

PRISONS AND THE BIBLE  
A 10-session adult-education curriculum

OVERVIEW:

The Bible says many conflicting things about criminal justice – from the stories of unjust imprisonment in the Hebrew Bible to the punishments (which may not be as harsh as they appear) in the Mosaic Law, to the beautiful visions of the reconciliation of criminals given by the prophets and apostles.

This study considers the biblical texts openly and honestly in their complexity. We cannot make the Bible say what we want it to about prisons!

But as prison abolitionists, we can choose to read the biblical witness in light of Jesus’ understanding that the reign of God means freeing the prisoners. By honestly considering relevant biblical passages, we are able to deepen our understanding of how this message is revealed to us and our discernment of how God is calling us to act in the context of the justice system we have now.

With abolitionist eyes, we can read the consistent witness of the Bible on the side of those who are held captive or are marginalized by our culture and the systems that govern our lives, without flattening the complex witness of the texts about incarceration. What we see is “all things working together for good for those who love God” (Romans 8:28) even when God’s witness to liberation takes place inside or alongside prisons. What this reminds us, as we work toward a future without prisons, is to look for the hints of work that God is already doing within places of incarceration, captivity, and punishment. Perhaps these passages about prisons are of especial relevance for us “in the meantime” as we struggle to walk alongside and support those who are incarcerated, and even those who still believe prisons are essential to justice, on the long walk to liberation.

*Use of this study alone is appropriate for individuals and congregations that already have some familiarity with issues of criminal justice/injustice in the current system, or for people directly impacted by the criminal justice system. If using this study alone, you may find it helpful to share the summary of a prison-abolitionist theological perspective, available at [christiansforabolition.org](http://christiansforabolition.org), to provide context for participants. This study would also be an appropriate follow-up to the four-week study “Introduction to Abolitionist Theologies” available at [christiansforabolition.org/resources](http://christiansforabolition.org/resources).*

GOALS:

- To approach biblical texts on prisons, justice, and law with an open heart and develop an appreciation of the complex biblical witness around issues of prison and justice, while also presenting an abolitionist reading of each passage
- To more clearly discern what a Christian prison abolitionist witness looks like, in light of the varied positions taken in the Bible
- To center the voices and interpretations of the texts by incarcerated people

## SESSION 1: GOD WORKS THROUGH JOSEPH'S UNJUST IMPRISONMENT

- Theme: God works through Joseph's unjust imprisonment

The story of Joseph is a powerful account of someone carried by God's faithfulness through imprisonment, who uses relationships he forms in prison for the greater good. Joseph is betrayed and imprisoned unjustly but ultimately vindicated—yet his incarceration has lasting effects...

- Text: Genesis 39:20-41:13
- Key abolitionist idea: God can work good through situations of unjust or arbitrary imprisonment – but that doesn't therefore mean the imprisonment is justified or that we should not resist injustice.
- Questions for discussion:
  - Joseph says about his enslavement and his imprisonment, to his brothers "You intended it for evil, but God intended it for good." How do you see God working for good through situations of imprisonment, even unjust imprisonment, today? If God is able to do good through unjust systems, should that affect the ways we fight against those injustices and our attitude towards them? How?
  - Compare the situations of the baker and the cupbearer to Joseph's situation. What do their stories have to tell us about the role of arbitrariness or unfairness in punishment, and how does that play out in our criminal justice system today?

## SESSION 2: PROTECTION AND RETRIBUTION IN THE LAW OF ISRAEL

- Theme: Protection and retribution in the law of Israel

The “Mosaic Law” of Israel reflects ancient moral values, but also shows a deep concern for those who are marginalized, like the poor, widows, and orphans. In the context of punishment for murder or other serious harm, how do we understand the Law’s provisions in a healing and liberating way, as many scholars believe they were intended to be?

- Text: Numbers 35:6-34 and Deuteronomy 19:1-21
- Key abolitionist idea: Capital punishment is presented in the Mosaic Law as a sign of the holiness of God’s people, not out of a desire for retribution, and must be understood in the context of God’s covenant with the people of Israel as a whole. “An eye for an eye” is an early restorative justice text, aimed at making commensurate amends and restricting the cycle of vengeance and violence—it was never interpreted as actually requiring violence in response to violence. The cities of refuge provide an early restorative justice model in their concern for protecting the ‘innocent blood’ of the offender as well.
- Questions for discussion:
  - The presence of capital punishment in the Mosaic Law makes these difficult texts for an abolitionist or an opponent of capital punishment. What is your initial reaction to the texts?
  - The biblical emphasis on not shedding innocent blood, even in retribution, is strong, as is the emphasis on “due process” and having sufficient evidence before punishing someone. How does that interact with our current criminal justice system? Do you think we avoid shedding innocent blood?
  - At the same time, these texts show God demanding the purification of Israel by shedding the blood of murderers. Why do you think God commands this of Israel? How should this law affect the way we think about punishment and retribution today?

### SESSION 3: JEREMIAH IMPRISONED FOR THE LORD

- Theme: Jeremiah imprisoned for the Lord

The prophet Jeremiah was unpopular because of his commitment to prophesying the word of God even when his prophecies were of destruction, and he was imprisoned multiple times in the political chaos preceding the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon. His story presents parallels for prisoners of conscience in our time.

- Text: Jeremiah 37:11–38:28
- Key abolitionist idea: The arbitrariness and cruelty of Jeremiah’s imprisonment for his political opinions brings into question the justice of incarceration.
- Questions for discussion:
  - The story shows Jeremiah in different carceral settings: a prison, under “house arrest” in the court of the guard, and later thrown into a pit and left to starve. How do these settings and their various cruelty reflect conditions that incarcerated people face today?
  - Jeremiah is both imprisoned and freed because of his political opinions and his commitment to the Word of God. How are political opinions criminalized today?
  - What does Jeremiah’s repeated rescue from the imprisonment he suffers suggest about God’s fidelity to him and to political prisoners?

#### SESSION 4: RESISTANCE AND DELIVERANCE IN THE BOOK OF DANIEL

- Theme: Resistance and deliverance in the book of Daniel

The stories in the book of Daniel represent early examples of civil disobedience, as Daniel and his friends refuse to obey unjust laws and are incarcerated and threatened with death as political prisoners. What can we learn from their witness?

- Text: Daniel 3:1–30, Daniel 6:1–28
- Key abolitionist idea: The stories of Daniel in the Lion’s Den and of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace both present images of a place of death, to which the power of the state can sentence you rightly or wrongly, and of God’s deliverance of God’s people from punishment for breaking unjust laws.
- Questions for discussion:
  - Was it the right and moral choice for Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to break the king’s law? Under what conditions is civil disobedience justified?
  - What can we learn from Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s commitment to the truth?
  - What can we learn from God’s rescue of them? What parallels does it have to God’s commitment to those who are incarcerated today?

## SESSION 5: THE INCARCERATION AND DEATH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

- Theme: The incarceration and death of John the Baptist

John the Baptist is imprisoned for speaking truth to power and condemning King Herod. While in prison, he asks for a sign that Jesus is really the Messiah. What can we learn about signs of hope for liberation that are available to incarcerated people and to those on the outside?

- Text: Matthew 11:2–6, Matthew 14:1–12
- Key abolitionist idea: God is always bringing signs of hope and coming liberation both to and through those who are incarcerated.
- Questions for discussion:
  - What does the arbitrary nature of Herod’s decision to imprison and eventually execute John say about our criminal justice system today?
  - What signs of hope do we see in our current criminal justice system, both from solidarity among those who are incarcerated and advocacy on the outside?
  - What would we “go and tell” those who are incarcerated about the signs of Jesus’ liberating presence in the world today?

## SESSION 6: JESUS CRUCIFIED WITH THE “CRIMINALS”

- Theme: Jesus crucified with the “criminals”

Jesus is condemned to death and crucified between two “criminals.” The imagery of three crosses presents a potent picture of Jesus’ ongoing presence today with those who are criminalized and incarcerated, and their priority of place in the coming reign of God.

- Text: Luke 23: 32–43
- Key abolitionist idea: Jesus is closest to those who are incarcerated. Christian community is born among those who are criminalized, for the sake of their liberation.
- Questions for discussion:
  - Karl Barth describes Jesus and the two “criminals” with whom he is crucified as “the first certain, indissoluble, and indestructible Christian community.” What do you think about the idea that Christian community comes *first* to those who are criminalized or incarcerated?
  - What do you think of the differences between the reactions of the two crucified with Jesus, and of the distinction one of them makes between their guilt and Jesus’ innocence? What do these varied reactions tell us about the nature of the “indestructible Christian community” formed among those who are criminalized or incarcerated?
  - What hope does Jesus’ promise, “Today you will be with me in Paradise,” provide for those incarcerated in our world?

## SESSION 7: GOD RESCUES PETER FROM PRISON

- Theme: God rescues Peter from prison

In the early church, God uses apparently supernatural means to free Peter from unjust incarceration. What hope and promise does this story offer those who are unjustly incarcerated today?

- Text: Acts 5:17-32, Acts 12:1-18
- Key abolitionist idea: In situations of unjust imprisonment, there are different ways to witness and make evident the injustice of the situation—one of which is resistance.
- Questions for discussion:
  - What is the implication of Peter’s claim “We must obey God rather than human beings” (Acts 5:29) for us today?
  - What can we infer from these stories about God’s will for those who are unjustly imprisoned? How does God react to incarceration?
  - Why do you think the text emphasizes that Peter thinks he is dreaming when the angel leads him out of the prison? How does that affect the way we read the story?
  - What does this story have to tell us as we think about how to resist systems of incarceration as Christians today?



## SESSION 8: PAUL AND SILAS BAPTIZE THEIR JAILER

- Theme: Paul and Silas baptize their jailer

When Paul and Silas are thrown into prison, God again takes supernatural action to release them—but instead of running, they stay and end up converting their jailer. What promise does this story bring to those who are incarcerated today?

- Text: Acts 16:16-40
- Key abolitionist idea: In situations of unjust imprisonment, there are different ways to witness and make evident the injustice of the situation—one of which is solidarity work occurring among incarcerated people and within prisons.
- Questions for discussion:
  - Compare the actions of Peter and of Paul and Silas when they are unjustly imprisoned and then freed by divine intervention. Does one or the other seem to be a more effective witness to the gospel?
  - Why do you think God sends an angel to rescue Peter from prison, twice, but not to release Paul and Silas?
  - What, if anything, can we infer from these stories about God's will for those who are unjustly imprisoned?
  - What does this story tell us about the important role and power incarcerated people have to work for solidarity and liberation even while incarcerated?

## SESSION 9: WHAT ARE THE ROLES OF THE STATE AND THE CHURCH IN RESPONDING TO EVIL?

- Theme: What are the roles of the state and the church in responding to evil?

Romans 13:1–6 has long been used to justify injustices, including slavery and prisons. But when read in the context of the surrounding verses, it is less about supporting state power than it is about encouraging those who have been harmed to refrain from seeking personal retribution or vengeance (instead leaving it to the state’s justice, even when that’s imperfect). Ultimately, all state power must be governed by love (Rom. 13:7–10), and love is opposed to prisons but seeks reconciliation, as the description of the mission of the church in 2 Cor. 5:17–21 further emphasizes.

- Text: Romans 12:17-13:10, 2 Corinthians 5:17-21
- Key abolitionist idea: The role of the state is to restrain personal retribution or vengeance, not “to punish crime.” The church’s mission to be ambassadors of reconciliation extends to improving state justice as well.
- Questions for discussion:
  - Romans 13:1-6 is a difficult text for many Christians because of the ways it has been used to justify injustices such as slavery. What do you think about it, reading it in the context of Romans 12:19 as a statement about the role of the state to restrain personal retribution or vengeance, more than about the state’s role in “punishing crime”?
  - Do you think the distinction drawn between the church and the state in these texts is a valid one? Can the state exact retribution while the church pursues reconciliation, or are the lines between these institutions more blurry than that?
  - Activist and scholar Ched Myers considers the phrase “ambassadors of reconciliation” (see 2 Cor. 5:20) to be one of the most important descriptors of Christians and our vocation. What does it mean that those in the church are called to be ambassadors of reconciliation? How does that affect our relation to systems of injustice in the secular world?

## SESSION 10: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

- Questions for discussion:
  - Overall, what does the Bible see as the role of the secular state with respect to crime and punishment? What does it see as the role of the church? How are these interrelated? How does justice as envisioned in Numbers 35:6-34 and Deuteronomy 19:1-13 differ from that envisioned in Romans 12-13 and why?
  - In what ways is our current justice system at odds with God's reign and will as shown in Matthew 25:31-46 and Luke 4:17-21? Are there ways in which you think our criminal justice system is supported by the biblical texts we've studied?
  - In Genesis 39:20-41:13 and Acts 16:16-40 we see God working in unexpected ways through the unjust imprisonment of a righteous person. How do we see God working in unexpected ways through injustices today and what effect does that have on how we choose to fight those injustices?
  - What guidance can we draw from these varied texts about how to act, as Christians committed to God's justice but living in the secular world?

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

This study and its questions are a starting point. We want to hear your perspectives, especially the voices of currently or formerly incarcerated people, or those who have loved ones affected by imprisonment.

If you want to write a meditation on one or more of these Biblical stories, you can send it to us at:

Christians for Abolition  
P.O. Box 4355  
West Hills, CA 91308

Please let us know if you want to give us permission to use your writing or name in future versions of this study.