

The Roman Empire: in the First Century.

Social Order. Slaves & Freeman

Slavery in ancient Rome differed from its modern forms in that it was not based on race.

But like modern slavery, it was an abusive and degrading institution. Cruelty was commonplace.

A common practice

Slavery had a long history in the ancient world and was practiced in Ancient Egypt and Greece, as well as Rome. Most slaves during the Roman Empire were foreigners and, unlike in modern times, Roman slavery was not based on race.

Slaves in Rome might include prisoners of war, sailors captured and sold by pirates, or slaves bought outside Roman territory. In hard times, it was not uncommon for desperate Roman citizens to raise money by selling their children into slavery.

Life as a slave

All slaves and their families were the property of their owners, who could sell or rent them out at any time. Their lives were harsh. Slaves were often whipped, branded or cruelly mistreated. Their owners could also kill them for any reason, and would face no punishment.

Although Romans accepted slavery as the norm, some people – like the poet and philosopher, [Seneca](#) – argued that slaves should at least be treated fairly.

Essential labor

Slaves worked everywhere – in private households, in mines and factories, and on farms. They also worked for city governments on engineering projects such as roads, aqueducts and buildings. As a result, they merged easily into the population.

In fact, slaves looked so similar to Roman citizens that the Senate once considered a plan to make them wear special clothing so that they could be identified at a glance. The idea was rejected because the Senate feared that, if slaves saw how many of them were working in Rome, they might be tempted to join forces and rebel.

Manumission

Another difference between Roman slavery and its more modern variety was manumission – the ability of slaves to be freed. Roman owners freed their slaves in considerable numbers: some freed them outright, while others allowed them to buy their own freedom. The prospect of possible freedom through manumission encouraged most slaves to be obedient and hard working.

Formal manumission was performed by a magistrate and gave freed men full Roman citizenship. The one exception was that they were not allowed to hold office. However, the law gave any children born to freedmen, after formal manumission, full rights of citizenship, including the right to hold office.

Informal manumission gave fewer rights. Slaves freed informally did not become citizens and any property or wealth they accumulated reverted to their former owners when they died.

Free at last?

Once freed, former slaves could work in the same jobs as [plebeians](#) – as craftsmen, midwives or traders. Some even became wealthy. However, Rome's rigid society attached importance to social status and even successful freedmen usually found the stigma of slavery hard to overcome – the degradation lasted well beyond the slavery itself.

https://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/slaves_freemen.html

How Paul Worked to Overcome Slavery

Article by
John Piper

Founder & Teacher, desiringGod.org

The historic and contemporary reality of slavery is never far away from how we think about the Bible. Instead of a frontal attack on the culturally pervasive institution of slavery in his day, Paul took another approach, for example, in his letter to Philemon.

Onesimus was a slave. His master Philemon was a Christian. Onesimus had evidently run away from Colossae ([Colossians 4:9](#)) to Rome where Paul, in prison, had led him to faith in Jesus. Now he was sending Onesimus back to Philemon.

This letter tells Philemon how to receive Onesimus.

In the process, Paul does at least 11 things that work together to undermine slavery.

1/. Paul draws attention to Philemon's *love* for all the saints. "I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints" (1:5). This puts Philemon's relationship with Onesimus (now one of the saints) under the banner of love, not just commerce.

2/. Paul models for Philemon the superiority of *appeals* over commands when it comes to relationships governed by love. "Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you" (1:8-9). This points Philemon to the new dynamics that will hold sway between him and Onesimus. Acting out of freedom from a heart of love is the goal in the relationship.

3/. Paul heightens the sense of Onesimus being in the family of God by calling him his *child*. "I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment" (1:10). Remember, Philemon, however you deal with him, you are dealing with my child.

4/. Paul raises the stakes again by saying that Onesimus has become entwined around his own deep affections. "I am sending him back to you, sending my very *heart*" (1:12). The word for "heart" is "bowels." This means, "I am deeply bound emotionally to this man." Treat him that way.

5/. Paul again emphasizes that he wants to avoid force or coercion in his relationship with Philemon. "I would have been glad to keep him with me...but I preferred to do nothing without your *consent* in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord" (1:13-14). This is pointing Philemon

how to deal with Onesimus so that he too will act “of his own accord.”

6/. Paul raises the intensity of the relationship again with the word *forever*. “For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever” (1:15). In other words, Onesimus is not coming back into any ordinary, secular relationship. It is forever.

7/. Paul says that Philemon’s relationship can no longer be the usual master-slave relationship. “[You have him back] *no longer as a slave* but more than a slave, as a beloved brother” (1:16). Whether he lets Onesimus go back free to serve Paul, or keeps him in his service, things cannot remain as they were. “No longer as a slave” does not lose its force when Paul adds, “more than a slave.”

8/. In that same verse (1:16), Paul refers to Onesimus as Philemon’s *beloved brother*. This is the relationship that takes the place of slave. “No longer as a slave...but as a beloved brother.” Onesimus now gets the “holy kiss” (1 [Thessalonians 5:26](#)) from Philemon and eats at his side at the Lord’s Table.

9/. Paul makes clear that Onesimus is with Philemon *in the Lord*. “[He is] a beloved brother...in the Lord” (1:16). Onesimus’s identity is now the same as Philemon’s. He is “in the Lord.”

10/. Paul tells Philemon to receive Onesimus *the way he would receive Paul*. “So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me” (1:17). This is perhaps as strong as anything he has said: Philemon, how would you see me, treat me, relate to me, receive me? Treat your former slave and new brother that way.

11/. Paul says to Philemon that he will *cover all Onesimus’s debts*. “If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account” (1:18). Philemon would no doubt be shamed by this, if he had any thoughts of demanding repayment from his new brother, because Paul is in prison! He lives off the gifts of others. Philemon is the one who is to prepare a guest room for Paul! (1:22).

The upshot of all this is that, without explicitly prohibiting slavery, Paul has pointed the church away from slavery because it is an institution which is incompatible with the way the gospel works in people’s lives. Whether the slavery is economic, racial, sexual, mild, or brutal, Paul’s way of dealing with Philemon works to undermine the institution across its various manifestations. To walk “in step with the truth of the gospel” ([Galatians 2:14](#)) is to walk away from slavery. [John Piper \(@JohnPiper\)](#) is founder and teacher of [desiringGod.org](#) and chancellor of Bethlehem College & Seminary. For 33 years, he served as pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota. He is author of [more than 50 books](#), including *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* and most recently *Coronavirus and Christ*.