

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 47: The Apostle Paul & His Times

Stench, Pain, and Misery

Life in a Roman Prison.

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Paul may have spent as much as 25 percent of his time as a missionary in prison. We know of his brief lock-up in Philippi, two years' incarceration in Caesarea, and at least another two in Rome. Yet Paul says he experienced "far more imprisonments," than his opponents. To understand Paul, we need to understand where he spent so much time.

Bloody Ordeal

Roman imprisonment was preceded by being stripped naked and then flogged, a humiliating, painful, and bloody ordeal. The bleeding wounds went untreated; prisoners sat in painful leg or wrist chains. Mutilated, blood-stained clothing was not replaced, even in the cold of winter. In his final imprisonment, Paul asked for a cloak, presumably because of the cold.

Most cells were dark, especially the inner cells of a prison, like the one Paul and Silas inhabited in Philippi. Unbearable cold, lack of water, cramped quarters, and sickening stench from few toilets made sleeping difficult and waking hours miserable.

Male and female prisoners were sometimes incarcerated together, which led to sexual immorality and abuse.

Prison food, when available, was poor. Most prisoners had to provide their own food from outside sources. When Paul was in prison in Caesarea, Felix, the procurator, gave orders to the centurion that "none of his friends should be prevented from attending to his needs."

Because of the miserable conditions, many prisoners begged for a speedy death. Others simply committed suicide.

The Privileged Few

All of this could be mitigated to some extent if the prisoner was important or paid a bribe (as Governor Felix hoped to receive from Paul in Caesarea).

A prominent individual, or one expected to be released, might be kept under house arrest if he or she could afford the rent. In Rome, where housing prisoners was excessively expensive, Paul was given the privilege of house arrest, and he paid the rent himself (exactly how, we don't know). He probably lived in a third-floor apartment; first floors were used for shops, and the second floor was expensive.

In his final imprisonment in Rome, though, Paul's life came to an end in the woeful conditions of a Roman prison.