The Bible Speaks on Prisons

What does the Bible say about prisons?

First, the prison issue was at the top of Jesus’ moral agenda.

He prioritized concern for the incarcerated at the beginning of his public ministry in his inaugural sermon in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-19).

Toward the end of his work and witness, he told a parable about the separation of the sheep and the goats, the separation of the righteous from the unrighteous (Matthew 25:31-46). One of the signs of faithfulness was whether followers visited those in prison.

In the beginning, Jesus said that God “has sent me to proclaim release to the captives” (Luke 4:18).

He was reading a passage from Isaiah 61:1, which records that the Spirit of God had anointed his servant “to proclaim liberty to the captives, and opening of the prison to those who are bound.”

The word “captives” appears only in this Lucan passage, not elsewhere in the New Testament.

In the Isaiah passage, the transliteration for captive is shabah – referring to those who had been taken away into captivity from military conquest. The mission of God’s servant was to liberate these war captives and to open wide the doors to the imprisoned.

Some Christians read the Isaiah passage as messianic prophecy. That is something that will occur at a future date. Other Christians spiritualize Luke 4, thinking that it refers only to the promise of freedom from spiritual bondage, not a reference to actual, physical imprisonment.
Baptist historian Walter Rauschenbusch took another approach to Luke 4:18-19, a more literal rendering of the passage. He thought the text had a social application. He said it was Jesus’ “pronunciamento and platform for Christianity.”

Moving toward the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus painted a parable of a great judgment when the king would assess the moral quality of nations.

When the “Son of man” sits on his throne, the parable reads that “before him will be gathered all the nations” (Matthew 25:32). Many Christians substitute the idea of individuals for “nations,” as if judgment concerns individual actions instead of societal engagement.

The king will accept into the kingdom those who visited the imprisoned (Matthew 25:36). He will tell those who didn’t visit prisons to depart from him (Matthew 25:43).

How we treat the marginalized and powerless is what matters to the king - and prisoners were seen as “the least” among those in society.

What is abundantly clear in a simple reading of Luke 4 and Matthew 25 is that Jesus prioritized the prison issue for his followers. As is often the case, he left the application of his moral agenda for his followers to figure out.

Second, prisons were used as places of punishment for those who offended the politically powerful. Prisons had a punitive purpose. Retribution was the reason for imprisonment.

That reality still exists today in many places, although many nations find ways to mask politically motivated imprisonment with legal justifications. Of course, such practices don’t mean all imprisonment is without just cause.

Modern-day prison punishment has the function of punishing wrongdoers as well as reforming their behaviors. Offenders serve their time and are supposed to re-enter society as better people.
The goal of reform is missing from three biblical stories:

Potiphar, captain of the guard for Pharaoh, wrongfully placed Joseph in prison. Potiphar’s wife had repeatedly attempted to seduce Joseph. Then, one day, her frustration resulted in a false report to her husband. And Joseph was imprisoned (Genesis 39).

King Herod imprisoned John the Baptist, who dared to criticize publicly the wrongness of Herod having married his brother’s wife (Mark 6:14-29).

The magistrates of Philippi threw Paul and Silas in prison on bogus charges. After Paul and Silas took away the gift of prophecy from a slave girl, her owners “saw that their hope of gain was gone.”

They seized them and drug them before the magistrates, charging that they were “disturbing our city.” They did not rightfully say that Paul and Silas had denied their economic gain (Acts 16:16-40).

These biblical stories illustrate an age-old problem: Not everyone imprisoned is guilty of genuine wrongdoing.

Third, imprisonment did not quench the witness of biblical believers. Nor did prisons impede the work of God.

After Paul and Silas were imprisoned in Philippi, they prayed and sang. They gave a witness to the other prisoners who listened to their testimony.

When the jailer sought to commit suicide – thinking that his prisoners had escaped following the earthquake – Paul and Silas intervened. Their witness led to the jailer’s conversion and that of his family (Acts 16:16-40).

Peter was also imprisoned when King Herod was persecuting the church to curry political favor. King Herod placed a heavy guard around Peter, intending to do him harm after the season of Passover. Yet Peter escaped by the hand of God (Acts 12:1-11).
The Hebrew prophet Jeremiah had his own imprisonment by King Zedekiah of Judah when Babylon besieged Jerusalem.

Following God’s instructions, Jeremiah conducted the business of investing in real estate. He purchased property in Anathoth from his cousin Hanamel. Jeremiah witnessed to the people that God had a good future for them in the worst of times (Jeremiah 32).

These biblical stories disclose the divine presence and the positive witness of believers in prisons.

As prisons and imprisonment are threads that run through the Bible, prison ministry and concern about prisons ought to run more powerfully through churches.

Doing interviews for our forthcoming documentary on prisons and faith, we have repeatedly heard references to Matthew 25.

It is the biblical lynchpin for many Christians who are involved in prison ministry. It is also a question mark that makes one wonder why more churches are not involved in prisons and with those returning from prison.

Other passages are cited. The moral theology of restorative justice instead of retributive justice is voiced. Many interviewees confess a self-serving reason for their involvement – they receive a blessing for working with offenders and returning citizens.

Our criminal justice system and prison complex differ sharply from biblical times. For example, we live in a democracy, not a theocratic or autocratic state devoid of rights, lacking in due process. However, the gap between then and now does not negate the Bible’s authority and guidance.

While no biblical blueprint exists for how Christians are to engage the prison issue, the biblical witness offers us a moral compass. The direction is clear. The details are left to us to work out.
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