

Prisoners' Day Observed in Different Times and Places

In the News

On April 17, Palestinians commemorated Palestinian Prisoners' Day, as they do annually, to express support for imprisoned loved ones. Nearly 1,400 Palestinians have been arrested by law enforcement officers since the beginning of 2021, with about 4,500 Palestinians currently being detained in Israeli jails.

When we at *The Wired Word* heard about the observance, we wondered how widespread such efforts were. We learned that similar days have been observed in other countries under names such as "International Day of Solidarity with Political Prisoners and Prisoners of War" and "International Prison Justice Day."

Such movements can spring from diverse points on the political and cultural spectrum, and may be characterized by different racial, religious, ethnic or nationalist identities. They may begin with protests against oppressive regimes rooted in hard-right or extreme left ideologies.

According to the International League of Peoples' Struggle, "Political prisoners are activists, freedom fighters, human rights defenders, and people who have been deprived of their liberty and remain in detention as a result of their political beliefs, aspirations and struggles."

But many disagree with that characterization of those imprisoned, whom they see as hardened criminals or terrorists who should never be released.

Prisoners' Justice Day, which began in Canada in 1974 in support of prisoners' rights, is observed annually on August 10.

In 1983, a group of imprisoned people on hunger strike in France proposed that Prisoners' Justice Day be observed throughout the world.

No matter where or when such movements occur, they appear to begin from a place of pain. The details may vary, but the stories sound eerily similar. Isolation. Solitary confinement. Separation from family and friends, sometimes for years. Missed celebrations, births, weddings, anniversaries, graduations, solemn occasions, memorial services, reunions. Lengthy sentences, often for relatively minor offenses. Abuse. Mental, physical and psychological deterioration. The loss of dreams and hope. Charging onerous and exorbitant fines on those who can least afford them, to induce fear and discourage people from resisting those who exercise power.

According to *Wikipedia*, as of 2018, the overall incarceration rate in the United States was 639 per 100,000 (the highest in the world), compared to 411 per 100,000 in Russia and 104 per 100,000 in Canada; the incarceration rate for 2019 was 38 per 100,000 in Japan. According to

the World Prison Population List (11th edition) there were around 10.35 million people in penal institutions worldwide in 2015; about 2.2 million (or 21 percent of the world's prisoners) were in adult prison facilities in the United States, even though the United States represented only around 4.4 percent of the world's population in 2015.

According to a 2008 article in *The New York Times*, one factor that puts the rates in the United States so high is that sentences are much longer than they are elsewhere. In the United States, the typical mandatory sentence for a first-time drug offense in federal court is five or ten years, compared to six months or less in other developed countries.

In addition, the United States has significant racial disparities in rates of incarceration. According to law professor Michelle Alexander, the United States "imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid." One estimate put the incarceration rate for young black men ages 20 to 39 at nearly 10,000 per 100,000 in America, compared to 851 per 100,000 in South Africa at the height of apartheid.

"In Washington, D.C., our nation's capital, it is estimated that three out of four young black men (and nearly all those in the poorest neighborhoods) can expect to serve time in prison," Alexander wrote.

Even though blacks make up only about 13 percent of the population of the United States, they comprise 40 percent of the U.S. incarcerated population.

"African-Americans are not significantly more likely to use or sell prohibited drugs than whites," Alexander noted, "but they are made criminals at drastically higher rates for precisely the same conduct."

"We could choose to be a nation that extends care, compassion and concern to those who are locked up and locked out or headed for prison before they are old enough to vote. We could seek for them the same opportunities we seek for our own children; we could treat them like one of 'us.' We could do that," Alexander suggested. "Or we can choose to be a nation that shames and blames its most vulnerable, affixes badges of dishonor upon them at young ages, and then relegates them to a permanent second-class status for life."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[United States Incarceration Rate. Wikipedia](#)

['Lives Gone': Palestinians Mark Prisoner's Day. Al Jazeera](#)

[Prisoners' Justice Day. Wikipedia](#)

[Jailed for Waving Flowers in the Street or Holding Tea Parties: Life in the Newly Totalitarian State of Belarus. Yahoo](#)

[Myanmar Frees Thousands of Prisoners but Many Dissidents Excluded. Al Jazeera](#)

Applying the News Story

The Wired Word does not take a position on the political views of groups promoting or hosting Prisoners' Days. We also recognize that a strong argument could be made for establishing days to honor and remember crime victims. Perhaps there is room in the church for ministry to all those impacted by crime and the prison system. We suspect that some incarcerated persons are also crime victims in need of compassion.

We recognize that some offenders do need to be incarcerated because of the nature of their crimes, and because of the threat they pose to society. We are not suggesting that we should empty all prisons. Rather, that we consider how to best utilize our resources to work toward greater justice for all, a goal we suspect all people of good will share.

The Big Questions

1. What is the point of having a "Prisoners' Day"? What would a Prisoners' Day look like if we had such an observance in the United States?
2. How would you define a Christian dissident? Who are today's Christian dissidents? In what nations are some of them likely to be imprisoned?
3. What biblical references to prisoners and incarceration resonate most with you, and why do you connect with them?
4. What role, if any, should Christians play in shaping and/or challenging the way people enter and move through the criminal justice system in their country?
5. Throughout history, people of faith have at times been nonconformists, and at other times, they have stood for the status quo. How should a society define criminality and how should nonconforming behavior and views of dissidents be handled? What, if any, sort of offenders truly belong in prison without possibility of release, and why?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Luke 3:18-20

So, with many other exhortations, [John] proclaimed the good news to the people. But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison. (For context, read 3:1-20.)

Part of the good news John the Baptist proclaimed to the people was that the coming Messiah would bring justice and make things right that had been upside down. You can hear the "reversal of fortunes" theme in verse 5, with the leveling of playing fields ("Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low") and correction of crookedness and corruption ("the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth"). It was also good news that God's salvation would be extended to all people, not to those who presumed to have some advantage with God by virtue of their ethnic or religious identity (vv. 6-8).

The crowds also would have heard John's practical counsel for daily living as good news: God's community was to be characterized by those who had extra sharing with those who had none (vv. 10-11). Those in positions of power (tax collectors and soldiers) were not to extort money, threaten, or falsely accuse the people to take more than they were entitled to receive (vv. 12-14).

It was also good news that the coming Messiah would correctly distinguish between what was good (wheat) and what was worthless (chaff). The metaphor means that he would gather and keep those who produce the good fruit of repentance (generosity, kindness, honesty, fairness, etc.), but those who produce nothing of value, even what they think they have will not last (vv. 15-17).

But one man didn't hear John's message as good news. King Herod resented John for calling him out for stealing his brother's wife and for a host of other evil things he had done. Then Luke tells us that Herod "added to them all by shutting up John in prison." From this we understand that might doesn't make right. Just because someone has the power to enforce his will doesn't necessarily mean all his actions are good. That includes the power to put people in prison. Luke calls what Herod did an "evil thing."

Questions: How can you tell when putting someone in prison is the right thing to do, and when it is "an evil thing"? How should God's people react when a person in power does an evil thing, putting someone in prison who should not be there?

Matthew 18:30-33

[Jesus said,] "But [the first slave] refused [to listen to the second slave's request for more time to repay his debt]; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?'" (For context, read 18:23-35.)

Jesus told this parable in which he compared the kingdom of heaven to a king dealing with those who were indebted to him. One slave owed him so much that by our reckoning he would have had to work 60 million days, or 164,384 years to pay off his debt ... obviously an impossible task! When the king ordered the slave and his family to be sold, so even a tiny portion of the debt might be paid, the slave threw himself on the king's mercy, and begged for time to pay what he owed. Knowing the slave would never be able to accomplish such an impossible task, the king out of pity forgave the debt.

Whereupon, the slave who had been released from his obligation to pay his debt, came upon a fellow slave who owed him the equivalent of about four months wages -- a significant amount, no doubt, but nothing compared to what the first slave had owed the king. Instead of extending mercy to his coworker, the first slave seized him by the throat and demanded payment on the spot. When the second slave was unable to satisfy him, the first slave threw him into prison.

This is where things get interesting. There were other slaves watching these events unfold -- who were greatly disturbed by the way the first slave treated his coworker. These bystanders could

have kept quiet, but they didn't. Instead, they reported what they had witnessed to the one person who could do something about it: the king. If anything was going to change, they had to speak up. They had to bear witness, to be "the video" of their time.

In his anger over the first slave's lack of compassion, the king reinstated his original debt, ensuring that he would never be free. Not only that, but he would be tortured, whether literally or psychologically, we don't know. But he would have to live with the knowledge that his coldheartedness had cost him his freedom.

Questions: What responsibility, if any, do Christians have if they see what they believe to be an injustice happening? When we have an advantage over another person, what should guide our decisions about how to best use our advantage?

Luke 23:10-11, 23-25

The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing [Jesus]. Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. ... But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. He released the man they asked for [Barabbas], the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished. (For context, read 23:6-25.)

In this chapter, we catch a glimpse of how the gears of Roman jurisprudence functioned. Pilate and Herod each tried to pass the buck to the other leader, arguing about issues like jurisdiction. Neither leader really wanted the hot potato of an upstart would-be messiah, whose presence could rile up the people on the one hand, and enrage Caesar on the other.

At the same time, Herod was intrigued by Jesus and really hoped for some unusual entertainment at his expense. But Jesus kept silent, refusing to respond to Herod's questions or to his accusers' false claims. Rather than treating Jesus with the respect ordinarily accorded a rabbi, Herod and his soldiers mocked him, tossing him back to Pilate like a ping-pong ball. The exchange that Pilate and Herod had over the course of Jesus' trial led to the two rulers becoming friends, when before they had been enemies (vv. 6-12).

Further evidence of the injustice inherent in the process of the trial came when Pilate acknowledged that he had not heard any credible evidence that Jesus was guilty of any of the charges laid against him. In spite of that, Pilate was willing to have Jesus flogged. The Roman governor was trying to have it both ways, to please those who wanted Jesus punished, even though he was innocent, and to make himself look magnanimous by sparing Jesus the death penalty (vv. 13-22).

Finally, much like contemporary poll watchers, Pilate tested the way the wind of public opinion was blowing, and decided that handing Jesus over to be crucified was the lesser of whatever bad options he had available to him.

In ["The Story of Barabbas Is No Mere Prisoner Swap."](#) Andrew Wilson, teaching pastor at King's Church, London, wrote that Jesus traded places with Barabbas. He contends "this is not

merely an exchange, but a substitution. Jesus doesn't just die instead of Barabbas; he dies in his place as his substitute, his representative. We know this because ... Barabbas and Jesus stand accused of the same crime: sedition, insurrection, treason."

Both men pose a direct threat to Caesar's authority. But Wilson writes that "Barabbas represents the way of war, strength, and violent insurrection. Jesus represents the way of peace, innocence, and sacrifice. When Pilate asks the crowd for their preference, this is the point at issue. And Jerusalem chooses the way of violence -- "Not this man, but Barabbas!" (John 18:40)

Questions: What do you think motivated Pilate, Herod, Jesus' accusers and the soldiers, as the trial progressed? Given the many forces involved in the Roman criminal justice system, how difficult do you think it would have been for Pilate to reach a more just verdict? What does Jesus' trial suggest about the challenges of working for justice in other systems, our own included?

Acts 24:23-27

Then [Felix] ordered the centurion to keep [Paul] in custody, but to let him have some liberty and not to prevent any of his friends from taking care of his needs. Some days later when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, he sent for Paul and heard him speak concerning faith in Christ Jesus. And as he discussed justice, self-control, and the coming judgment, Felix became frightened and said, "Go away for the present; when I have an opportunity, I will send for you." At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul, and for that reason he used to send for him very often and converse with him. After two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus; and since he wanted to grant the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison. (For context, read 23:22-27.)

When Paul visited Jerusalem, he had almost finished seven days of purification rites when some Jews from Asia falsely accused him of defiling the temple by bringing Greek outsiders into the holy place (Acts 21:27-29). His enemies stirred up the people, until a Roman tribune came with soldiers and centurions to arrest Paul and bind him with chains (Acts 21:30-36). After bringing Paul into the barracks, the tribune learned he was not the Egyptian revolutionary they were looking for, so he granted Paul permission to speak to the people in his own defense (Acts 21:37-40; 22:1-21).

When the crowd still could not be pacified, the tribune ordered Paul to be tied up and flogged, to try to extract information that would help him understand the reason for the people's discontent. Paul knew his rights, as a Roman citizen, and inquired of the centurion standing nearby whether it was legal for them to flog him. The centurion reported the conversation to his superior officer, who immediately halted the illegal examination. The next day, the tribune released Paul and arranged a deposition of sorts with the chief priests and entire council (Acts 22:22-30).

Paul gave further testimony, but his listeners could not agree on a verdict. Instead, the various factions became so violent that the tribune ordered his soldiers to rescue Paul and bring him back to the barracks for safekeeping (Acts 23:1-11). Meanwhile, 40 men conspired to ambush and kill Paul, but the plot was revealed to Paul, who got word to the tribune through one of the centurions (Acts 23:12-22). The tribune (Claudius Lysias) provided a heavy military escort of 200 soldiers,

70 cavalry officers, and 200 spearmen, and spirited Paul away to Felix the governor under cover of night, thus foiling the plot (Acts 23:23-35).

Five days later, Felix held a formal hearing, at which Paul's accusers spoke before he gave his own defense. Felix ordered the case postponed until the tribune Lysias could arrive to give testimony (Acts 24:1-22).

Questions: Compare and contrast the way the Roman officers handled Paul's case with the way law enforcement officers in the United States have handled cases with which you are familiar. What actions did the Roman officials take that were commendable, in your view? What actions did they take that might have been questionable, or that may have been based on less than stellar motives?

How would you characterize the relationship Paul had with the Roman soldiers who had him in custody? What might this mean with regard to how Christians today should view and interact with law enforcement officers?

For Further Discussion

1. Consider this, from former five-term U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D-NM): "People should not be imprisoned without having the ability to challenge the legality of that imprisonment."
2. "If we went back to the [imprisonment rate](#) we had in the early '70s, something like four out of five people employed in the prison industry would lose their jobs. That's what you're up against," wrote award-winning American filmmaker Eugene Jarecki. What is the relationship of economics and the prison industry?
3. "Economic power is exercised by means of a positive, by offering men a reward, an incentive, a payment, a value; political power is exercised by means of a negative, by the threat of punishment, injury, imprisonment, destruction," asserted author and philosopher Ayn Rand, adding. "The businessman's tool is values; the bureaucrat's tool is fear." How do politics figure into the way people are punished in a society?
4. "Dare to do things worthy of imprisonment if you mean to be of consequence," wrote Roman poet Juvenal. What, if any, "things worthy of imprisonment" would you be willing to do in order "to be of consequence"?
5. Discuss this, from American historian and activist Howard Zinn's book, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train: A Personal History of Our Times*: "I am convinced that imprisonment is a way of pretending to solve the problem of crime. It does nothing for the victims of crime, but perpetuates the idea of retribution, thus maintaining the endless cycle of violence in our culture. It is a cruel and useless substitute for the elimination of those conditions -- poverty, unemployment, homelessness, desperation, racism, greed -- which are at the root of most punished crime. The crimes of the rich and powerful go mostly unpunished. It must surely be a tribute to the resilience of the human spirit that even a small number of those men and women in the hell of the prison system survive it and hold on to their humanity."

6. Attorney and author of political and legal thrillers, Kenneth Eade, wrote in *An Evil Trade*: "Putting a man's life to waste is not justice." How can a society avoid "wasting" people's lives in the way it constructs its laws?

7. React to this, from Soviet dissident and political prisoner Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918 - 1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation, Books I-II*: "At no time have governments been moralists. They never imprisoned people and executed them *for* having done something. They imprisoned and executed them *to keep them from* doing something." Some examples of governments that used prison and other punishment as a form of social control of people who pose a threat to those in power include South Africa, in the case of Nelson Mandela, Russia, in the case of opposition leader [Alexei Navalny](#), or India, in its treatment of civil rights leader Mahatma Gandhi.

8. According to copywriter Johnathan Jena, "True wisdom comes in understanding that sometimes, you are both the prison and the key." When, if ever, have you found that to be the case in your own life?

9. Consider these quotes, from Michelle Alexander, author of *The New York Times* bestseller, [The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness](#):

"Today it is perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals in nearly all the ways that it was once legal to discriminate against African-Americans. Once you're labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination -- employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service -- are suddenly legal. As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow. We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it.

"One theorist, Iris Marion Young, relying on a famous 'birdcage' metaphor, explains ... : If one thinks about racism by examining only one wire of the cage, or one form of disadvantage, it is difficult to understand how and why the bird is trapped. Only a large number of wires arranged in a specific way, and connected to one another, serve to enclose the bird and to ensure that it cannot escape.

"As a society, our decision to heap shame and contempt upon those who struggle and fail in a system designed to keep them locked up and locked out says far more about ourselves than it does about them."

Responding to the News

1. You may want to pick up a copy of [The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness](#), by Michelle Alexander, [Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption](#), by Bryan Stevenson, or [Rethinking Incarceration: Advocating for Justice That Restores](#), by Dominique DuBois Gilliard.

2. This might be a good time to explore what policies, position papers and ministries your church and denomination has in the area of incarceration. Is the information accurate and up-to-date? How can your congregation contribute to building a more just society?

Prayer Suggested by Psalm 69:4, 30-33; Psalm 79:8-13; Psalm 102:18-22; Isaiah 42:22; Genesis 40:23

O God, we thank you that you hear the needy and do not despise your people who are hated without cause, who are accused falsely, and who are in bonds. Protect the wrongly imprisoned and revive the hope of the oppressed. Let your compassion come speedily to meet the guilty who are brought very low in grief over their sin. Look down from heaven and hear the groans of crime victims and prisoners; render justice to the hidden and forgotten, that generations yet unborn may praise your name. Amen.