

# The Harvester



*Preparing Souls  
To Serve The Lord!*



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## ***SLAVERY IN THE FIRST-CENTURY ROMAN WORLD***

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The subject of slavery can be a potentially controversial issue today. Usually, when people think of slavery, they think of the slavery that existed in Antebellum America. Slavery in America during the nineteenth-century has certainly affected this nation. In fact, the bloodiest war America has ever fought involved how people viewed slavery and its impact on America's future. All slavery, however, does not compare in every way to the slavery that existed in America. Slavery in the Roman world of Paul's day is one such example. An understanding of the first-century system of slavery will help us better understand first-century Christians (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26; Jas. 2:5); New Testament discussions involving slavery (cf. Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:22-25; 1 Pet. 2:18-19); and the Christian's slavery to Christ (Rom 6:16-18; 1 Cor 7:20-23).

### ***HISTORICAL BACKGROUND***

Slavery in the Roman world of Paul's day was considered a normal and moral part of life. Some have estimated as much as a quarter to a third of Rome's population was slave, and an even greater percentage when factoring in freed slaves. At one time, a Roman higher-up suggested that slaves be identified by their clothing so fellow-Romans could know who were the slaves. However, that idea was put down when it was realized the large number identified as slaves would know with whom to unite in a rebellion! The typi-

cal household knew about slavery. It is interesting that major New Testament discussions about family roles have instructions not only for the husbands, wives, and children, but also for masters and slaves (cf. Eph. 5:22-6:9; Col. 3:18-4:1; 1 Pet. 2:18-3:7).

There were at least five ways people in the first-century Roman world became slaves. Three of those are stated by the Jewish historian/philosopher, Philo (ca. 20-15 BC-AD 45-50). He said people were made slaves by being born of slave parents ("homebred"), by being "purchased," or by being "captured in war." Other ways included enslaving oneself to a debtor to pay off the debt and babies who were rescued from exposure to the elements because their biological parents did not want them. Most major areas in the Roman world had slave markets.

There are at least six characteristics of slaves/slavery in the first century that were different from slaves/slavery in Antebellum American history (adapted from Bartchy 1098-1099). First, for the most part, slaves in the first-century could not be identified by their appearance. They did not wear special clothing nor was their skin color any different from their master's. Second, the education of slaves in the first-century was encouraged because it increased their value, contrary to cultures that refused to educate their subjects as a tool of keeping them in subjection. Third, first-century slaves were

not on the socioeconomic bottom. They did not automatically receive substandard living conditions nor were they forced to live in poverty. Fourth, first-century slaves could own property, even other slaves (cf. Mt. 18:27-28). Fifth, first-century slaves were not considered a social class by themselves. They worked across a broad range of social levels and were often viewed as being in the same social class as their master. Sixth, most domestic slaves in the first-century could expect to be freed by age thirty. For example, Felix, the governor of Judea (AD 53-60) mentioned throughout Acts 23-24, was a former slave of Claudius Caesar's mother (Bell 77). Also, Luke mentioned the "synagogue of the Freedmen" (Acts 6:9), which indicates a large Jewish gathering of freed slaves.

## **NEW TESTAMENT ALLUSIONS TO PHYSICAL SLAVERY IN THIS WORLD**

There are several verses that deal with the relationships between physical slaves and masters. More verses deal with Christian slaves. First, Christian slaves were to be obedient to their own masters (Eph. 6:5; Col. 3:22; Titus 2:9), even if their masters were harsh (1 Pet. 2:18). Of course, the exception would be if masters were demanding slaves to violate God's will (Acts 5:29). Second, Christian slaves were to be sincere, "not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers" (Eph. 6:5-6; Col. 3:22). Third,

Christian slaves were not to be characterized by "answering back [argumentative, ESV]" nor by "pilfering [purloining, KJV]" (Titus 2:9-10). Fourth, above all, Christian slaves were to fear God and serve their masters "as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart" (Eph. 6:5-6; Col. 3:22-23; 1 Pet. 2:18), that "they may adorn the doctrine of God" (Titus 2:9). It is interesting to note that First Peter 2:21, perhaps the best known verse dealing with Christ's example during suffering, is given in the immediate context of Christian slaves being beaten by their harsh masters for righteousness' sake!

Christian masters of slaves were also given instruction. First, Paul said they were to "do the same things to them" (Eph. 6:9), which from the previous verses concerning slaves included "doing the will of God from the heart, with goodwill ... as to the Lord, and not to men" (Eph. 6:6-7). In other words, masters were to treat their slaves with love and respect. Furthermore, Christian masters were to give their

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slaves what was “just and fair” (Col. 4:1). Christian masters’ ultimate motivating factor was the Master they had in heaven, who always judges without partiality (Eph. 6:9; Col. 4:1). If all slaves responded to their masters as Paul instructed, and if all masters treated their slaves as Paul instructed, there would be no place for slavery anytime or anywhere!

Concerning physical slavery, Paul also taught that a Christian slave could still be faithful to Christ:

Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called. <sup>21</sup>Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use it. <sup>22</sup>For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord’s freedman. Likewise he who is called while free is Christ’s slave. <sup>23</sup>You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. (1 Cor 7:20-23)

Obviously, the “calling in which he was called” refers to something not sinful. For example, if one were a thief when he obeyed the Gospel, he could not remain a thief (1 Cor. 6:10). People must repent of evil occupations before becoming Christians! Paul also gave freedom as the preferred state (1 Cor. 7:21), but even as a slave, a Christian could be faithful!

Paul’s letter to Philemon also concerns slavery in the sense that Onesimus, a former slave of Philemon, had come in contact with Paul and was now a Christian. Paul characterized Onesimus to Philemon as “once was unprofitable ... but now is profitable” (Phile. 11). Paul saw great value in Onesimus as it concerned the ministry, but the apostle wanted him first to return to Philemon (Phile 12-14). Paul suggested the providence of God in what took place so that Philemon might receive Onesimus “forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother” (Phile. 15-16). What ever became of Onesimus and Philemon the text does not say, but this, and other passages show, that physical slavery was a regular part of the first century Roman world.

## **NEW TESTAMENT ALLUSIONS TO SLAVERY IN THE LORD**

There are several different terms Paul used in the New Testament that indicate his slavery to Christ. First, Paul often referred to himself in the opening of his epistles as the “bondservant [servant, KJV] of Jesus Christ” (Rom. 1:1; Gal. 1:10; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1). The word from which this is translated (*doulos*, δούλος) refers to a common first-century slave.

The highest concentration of different slave-words that Paul used was in First Corinthians 3–4.

In this context, Paul addressed the division that was taking place in Corinth. Part of their division was putting men on a pedestal. Some were claiming, “‘I am of Paul,’ or ‘I am of Apollos,’ or ‘I am of Cephas,’ or ‘I am of Christ’” (1 Cor. 1:12). In First Corinthians 3:4, Paul asked, “For when one says, ‘I am of Paul,’ and another, ‘I am of Apollos,’ are you not carnal?” Then, the apostle began to show that far from deserving a place high above, he and his coworkers assumed a very lowly place in slavery to Christ. “Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one?” (1 Cor. 3:5). Here is the second slave-word Paul used for himself. “Ministers [servants, ESV]” (from *diakonos*, διάκονος) was first used to refer to a table-waiter (a lowly servant in that culture), and then the word came to refer to one who rendered service of any kind. It is the same word that is sometimes translated “deacon” (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8, 12).

Later in that same context, Paul wrote, “Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor. 4:1). Here are the third and fourth slave-words Paul used. The word “servants [ministers, KJV]” is from a word (*huperetes*, ὑπηρέτης) that referred to an “under rower, subordinate rower” (which was a slave who worked the oars of a ship); then later referred to anyone who served a master or superior (Thayer 641). “Steward” is from a word (*oikonomos*, οἰκονόμος) that refers to “the manager of the household; often a trusted slave ... put in charge of the whole household” (Rogers and Rogers 354). These slave-words show that far from being put on a pedestal, Paul was a lowly slave of Christ!

## **CONCLUSION**

The major differences between slavery in the world and slavery in the Lord involve the quality of the Master, the peacefulness of reward, and, the voluntary terms of service. Paul wrote:

Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one’s slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? <sup>17</sup>But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. <sup>18</sup>And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. (Rom. 6:16-18)

No matter the history of Antebellum slavery or slavery in the first-century, all accountable people

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are either spiritual slaves to sin or spiritual slaves to righteousness. There is no middle ground! The only way to become a slave of righteousness is to “obey from the heart that form of doctrine” which was delivered! May each Christian truly serve Jesus as his Master! 🙏

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