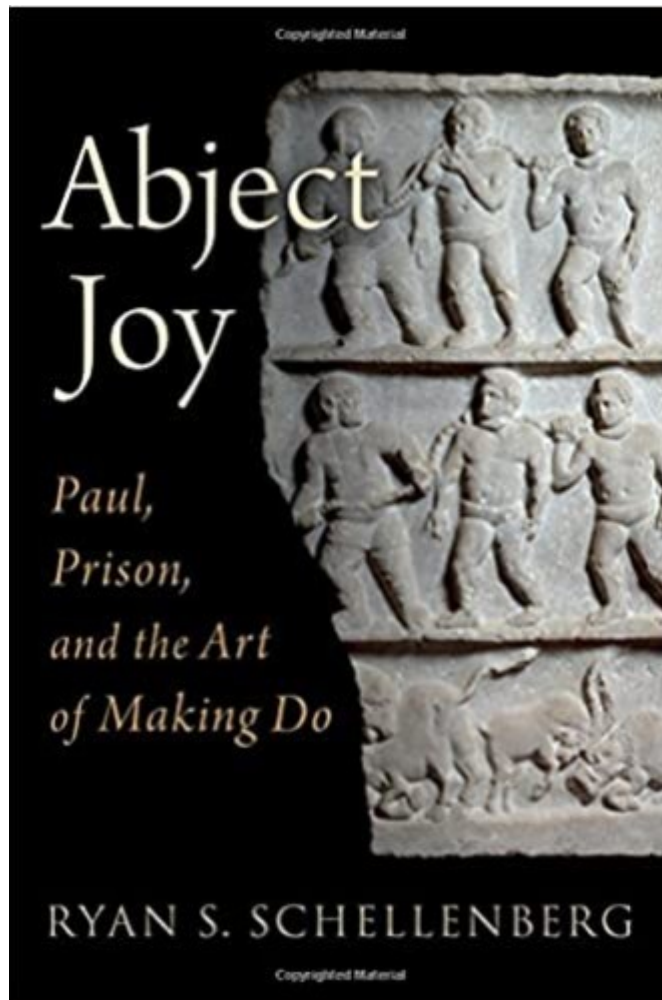


Why was the apostle Paul in prison so often?

Perhaps for the same reasons people are today.

by [Sarah Jobe](#) in the [April 6, 2022](#) issue

In Review



Abject Joy

Paul, Prison, and the Art of Making Do

By Ryan S. Schellenberg
Oxford University Press

Christians who care about mass incarceration do not often turn to academic biblical scholarship to fuel their understanding of American prisons, but that is just what Ryan Schellenberg offers in his new book. He starts with a basic observation: not only was Paul imprisoned, but Paul was imprisoned a lot. Clement of Rome claims that Paul was seven times behind bars; Paul says simply that it was “far more imprisonments” than his rival apostles (2 Cor. 11:23). Using biblical texts, other ancient sources, and the experiences of currently incarcerated people, Schellenberg seeks to answer a basic question: What type of person must Paul have been to have been imprisoned so many times?

In a detailed yet accessible survey of ancient Greek and Roman carceral tropes, Schellenberg reviews the types of prisoner that the Christian tradition has imagined Paul to be: Paul the philosopher, Paul the political prisoner, Paul the wrongfully accused, Paul the Roman citizen demanding trial, and Paul the martyr. He then challenges the notion that these are the best carceral tropes for understanding Paul, noting that these tropes most often involve singular incarcerations of high-ranking people that result in execution or exile.

Schellenberg then documents how poor, itinerant people considered to be a public nuisance bore the brunt of “casual administrative violence” as well as short-term imprisonments under local magistrates as a means of “keeping the peace.” Borrowing a term from Jennifer Glancy, Schellenberg suggests that to take the biblical witness seriously, we must accept that Paul inhabited a “whippable body,” one that could be hit or locked up by local authorities with impunity for something like what we would call disorderly conduct. Paul’s was one among many bodies treated this way in the ancient Roman world: poor, homeless, and of an ethnicity that marked him as part of an occupied people. Which is to say, Paul looked a lot like those who get overpoliced and thrown in jail today.

For the Bible geeks and carceral studies nerds out there, Schellenberg is debunking a popular myth that there was no use of punitive incarceration in the ancient world. For the rest of us, Schellenberg’s work comes as even more of a challenge: if Paul was actually quite similar to the people currently held in America’s prisons, perhaps America’s churches should be treating incarcerated people the way that the church at Philippi treated Paul. Schellenberg’s exegesis of the book of Philippians suggests at least three ways that the un-incarcerated church can come alongside

incarcerated people: resourcing, re-narration, and risk.

The church at Philippi provided resources to Paul during and after his incarceration, meeting his physical needs and becoming his social safety net. The Philippians sent Epaphroditus to Paul to make sure he had the means of surviving behind bars. They wrote letters back and forth with Paul while he did his time. They prepared a guest room for him for when he was released. These basic forms of support—sending visitors into prison, writing letters, and opening our homes to people getting out of prison—are still the basic tasks needed today.

As important as these physical supports are, Schellenberg argues that it's just as significant how the church sees Paul, who they imagine him to be. The church at Philippi gave Paul a chance to re-narrate his own identity as a prisoner. Rather than an embarrassment and moral indictment, his incarceration became a site of special intimacy with Christ. Schellenberg notices that, in the letter to the Philippians, Paul never exhibits any evidence that he's being pressured to explain his incarceration. He "feels no need to belabor his innocence" or make a case for his own exemplarity.

Instead, the church in Philippi seems to be part of a wider non-elite that simply accepted as fact the routine "imprisonment of friends and kin." They were people who saw how incarceration maintained social power, and thus they put "little stock in the moral authority of the magistrate." Rather than regarding Paul as a charity case, recidivist, or person to be rehabilitated, they treated him as an imprisoned friend, a moral authority, and a witness to the Christ who was arrested, tried, found guilty, and executed. What would it take for the church today to use as a template this re-narration of personhood for those we currently call repeat offenders?

Finally, as we come to the two-year mark of COVID raging through America's prisons at five times the rate of the general population, it is worth noting that Epaphroditus risked drawing so close to Paul during his imprisonment that Epaphroditus became deathly ill (Phil. 2:27). Schellenberg takes time to document the ways that ancient prisons made people sick, and they are strikingly similar to the death-dealing dynamics in American prisons today. Not only were ancient prisons places where disease ran rampant, but they were sites of hunger and scarcity. Today's prisons are facing staffing shortages as high as 70 percent, which leads to increased lockdowns and basic needs going unmet. Suicide was considered a noble way out of the shame of incarceration for Greek and Roman elites; corrections workers have a suicide rate 39 percent higher than any other occupation, and the suicide rate of people

incarcerated in jails is three times the national average.

When Paul describes how Epaphroditus risked his health to be near Paul in prison he uses the same phrase—sick “to the point of death”—he has just used to describe the sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross (Phil. 2:8). The letter to the Philippians demands that we engage in a different sort of risk assessment, taking seriously that one of the most ancient ways the church has imitated Jesus’ risk is by taking on the risks of drawing near to those in prison.

After Schellenberg’s book, the US church can no longer comfortably distance the incarcerated Paul from incarcerated people today, or the conditions of ancient prisons from the reality of prisons today. An honest assessment shows that the economic and racial biases behind who gets repeatedly locked up today look a lot like what happened to Paul—and this challenges Christians to engage in the same sort of resourcing, re-narration, and risk that marked the church at Philippi.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Paul the repeat offender.”