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It's something I've never done, and I doubt whether you have either, but many others have done so throughout the ages, proudly following the example of the apostle Paul. You might recognize a few of the names:

- Martin Luther King, Jr. who spoke up on behalf of Civil Rights for African Americans
- the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who spoke out against Hitler
- Dorothy Day, leader of the Catholic Worker Movement
- Nelson Mandela who opposed the racial segregation of apartheid in South Africa
- and Mahatma Gandhi who led the people of India to independence.

“Oh, sure,” you might be thinking. “They were great leaders who spoke out against injustice, and you're right, I've not done that. I hope you're not planning to talk about speaking out against such things, for I'm not sure I could do that.”

Although speaking out against injustice is something they have in common, that's not what I'm focusing on. I'll give another hint: They also have something in common with other people you might recognize:<sup>1</sup>

*Imprisoned*  
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- Author Sir Thomas Malory who wrote the legends of King Arthur
- John Bunyan, writer of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a story of a faithful Christian living during challenging times
- Miguel de Cervantes, the author of *Don Quixote*
- Writer Henry David Thoreau
- American poet e.e. cummings
- Piper Kerman, who wrote a book that has become a Netflix miniseries *Orange Is the New Black*

What do all the names I mentioned have in common? They all wrote while sitting in jail, imprisoned. Letters, biographies, stories about their lives. They expressed themselves with the pen while imprisoned.

One author has suggested that “The English Reformation under Henry VIII initiated an extraordinary flowering of the letter from prison as a genre of English religious literature... By the end of the seventeenth century, nearly 3000 letters from prison had been printed and circulated as acts of conscience and political resistance.”<sup>2</sup>

Imprisonment seems to have inspired many faithful people throughout history. What would the

*Philippians 1:1-7, 12-14*

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world look like without these prison writings? Without the imprisonment of the apostle Paul, for example, who wrote many of his letters to churches from prison, how much of the New Testament would be missing?

I'm not suggesting that each of us do something to get ourselves in jail and then write a letter, but that we hear Paul's words to the church in the city of Philippi within the context of imprisonment. Philippi was a wealthy town, originally conquered for its gold mines and strategic location along an important road. Many people would have traveled through Philippi, and it's here that Paul recognized the chance to turn his imprisonment into an opportunity.

Rather than writing words of bitterness, Paul began his letter "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." He then thanked his readers and told them he prays for them with joy. Really, Paul? Joy? Thanksgiving? While imprisoned? How can you do that?

He's even confident that those who receive his letter will continue the good work that began among them, for he wrote:

My prayers and hopes have deep roots in reality. You have, after all, stuck with me all the way from the time I was thrown in jail, put on trial, and came out of it in one piece. All along you have experienced with me the most generous help from God.<sup>3</sup>

Paul encouraged the congregation to continue loving one another and to not be discouraged, for even though he was imprisoned, he discovered that God could do amazing things. He wrote to the Philippians:

My dear friends, I want you to know that what has happened to me has helped to spread the good news. The Roman guards and all the others know that I am here in jail because I serve Christ. Now most of the Lord's followers have become brave and are fearlessly telling the message.<sup>4</sup>

What began with imprisonment turned into an opportunity, for no matter what tragedy occurs in our lives, God can turn it into something else. Think of all the stories in the Bible when people's lives

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were turned upside down and God found a way to their tragedy into an opportunity:

Joseph's brothers were jealous of him and sold him to a traveling caravan. When he ended up in jail for something he did not do, his ability to interpret the Pharaoh's dream put him in charge of saving grain to provide food during a draught. What began as a time of imprisonment for Joseph, God turned into an opportunity to save many lives.

When Queen Esther learned that Haman plotted to kill many of God's people, she risked her life to turn the plot into an opportunity to save God's people.

I'm not suggesting that God creates bad situations in our lives in order to bring opportunities for hope, for God takes whatever comes into our lives and offers us new possibilities. God always works for good; God never creates terror. When we find ourselves imprisoned, God offers us ways to discover freedom.

I imagine many of you are thinking, "But pastor, I've never been in prison; I'm not imprisoned, so what does Paul's letter mean for me?"

Although you might not find yourself in a literal prison, I imagine each of us has experienced times when we've felt imprisoned and long for freedom.

Some may find themselves imprisoned by thinking they always have to be right. Rather than being open to learning from someone else, the one imprisoned by always-having-to-be-right misses the opportunity to learn with others.

Some may be imprisoned by the fear of trying something new. Rather than experiencing the fullness of new opportunities, one imprisoned by the fear of failure misses the opportunity to grow.

One could be imprisoned by the love of money, spending days and evenings making more and more while missing the opportunity to become generous by sharing with others.

Yesterday while attending our Region's anti-racism/pro-reconciliation training, I heard other pastors shared stories of how racism has imprisoned their lives. One African-American woman told about how she had been eating at the same restaurant for many years. Each time, the waiter served all the other customers first before

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taking her order. It happened over and over again. After attending one of the anti-racism gatherings, she finally had the courage to ask why she was always served last, which opened up the opportunity for a conversation about both their imprisonments. The waiter was imprisoned by his lack of awareness of seeing her as a customer, and she was imprisoned by his inability to see her. Becoming aware set them both free.

When we find ourselves imprisoned, sometimes we just might find the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of those around us, as was the case with a man in jail for armed robbery. His wife wrote a letter to him.

“When is the best time to plant the potatoes?” she wrote.

The husband wrote back, “Don’t dig in the potato patch now. That is where I hid all of my guns.”

The prison mail was monitored, of course, and soon the potato patch in question was being dug up by a whole squad of policemen. But there were no guns to be found.

Again, the wife wrote to her husband in prison. “They’ve dug up the whole potato patch,” she complained.

Her imprisoned husband wrote back with a smile, “The patch is now properly tilled. You may now plant the potatoes.”<sup>5</sup>

If you find yourself trying to discern the best time to plant something new, or if you find yourself imprisoned by narrow views, the fear of failure, the addiction of money, the evils of racism, or other things that limit your life, celebrate that God can offer change, an opportunity for planting new ideas, a path to freedom.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.criminaljusticedegreehub.com/literary-works-penned-in-prison/](http://www.criminaljusticedegreehub.com/literary-works-penned-in-prison/)

<sup>2</sup> W. Clark Gilpin, “The Letter from Prison in Christian History and Theology,” [https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/imce/pdfs/webforum/012003/Gilpin\\_Commentary2.pdf](https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/imce/pdfs/webforum/012003/Gilpin_Commentary2.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Philippians 1:7-8, *The Message Bible*.

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<sup>4</sup> Philippians 1:12-14, CEV.

<sup>5</sup> Hodgin, Michael. *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 4772-4778). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #795, adapted.