but then denied it, asserting that they had been but had ceased to be, some three years before, others many years, some as much as twenty-five years. *They all worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ....*

Trajan’s reply to Pliny:

...if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished, with this reservation, that *whoever denies that he is a Christian and really proves it--that is, by worshipping our gods--*even though he was under suspicion in the past, shall obtain pardon through repentance.

C. Post-Covid (?), healthy churches will return to public religion and vocal, public confession, as quickly as possible, with due charity towards those whose health concerns restrict them (R. 14:1).