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Slavery in New Testament Times

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Slavery in New Testament Times—Philemon 1:16

Ancient Greece and the Roman empire that followed developed a harsh type of slavery that continued into the New Testament period. It regarded slaves as personal property and stripped them of any rights regarding them as both physically and morally inferior to free citizens. A person could become such a slave for several reasons: captured during a war, being condemned in court, being abandoned by one's parents, selling oneself to pay debts, or by being born to a slave mother. By the time of the Roman Empire, slavery was so widespread

that historians estimate that almost one-fifth of the empire were slaves. Indeed, over 30 percent of the city of Rome itself was made up of slaves.

The fact that slaves were so vital to Rome's economy encouraged society to keep increasing their numbers. Considered "living property" (Aristotle, *Politics* 1.2.4-5, 1253b) or "instruments," their work made the production of wine and olive oil as well as livestock farming possible. Besides shaping the economy, slavery had a powerful influence in shaping

Greeting

1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
 To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer,
2 to the beloved^a 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.

Philemon's Love and Faith

4 I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers,
5 hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints,
6 that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you^b in Christ Jesus.
7 For we have^c great joy^d and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.

The Plea for Onesimus

8 Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting,
9 yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you—being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ—
10 I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains,
11 who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.
12 I am sending him back.^e You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart,

1:2 NU-Text reads to our sister Apphia. 1:6 NU-Text and M-Text read us. 1:7 NU-Text reads had. ^dM-Text reads thanksgiving. 1:12 NU-Text reads back to you in person, that is, my own heart.

13 whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel.

14 But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.

15 For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever,

16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Philemon's Obedience Encouraged

17 If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me.

18 But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account.

19 I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides.

20 Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.

21 Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

22 But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.

Farewell

23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you,

24 as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers.

25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

DAILY LIFE

Greco-Roman society. Small farmers were unable to compete with slave labor. They found themselves forced to sell their properties and seek other ways of supporting themselves. As a result, thousands of people had to look for work in major cities like Rome. However, with such a large population of slaves in all of the major cities, Greco-Roman leaders were in constant fear of rebellion. The slave revolt led by Spartacus in the first century BC was so widespread that it took three years for the Roman army to subdue it. The fierce actions of the Roman government eventually reduced the danger of revolt. The authorities hired professional slavecatchers to bring back

runaways, placing them in iron collars to further discourage revolt. Any act of disobedience by a slave often resulted in severe punishment. Crucifixion was a common type of execution especially reserved for slaves.

Slavery also had its financial costs. Slave owners had to feed and care for their "property" to ensure that they would be fit for work. Sometimes slave masters encouraged their slaves with incentives in the form of wages. Such income offered slaves the possibility of saving enough money to buy their freedom. Since slaves could not enter legal contracts, they could take their funds to a temple or a synagogue. The

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DAILY LIFE

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deity would then act as an intermediary in the purchase of their release.

Records of freed slaves from the second century BC Greek city of Delphi commemorate their owners' fictitious sale of them to the deity Pythian Apollo. Sometimes a slave master might grant a slave freedom of their own volition, a legal process called manumission. Archaeologists have found many documents recording the freeing of such slaves. More than 1,200 of them have survived from Delphi alone. Even then, the manumission document might require the former slave to perform various services for their former owners for a specific period of time or until the death of the former master. A few former slaves, in turn, then honored their former masters by publicly thanking them in inscriptions on monuments or grave markers. On rare occasions, slaves could be adopted and retain the name of the slave master when a suitable heir could not be found.

The status of a slave and their living conditions depended on several factors, including the type of work they did, the particular abilities or skills they had, and how kind or cruel their slave masters might be. A palace servant had a better life than most poor free men. Many government officials and business staff were slaves. Mine slaves labored under such terrible conditions that their life expectancy was shorter than that of the average person. Gladiators were also slaves, trained to fight to the death as entertainment. Educated slaves often served as private tutors for the children of wealthy families. All slaves faced the constant danger of beatings or torture because of

real or imagined infractions. Depending on the goodwill of their masters, slaves had the right to enter a form of marriage, be treated when sick, and receive the necessary food, clothes, and housing to enable them to serve their owners. Male owners might legally have sex with their female slaves, something denied to Roman matrons.

Many words and metaphors in the New Testament refer to the institution of slavery during the Greco-Roman period. Although the actual Greek terms used in the context of biblical redemption are different than those used in the manumission of slaves, the idea is certainly present: Christ paid the price for our freedom so that we are no longer slaves to sin (cf. 1 Cor 7:22-23). Such spiritual freedom in Christ is the message that permeates the New Testament, declaring that all believers are brothers and sisters in Christ, whether free or slave. Such freedom changes the way that Christians would perceive issues of morality, responsibility, and social status. In the process, it transforms the relationship between master and slave into one between members of the same spiritual family, with love for one another as the dominant ingredient (cf. the letter to Philemon). Slave owners were to treat their slaves kindly, remembering that they have a higher Master. Likewise, slaves were admonished to consider their work as service for Christ, not just to please their human masters (Eph. 6:5-9). The New Testament ethic neither condones slavery nor seeks to incite revolt. It aims to elevate the level of human relationships to neutralize the harmful impact of this unjust institution.

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A bronze slave collar. The tag suspended from it promises a reward to anyone who returns the slave should he attempt to escape.

