

PLATO'S CAVE IN PAUL'S PRISON  
A Short Story Dialogue  
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## PLATO'S CAVE IN PAUL'S PRISON

Narrator: The prisoners are in a room, some six feet high, thirty feet long and twenty-two feet wide, with a hole in the floor. It is disgusting and vile due to filth, darkness and decay. Some were inflicted with leprosy, intestinal worms, or dysentery. The stench was thick as fog. The only light fanned out from the frame of the iron door and a small square hole in its center. Prisoners are condemned to die either by strangulation or starvation, and are chained to walls. Flies, roaches and fleas infest this dank space. Sometimes the dead are displayed on the stone stairs, before being thrown into the Tiber.

Silas: "Paul, you are right."

Paul: "Yes, we are destined to be here. Even with our feet locked in stocks, we glorify Jesus as Lord!"

Silas: "I remember her clearly. This certain slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination met us, who brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling. This girl followed and us, and cried out, saying, 'These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation.' And this she did for many days."

Paul: "She was such a pest, like a biting insect."

Silas: "Then you said, 'I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.' And he came out that very hour. But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized us and dragged us into the marketplace to the authorities. And they brought us to the magistrates, and said, 'These men, being Jews, exceedingly trouble our city; and they teach customs which are not lawful for us, being Romans, to receive or observe.'"

Paul: "How this glorified the Lord!"

Silas: "Then the multitude rose up together against us; and the magistrates tore off their clothes and commanded us to be beaten with rods. And when they had laid many stripes on us, they threw us into prison, commanding the jailer to keep us securely. Having received such a charge, he put us into the inner prison and fastened our feet in the stocks."

Narrator: They gazed about in the smelly gloom. But at midnight Paul and Silas are praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners are listening to them (Acts 16:16-26, selections).

Narrator: the jailor, annoyed at being awakened, cursed and arose.

“Shut up you two or I’ll fasten your tongues with nails into your jaws.”

Paul: “We cannot; the very stones in the walls would cry out if we are silent.”

The jailer opens the iron door, approaches with a guard behind him who holds a torch. Paul and Silas squint at the burst of light.

“Who are you?” He walks toward them on rotting straw, and brandishes a whip. Due to their beatings, both are covered in clotted blood and bruised head-to-foot.

Paul: “I am Paul and this is Silas. We are servants of our Lord and Savior, Christ Jesus.”

The jailer: “This ‘Christ,’ is the hero of the Nazarene sect, is he not?”

Paul: “‘Sect?’ We worship the God of the universe and of His resurrected Son.”

The jailer: “Well, before the Romans conscripted me to this filthy duty, I was a philosopher and a student of Plato.

Paul: “Yes, yes—I read him some years ago when I was a Pharisee. I wanted to learn about Greek myths, and read about those gods who fornicated with each other and humans. I don’t suppose you worship Zeus, himself an adulterer?”

The jailer: “Heavens no. That is a dunghill of mythology. I worship the Idea of the Good. This is the true Logos, not some superstition.”

Paul: "I have spoken to some of your Greek philosophers. 'Idea of the Good?' where does this 'Good' dwell?"

The Jailer: "You Jews are bewitched. I shall tell you the truth of this world." The torchbearer remains, glaring at them. He goes to his cot, returns with a collection of pages, and sits on straw facing Paul and Silas. The other prisoners fix their weary eyes on them.

"The Republic is an extensive dialogue on the nature of justice and reality, and the 'Allegory of the Cave' can be found in Book VII. The Republic is directed toward a discussion of the education required of a Philosopher-King."

Silas: "Greek philosophers, Roman philosophers, Kings of Wisdom. Shrines in every room to worship."

The Jailer, ignoring Silas, continued. "For you ignorant Christians, Plato describes reality with these principles: the world perceived by our senses is not the real world but only a poor imitation or copy of it; the real world can only be apprehended intellectually; the universe is ultimately is good; and only those truly wise—the Philosopher-King—can rule."

Paul: "So the Roman Philosopher-Kings replaced the Greek Philosopher-Kings?"

The jailer: "Those barbarians took us over by force, renamed our gods with theirs."

Paul: "It seems the problem with sons of men is 'might makes right,' not 'right makes might.' There is no human answer to this problem. Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the

power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength" (1 Cor 20-25).

The jailer reads: "Listen, fools, to the only answer and not your superstition! Plato wrote about this. In summary, there are prisoners who think that shadows are reality. Then there are those prisoners who are freed and forced to look at the things that are used to cast shadows on the wall, but cannot recognize these as sources for shadows. Due to their ignorance, some prisoners are freed and dragged along to the outside of cave to see true reality. The Philosopher-Kings, now free, return to the cave to former fellow-prisoners, to point them to the Good.

"The prisoners are bound, 'Here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets. Behind them men are passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials, which appear over the wall. Some of them are talking, others silent. Like ourselves, I replied; and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave.'"

Silas: "They are prisoners of sin against the Holy One, not because they are ignorant."

The jailor pauses, and then picks another section.

"To them, I said, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images.

At first, when any of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then conceive some one saying to him, that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching nearer to being and his eye is turned towards more real existence, he has a clearer vision. And if he is compelled to look straight at the light, will he not have a pain in his eyes which will make him turn away to take and take in the objects of vision which he can see,

and which he will conceive to be in reality clearer than the things which are now being shown to him?”

Paul: “So you and I are shadows. And I suppose our stripes and bruises are shadows of whips and rods that caused them? Raise and wave your whip at us.”

The Jailor sneers, stands, raises the whip and waves it back and forth, and due to the torchlight behind him, its shadow silhouettes Paul’s and Silas’s bodies.

Paul: “Would you rather be beaten with a whip or the shadow of a whip? Nailed by spikes or by the shadow of spikes?”

The jailor, befuddled, stood silent.

Paul: “Verily I say to you, listen to the Lord’s Word I memorized, from Psalm 14, verse 4: Man is like a breath; his days are like a fleeting shadow. Your life is a fleeting shadow! Will you go to Hades or Zeus? Before Christ, there was only Sheol. Sheol is a nasty, dreary, and dark land, where all Jews go, and return from Sheol is not expected. Later in our history, some Hebrews expected Israel would be resurrected. But we who are in Messiah Jesus shall be raised in Christ! Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for He is with me.”

The Jailor shook his head. “I will rise to the Good. Listen to the end of this.” He sits, lays down his whip, gazes at the pages, and then reads.

“He is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent, and held fast until he’s forced into the presence of the sun himself, is he not likely to be pained and irritated? When he approaches the light his eyes will be dazzled, and he will not be able to see anything at all of what are now called realities. He will require to grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world. And first he will see the shadows best, next the reflections of men and other objects in the water, and then the objects themselves; then he will gaze upon the light of the moon and the stars and the spangled heaven; and he will see the sky and the stars by night better than the sun or the light of the sun by day? Last of he will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of him in the water, but he will see him in his own proper place, and not in another; and he will contemplate him as he is.”

Paul: “So it is the sun that is the reality. Or, is it the shadow of the true sun? Or, is the true sun the image of the idea of the True Sun?”

The Jailor: “You are confusing me.”

Paul: “The sun is simply a shadow of the true God. I persecuted Christians, and was present when some Hebrews stoned Stephen. I remember his words as if he said this yesterday—I can never forget the moment. After Stephen spoke of Jesus as Lord, when they heard this, they are furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God’ (Acts 7:54-56). We don’t speak of shadows or images, except that Messiah Jesus is ‘the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation’ (Col. 1:15). We worship not ideas, but God. ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth’” Genesis (1.1).

The Jailor: “No, the Good is supreme. Hear what Plato says about the Philosopher-King, who ‘is the guardian of all that is in the visible world, and in a certain way the cause of all things which he and his fellows have been accustomed to behold.’

“‘The prison-house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, and you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upwards to be the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world according to my poor belief, which, at your desire, I have expressed whether rightly or wrongly God knows. But, whether true or false, my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that this is the power upon which he who would act rationally, either in public or private life must have his eye fixed into the cave.’”

He closes his pages and smirks at Paul and Silas. Both grin. The jailor reaches for the whip.

Paul: “Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ (2 Col. 8).

“I, Paul, a Pharisee, knew the Law of the Hebrews—but no intellectual enlightenment about the Law and the Prophets made it possible for me to ascend the prison-house of sin. I was ‘intellectually enlightened’ about YHWH, and as good a Hebrew as you are a Greek philosopher. Perhaps someone broke your chains, led you up to the world of sight into ‘the intellectual world.’ But I quote you what you just read from Plato: ‘I have expressed whether rightly or wrongly God

knows.' Your Plato has doubts? I profess what Christ has taught me! So, what God do you trust? Look where you are—sitting in a torch lit jail with us in this stinking dudgeon, reciting Plato's philosophy. You are a Philosopher-King sitting on a throne of moldy straw? Do you sing to the Good? We sing and pray to the Father of Lights."

The jailor: "You are common criminals."

Silas, pondering all of this, said "We are bound because of a certain slave girl, possessed with a spirit of divination, brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling. Finally, my brother Paul became greatly annoyed at her, turned and said to the spirit, 'I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.' And he came out that very hour (Acts 16:16, 18). They lost their profit and that is the nature of men—whether Hebrews, Greeks, or Romans. Christ inspired Paul to cast out her unclean spirit—in His holy Name."

The jailor scratches his head, and closes his pages of *The Republic*. He studies Paul and Silas, who now pray with closed eyes, their lips uttering something about "the risen Christ." He rises, slams the iron door and the guard locks it, leaving them in darkness. He climbs worn stone steps to his cot, and sits wondering about these two strange men of the Nazarene cult.

Narrator: "Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison are shaken; and immediately all the doors are opened and everyone's chains are loosed. And the keeper of the prison, awaking from sleep and seeing the prison doors open, supposing the prisoners had fled, drew his sword and was about to kill himself. But Paul called with a loud voice, saying, 'Do yourself no harm, for we are all here.' Then he called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. And he brought them out and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' So they said, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.' Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who are in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family are baptized. Now when he had brought them into his house, he set food before them; and he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household. When daylight came, the magistrates sent their officers with the order 'Release those men'" (Acts 16:26-34).

Narrator: "The jailor freed them as charged."

Before Paul spoke to the officers, he leaned and whispered to the jailor: “For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising Jesus from the dead” (Acts 17:31).

Then, Paul declared to the officers: “They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out.”

Narrator: “The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas are Roman citizens, they were alarmed. They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them. Then they left” (Acts 16:37-40).

The Keeper: “What do you think of those men, who could have escaped, but stayed and kept us from the sword?”

The Jailor: “I cannot deny this jail shook, and ‘all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were loosed.’ I cannot contradict all of the prisoners stayed here.”

The Keeper: “Rome would have our heads had they, Roman citizens, told the authorities that ‘They beat us publicly without a trial.’ At my house they said, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.’” He left. A number of Roman soldiers guard the entrances of the prison until doors could be replaced. The jailor returns to his cot, sits and stares at his copy of The Republic.

The Narrator: “The jailor ponders all of this. History does not record his response.”