

## Philemon 1:1 Prisoners of Christ

A sermon delivered at Calvary Chapel DC Metro  
[www.calvarydcmetro.org](http://www.calvarydcmetro.org)

Do you have any friends in jail?

I've served before in a church before where the answer was "Yeah, of course." You see, I grew up in an area where sometimes you had conversations about people going to visit so and so in jail. That's not really the world we live in here in the shadows of Washington DC though, is it?

So, you might be surprised to know the word 'prison' occurs almost 100 times in the Bible. In the pages of Scripture we find references time and again to prison, prisoners, and being taken captive either as individuals or as entire nations.

In fact, at least four books of the Bible are letters written from a Roman jail. Paul wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and the one we will look at this morning, Philemon while under arrest.

The first three are letters to churches and their names reflect the cities where those churches met: Ephesus, Philippi, and Colossae. Philemon though was written to a man, a man named Philemon. It's one of what we've been calling the Little Letters to Normal People; it's a short letter, originally written on a single sheet of papyrus, addressed to a normal person.

We'll talk more about him later, but Philemon wasn't in full time ministry, he wasn't a pastor or seminary professor – most likely he was a successful businessman in the city of Colossae. Under normal circumstances, he wasn't the kind of guy that was likely to have a friend in jail.

But he does, and actually, there's quite a bit more to that story. Philemon's letter was written by a man called Paul. He says so right in the opening verse. Read with me, will you?

1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy *our* brother,

To Philemon our beloved *friend* and fellow laborer, 2 to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Those first three words, "Paul, a prisoner" are words I am sure Paul never imagined early in his life that he would ever be writing. There came a time when Paul was actually putting

other people into prison, but I'm sure, at least in those early days, the idea of ever becoming a prisoner himself never entered his mind.

Now, why is that? Who was Paul? You hear his name a lot in the Bible and in church, but who was he?

Paul was actually born with the name Saul. He was a Jew, born into a Jewish family, and not just any family – he was born into the line of Benjamin. If you remember, God had called a man named Abraham out of Ur, modern day Iraq, and promised to give him the Promised Land – what we know today as Israel.

Abraham later had a son, Isaac, and Isaac had a son, Jacob. God changed Jacob's name to Israel, and he had twelve sons who eventually had families of their own who were known as the twelve tribes of Israel. One of those sons, and therefore, one of those tribes, was Benjamin.

Benjamin was a small tribe, but it was also very significant – the first king to ever rule the nation of Israel was from Benjamin, and his name was also Saul. So Paul, who is now in jail, was named after the first king of his nation. It would be like me naming my son George Washington Schlenz – which is a mouthful.

So Saul's a good Jewish boy with a good Jewish name, born into a good Jewish family that gave him a good Jewish upbringing. He was born in Tarsus, a city in modern Turkey, but at some point his family enrolled him in the most prestigious school in the Jewish world – he went to Jerusalem and was educated at the feet of Gamaliel one of the most respected rabbis in the world at that time. As a young man Paul was on the Ivy League track.

He was taught all the intricacies of the Jewish law and lived according to its most strict interpretations. He joined the Pharisees, a religious denomination of sorts and was, in his own words, "[zealous for God](#) (Acts 22:3)."

He eventually served on the Sanhedrin, what you might think of as the Jewish Senate – a group of leaders representing the nation in all sorts of decisions and law-making both religious and political. You could almost cast him as a young Barack Obama or John F. Kennedy, or Paul Ryan if you're a Republican – a surprisingly gifted up and comer who was advancing quickly compared to his peers.

He described himself at one point like this:

[Phil 3:4... If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: 5 circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; 6 ... concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.](#)

So it was no surprise that he took the lead in tackling a new problem - a group of people who were following some upshot rabbi from Galilee called Jesus were causing problems for

the establishment in Jerusalem. As a sort of third-party candidate Jesus' policies weren't welcome in the established system Saul represented. The Sanhedrin had already collaborated to have Jesus 'taken care of.' But then, a bunch of His followers starting causing problems telling everyone that Jesus had risen from the dead, and even working miracles themselves.

Something had to be done. So the elders started going after Jesus' disciples. Saul was there on the day they formed a lynch mob and went after a young man by the name of Stephen, throwing stones at him until he died. And since killing people with rocks is hard and bloody work, and since religious zealots don't like to get their fancy clothes dirty, the Bible says,

Acts 7:58 ... the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on *God* and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.  
Acts 8: 1 Now Saul was consenting to his death.

You and I might suppose that would have an affect on a man – that it might make him question what he was doing endorsing the death of someone who prayed for the forgiveness of his killers. But it didn't. It only strengthened Saul's resolve to shut down this little deviant group before it caused any more problems. So the Bible goes on with the story:

Acts 8:1 (cont.) At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 And devout men carried Stephen *to his burial*, and made great lamentation over him.  
3 As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing *them* to prison.

Saul figured he would be able to snuff out this new group pretty quickly with a few strategic arrests and by making an example of a few key believers. The problem was, Christianity was spreading even faster than their persecution.

Now, I think that's something important to remember in a season where some people are decrying the death of the church in America due to recent political decisions. Friends, as Pastor Matt Mozeleski out at CC Warrenton said, the Supreme Court didn't vote Jesus back into the tomb. The decisions of the leadership of a nation certainly have an impact on the church, but they cannot stop or control the church.

That's the lesson Saul was about to learn.

Christianity was starting to pop up in Damascus – real world Damascus, the capitol of Syria – and so, Saul requested and was given, credentials to travel over there and continue the policy of persecution they were rolling out in Jerusalem.

But on that fateful journey, on the road to Damascus, Saul's life was changed forever. When he least expected it, certainly when he wasn't looking for it, Saul was saved. He became, born-again. On that road Jesus appeared to him in a vision and asked "Saul, what are you doing? Why are you persecuting Me?" And instantly he understood Who was speaking and what He meant, and Saul totally and completely surrendered, being completely overwhelmed by the glory and majesty of Christ.

The life of Saul, which was on the fast track to worldly success, suffered a head-on collision with the semi-truck of Jesus and this man, who had endorsed the persecution of Christians, who had argued against the Christians, who was actively involved in arresting Christians, suddenly became a Christian himself.

And from that very moment, nothing was ever the same again. When Saul bowed before Jesus Christ, he turned his back on everything else he had ever accomplished. He told the Philippians:

Phil 3:7 But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. 8 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which *is* from the law, but that which *is* through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; 10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, 11 if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

12 Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. 13 Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing *I do*, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, 14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Saul spent the rest of his life serving Christ with more zeal and excellence than he had ever invested into anything before. He saw that Jesus had drawn a line in the sand of his life and he understood – it's one side or the other. You're either for Jesus or against Him. There is no ambivalence, no 'meh.' You're either all in or all out. Those are the only two options.

And so in Paul's writing we see all kinds of analogies made: God is the master and we are His servants; He is the King and we are the citizens; He is the commander and we are the soldiers; again and again he is trying to help us see God is in control and we belong to Him. The way Paul saw it, when he surrendered to Christ on the road to Damascus, it was a total and complete, an unconditional surrender. From here on out, his life was to be used for the glory of God no matter the cost, no matter the consequence.

Before he wrote to Philemon, Paul sent some letters to the church in Corinth and he described his experience in life and ministry since coming to Christ. He says he's been

working hard, faced harsh discipline from the courts, been in prison “frequently” and near death often.

2 Cor 11:24 From the Jews five times I received forty *stripes* minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; 26 *in* journeys often, *in* perils of waters, *in* perils of robbers, *in* perils of *my own* countrymen, *in* perils of the Gentiles, *in* perils in the city, *in* perils in the wilderness, *in* perils in the sea, *in* perils among false brethren; 27 in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness— 28 besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.

And on top of all this, he struggled with some sort of physical injury or illness that wouldn't heal and which God told him he would just have to endure while leaning on God for strength instead of receiving a miraculous cure. God told Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.”

And Paul agreed. He had experienced it time and time again – enough to be certain it was true – God WAS with Paul, God WAS leading Paul, and God had NOT abandoned Paul, even though things weren't going so well.

And so Paul said he took pleasure in his weaknesses, in the times he was insulted, when he went through hardship and persecution and calamity. He had the audacity to say, “**For when I am weak, then I am strong.**” Strong because when we come to the end of our own strength we often discover superior strength that comes from God.

So yes, Paul is now writing to Philemon from a prison. Yes, he is limited in his freedoms. Yes, has lost the social status and privilege he once had. It may even appear to the outside observer that the Roman government holds his life in their hands, but Paul doesn't mention Rome. He says he is a “**prisoner of Jesus Christ.**”

“**Paul, a prisoner...of Jesus Christ.**” These six words captured me this week and I laughed and said, here is one of the shortest books in the Bible, and we're going to spend more than a week on it because there's so much we need to consider, *just in the opening words!* So, we might be here in Philemon for a few months. Who knows? I'm joking of course, but it's going to take us at least two or maybe three weeks to get through Philemon and if you're surprised by that, you're not the only one – I didn't expect it either.

But let's get back to it.

“**Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ.**” As we have seen, Paul cast aside all of his old identities, all of his old titles, and now he is fine with just this introduction even when he's writing to someone “successful” like Philemon.

Friends, have we done the same? Can you say, “Scott, a prisoner of Jesus Christ.” “Elizabeth, a prisoner of Jesus Christ.” “Jeff, a prisoner of Jesus Christ.”

You say, well, of course I can't, I'm not in jail. Fair enough, I agree. But what about another title Paul often used, especially when he wasn't in jail – "Paul, a bondservant of Christ." Can you use that? Is that how you see yourself?

What IS your primary identity? How do you introduce yourself? How do you like to be introduced by others? What's important for others to know about you? What is important for others NOT to know about you? I love the way so many of us respond to the question, "what do you do?" with "I work for the government."

Well, actually Christian, of course you do! But not the government you think – you are a child of the Kingdom of God – you are an ambassador of Christ. You have rank and significance and purpose in the government, THE government – the one that doesn't care what happens in the next election cycle because it's never up for re-election, the government that will never fade or fail. The government that trumps all other governments – the government of God.

But do you see yourself that way? As a child of God, a prisoner of Christ, an ambassador of Heaven. What gets top billing in your life, the titles you've been given by men or the titles you've been given by God? Are you more interested in being known as a Management Analyst or a mom? As a Division Head or a husband and dad? As a Deputy Assistant Muckety Muck or as a Child of God?

Friend, are you more interested in moving up the ladder in the organizations of men, or are you, like Paul, convinced that it is useful, and even valuable at times to have position and rank on earth, but only if, *only if*, it doesn't get in the way of your loyalties to Christ?

And how do you see your current circumstances? Are they something you've earned, or something that has been entrusted to you by God?

Most people see God as optional or maybe helpful in their lives, as though He's our servant – He's the one who makes our lives better. It's the old idea of the genie in the bottle – He might take some coaxing, He can be a little cantankerous and aloof, but if you can get Him out of His bottle in a good mood – maybe He'll grant you a wish.

That's all wrong. The right way to see God is to see Him as He really is – to see Him as Lord and Master.

Why don't people do that? Why aren't we more willing to see ourselves as servants of God, as "[prisoners of Jesus Christ](#)?"

Because some people just don't see any need for God. Things are going fine in their lives, they feel like they're good people. Maybe they tell you, "honestly, I've never had a need for God in my life – I don't feel like I'm missing anything." And I can totally understand that – if all God does is make my life better. If my only message is "God has a wonderful plan for

your life” and you feel like you’re already living a wonderful life – why does what I have to share matter? You don’t need it; you’re getting along fine without it.

But Jesus doesn’t just come to make our lives better – can I remind you Paul is sitting in a Roman jail? Can I remind you of all he says he went through?

Can I remind you of the cross of Christ?

What was that all about? Why did Jesus have to be beaten and crucified – horrifically executed? Was it just to make my life better – to get me a parking space on a crowded day at the mall? To further secure my spot in the middle class in America? How do you tie a spear piercing His side and nails piercing His hands and feet to my prayer for a new iPad? There has to be something missing here. And there is. It’s called sin.

Jesus didn’t come simply to make our lives better; He came to save us from our sin. You see, even if your life is going well, even if things seem like they’re going fine at home and at work, and in every other area of life, you still sin. On purpose and on accident. You do things God says you should not do, and you neglect things you should do. And that is called sin. And sin keeps us separated from a Holy God.

Jesus told a parable about a man in Luke Chapter 12. He had had a good life, he was prospering. He was doing so well his barns couldn’t store anything else so he said to himself, here’s what I will do:

18...I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. 19 And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, *and* be merry.” 20 But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?’ 21 “So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

Sure, things might be going well for you right now, but what are your long term plans? I mean your REALLY long-term plans - what will you do when you die? Where are you going to spend eternity? If you weren’t interested in getting to know God here on earth, what makes you think you’ll be interested in getting to know Him in eternity? And what guarantee do you have that He’ll be interested in hanging out with you? What are you going to do about all the ways you offended God or ignored Him while you were here? My friend, I want you to know, God isn’t optional, and He’s not just for making your life better.

Some of us know that – we have come to Christ – we have asked for and received forgiveness, but we still see this kind of thing we’re talking about – putting God first in your life, seeing yourself as His prisoner, His servant - as radical. And honestly, you’re kind of afraid. You’re worried. You’re asking, “If I do that, I surrender to Him completely, if I make my life about God and not about me, can I really trust Him? Can I really believe that the ice won’t break if I step out onto it?”

Allow me to answer: Yes. Yes, a thousand times, yes. You can trust God. It may not be easy. I'm not promising things will turn out exactly the way you want them to. I'm not offering you a Make-A-Wish-Messiah. I'm telling you about Jesus. "Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ."

People in this world might look down on you as follow Him, you might have some difficulties and pains, but I guarantee, absolutely positively guarantee – I'm staking my entire life and eternity on this – that things will always work out for good over the long haul. You will not look back with any regrets if you choose to follow Christ and obey His commands – even if He allows you into a Roman jail.

Just look back to the cross and remember: that was God's proof of how much He loves you. That is what He was willing to do for you. And think about every description you know of God – how is He described? Holy? Yes. Righteous? Yes. Just? Yes. Merciful? Yes. Gracious? Yes. Loving? Of course! If God is the way He is described, doesn't that sound like someone you can trust?

Look back on your own life – is there anything you've done in His name or for His sake that you regret? What are you afraid of?

Are you afraid that the God who has been there all along is suddenly going to disappear?

The Bible says Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He's proven that you can trust Him in the past and He hasn't changed a bit. Your circumstances may have changed. It may feel like the ante has been upped a bit in life, but He has not changed. Will you still trust Him, do you still trust Him? Are you concerned that you got stuck with a JV Jesus and you're facing varsity decisions?

I'm not saying it will be easy, but I am saying that the Bible says you can trust Him.

After He fed the five-thousand, the next day people came pledging their loyalty to Jesus because He gave them bread – because He made their lives better for a moment. And He told them they didn't understand – that He wasn't the bread of the moment, He was the bread of life – that they had to come to God forever and with everything – that He was calling them to turn from a life built around their own choices and come back to the God who was their Master and Lord. That God wasn't here to make their lives better, He was here to re-prioritize them entirely.

John 6:60 Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard *this*, said, "This is a hard saying; who can understand it?"

61 When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples complained about this, He said to them, "Does this offend you? 62 *What* then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before? 63 It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and *they* are life. 64 But there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who would betray Him. 65 And He said, "Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father."



66 From that *time* many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more.  
67 Then Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also want to go away?"  
68 But Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words  
of eternal life. 69 Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the  
Son of the living God."

Friend, let me ask – do you have anywhere else to go? Are you a prisoner of Christ, or do you still have options?

I know the courts are making decisions. I know people are posting stuff online. I know you have some concerns about the office. But do you have anywhere else to go?

Are you a prisoner of the everchanging opinions of this world, or are you a prisoner of Jesus Christ?

Where are you looking for your blessing to come from?

When Paul wrote to Philemon, he was able to accept being a prisoner in Rome as long as he was a prisoner of Jesus. As long as he had the forgiveness, the companionship, the relationship that comes with knowing and serving Jesus Christ.

And what about you? Do you know that God hasn't changed? Do you know that the same Jesus who changed Paul's life and then comforted Him in every trial also wants to change your life and be your comfort? And if so, are you letting Him? Do you see yourself as His servant, His prisoner?

Friend, come to Jesus. Submit to Jesus. Surrender to Jesus.

Let's pray.