

**cover to
cover**

Bible Study

7 Sessions for Homegroup
and Personal Use

Paul's Letter to

Philemon

From slavery to freedom

Christopher Brearley

CWR

Contents

Introduction		5
Week 1	Paul, a Prisoner of Christ Jesus	9
Week 2	Philemon, a Fellow-worker	15
Week 3	Onesimus, a Runaway Slave	21
Week 4	Thanksgiving and Prayer	27
Week 5	Paul's Appeal for Onesimus	33
Week 6	Slaves and Masters	39
Week 7	Concluding Thoughts	45
Leader's Notes	51	

WEEK 1

Paul, a Prisoner of Christ Jesus

Opening Icebreaker

Discuss what characteristics you would expect to see in the life of someone who claims to be a Christian.



Bible Readings

- Philemon 1–3
- Acts 8:1–3
- Acts 9:1–19
- 2 Corinthians 11:16–33





Opening Our Eyes

Paul's letter to Philemon reveals a total transformation of character compared to that manifested when Saul (his Hebrew name) was walking along the Damascus Road uttering threats (Acts 9:1–2). Earlier he had given approval to the brutal murder of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Saul was then actively involved in an extensive, energetic, violent campaign against the Church in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1–3).

Above everything, Saul was a man with deep religious convictions. He was a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee (Acts 23:6) and strictly obedient to their many laws. These were incompatible with Christianity and a man of Saul's temperament could not tolerate rivals. So great was his opposition that he even pursued Christians who had fled to foreign cities (Acts 26:11). He was sincerely convinced that they were charlatans and blasphemers who were a very serious threat to the Jewish faith. Therefore, he was determined to suppress the infant Church using whatever means were necessary. Later he confesses to being responsible for the deaths of innocent men and women (Acts 22:4).

In Philemon, he goes from one extreme to another and pleads that a runaway slave, a Christian called Onesimus, be forgiven. Extreme prejudice and violent hatred are replaced by great humility and love. His career in blind religious fanaticism is replaced by an attitude of care and deep concern for the welfare of a former enemy.

Why the change?

Suffering teaches one many lessons that can be learnt no other way and can change people for better or worse. Sometimes it creates bitterness, resentment and self-pity, whilst it enables others to develop patience and perseverance (James 1:2–4) which lead to love and joy.

Paul, a Prisoner of Christ Jesus

Certainly Paul had endured many trials: lashed, beaten with rods, stoned, shipwrecked, imprisonment and more besides (2 Cor. 11:16–33). Repeatedly he faced death in God's service and, like others, considered it a tremendous privilege. Suffering can make us more sensitive to the needs of others (2 Cor. 1:3–4).

Age can also improve people, and Paul was now an old man (v.9), somewhere around fifty-five to sixty years old, at a time when the average life expectancy was much shorter than it is today. Maturity softens most things in life, though not necessarily people. It can make them critical and selfish; alternatively, the rashness and faults of youth can be replaced by wisdom and tolerance.

Saul's conversion

Although he was undoubtedly influenced by suffering and age, there is only one answer to explain this dramatic change of character. It came as the result of a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. There are three accounts of his conversion, one by Luke (Acts 9:1–19), and others by himself (Acts 22:6–16; 26:12–18). Saul discovered that Jesus was God. He, who had persecuted those who believed in Jesus, would now endure much suffering for the name of Jesus. In his letter to Philemon he begins, 'Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus'.

If we live closely with someone we will inevitably become like them, if they are the stronger character. As Paul let Christ control his inner life, it influenced his outer conduct. God had chosen this most unlikely candidate to take His message to the Gentiles as well as to the people of Israel (Acts 9:15). It was when he began his ministry amongst the Gentiles that he preferred to be known by his Roman name, Paul. This once powerful adversary of the Christian faith now became its greatest advocate.



Discussion Starters

1. Why do extremists preach intolerance and hatred to exploit and oppress others? Differentiate between blind zeal and deliberate disobedience.

2. What are the differences between doctrine and indoctrination?

3. Saul was a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee (Acts 23:6). How did this influence his character? What lessons are there for us to learn from this?

4. Why did Saul oppose Christianity so strongly? Think of situations where you may be provoked. How would you respond?
