

THE ROMAN WORLD & THE GOSPEL

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INTRODUCTION

God didn't just enter into any world two thousand years ago... He entered into "*a very specific world*"... a world that He designed in eternity past wherein He would present the good news of salvation to fallen man. It took "*a very unique culture*" to give definition and understanding to divine truth. As I have emphasized numerous times in my writings over the years, the ancient **Greek Language** (of which God is its author) *is the most exacting language ever devised* — it was this language that came from the mind of God that ruled over the entire Roman world at the incarnation of Christ; *i.e.*, it was the Greek Language that God used to communicate divine truth to the human family — by the way, **GOD** is the author of all languages (cf. Gen 11:6-9). One of the incredible qualities of New Testament Greek is that it can say things in an unequivocal manner and with great emphasis (*i.e.*, emphatic emphasis). The Greek verb has a number of "*moods*" to it, one of which is "*The Indicative Mood*;" this mood states things as "*absolute facts*" (not opinions) — when stated emphatically, it is basically stating things this way: "*Don't argue with what is written; it is the absolute truth of God.*" Frequently the Lord Jesus prefaced His teachings by saying, "*Truly, Truly, I say to you*" (cf. Jn 1:51; 3:3; 3:5; 3:11; 5:19; 5:24; 5:25; 6:26; etc.). *Essentially with such redundancy He was "emphatically" declaring an "unequivocal truth."* With that in mind, God's message to us is this: "*It is these truths that must be the foundation of one's thinking and faith*" — even though we might wrestle with them at some level (which is simply what it means to be human), we must forego our innate tendency to reject them. How do we do that? God tells us, "*we are to humbly approach Him in our admittedly sinful state, and ask Him to make His Word alive in our heart and lead us into truth*" — it is the Holy Spirit who "*opens our hearts to believe truth*;" it is not a function of human reason; though *man* reads and reflects upon what is written, *God* is the one who enlightens the mind and convicts the heart and gives him understanding (cf. Jn 14:16-17, 26; 16:13; Acts 16:14; Rom 10:17; Jam 1:21) — truth can only be revealed to the human heart by the Holy Spirit; that's why He is called the *Spirit of truth* (cf. Jn 14:17; 15:26; 16:13). As is quite evident, I frequently list *biblical references* throughout this study that help give definition to the various constructs of thought expressed — they are placed there to expand upon and give emphasis to what is written — I cannot encourage you too strongly to read those passages; remember, when you read Scripture, you're reading **GOD's WORD**, not my word (reflect upon that statement). Incidentally, I also give emphasis to some of the words & phrases by placing them in *italics*... *underlining* them... and **embolding** them.

The primary purpose of this study is to "give context" to many of the foundational teachings of Scripture, yet do it in such a way so as to not make this study an extremely tedious one. If you are sensitive at all to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, you no doubt are aware of the *cultural implications* of so many of the things that they taught... over and over and over again, "*culture*" gave definition to what they were teaching; nearly all of the "*parables*" that Jesus used when communicating divine truth had a strong cultural orientation (cf. Mt 13:5ff; 13:24ff; 13:31ff; 13:33ff; 18:23ff; 20:1ff; 21:33ff; etc.). The reality is, Scripture was written to particular groups of

people who lived in very specific settings (be it in Old Testament or New Testament times); without a general understanding of those conditions, one will naturally be inclined to read into Scripture the societal values and ideals of one's own culture; which can be very different from that culture that was being addressed. One of the significant things about the **Old Testament** is that it is, in large part, a **historical account** of what transpired in our world prior to the time of Christ (all the way back to creation), and **God's interaction in that world** — thus, the Old Testament reveals the purposes of God in creation and His subsequent revelations to man in human history. If man is God's premiere creature (He was created in God's image), and was given the capacity to recognize and have fellowship with Him, then it is reasonable to expect that the God of heaven would communicate with His creatures revealing His purpose and will. Obviously, God's revelation to man has been "**progressive**;" i.e., everything He revealed to him was not revealed in one fell swoop — His revelations occurred over a period of time. In each "**age**" of human history (cf. Mt 5:21-22; Jn 1:17; Eph 2:7; 3:5, 9; Heb 1:2), God increased His revelation to His creatures — it began with **Adam** in the Garden of Eden, and was expanded upon after he fell and sinned... then there was His judgment of the human family during the time of **Noah**, when He destroyed the world with a flood because of man's sinfulness; following the flood God instituted human government as a means of ruling over man, but human government also failed to curb man's sinfulness (the Tower of Babel was the result — so God confounded their speech, thus creating numerous languages and scattering man's civilization all over the world). This was followed by His choosing **Abraham** that He might make a people for Himself; however His people failed Him and were ultimately enslaved in **Egypt**. Everything that occurred here in our world up until the time of Abraham is recorded in the book of Genesis (i.e., the book of origins / beginnings). While God's people were enslaved in Egypt, God chose **Moses** to deliver His people from bondage & establish a covenant with them by the Mosaic Law (which was in force until the Incarnation of Christ) — many judgments occurred during this period of time because of Israel's continual failure to keep the Law; time & time again God would raise up **Prophets** to speak to His people, but they continually failed to obey Him, ultimately resulting in judgment and being subjected to bondage in **Babylon**. God's purpose in establishing the Law was to provide a righteous rule of life and bring sin into condemnation... yet Israel's experience under the law demonstrated that "**the rule of law**" did not have the capacity to change man into a righteous creature (cf. Rom 3:20; 8:3; Gal 3:19-24). **Thus the Law made it possible for God to demonstrate that everyone was guilty and every mouth closed** (cf. Rom 3:19), **that there is none righteous, not one** (Rom 3:10); **that made the entire human family aware of its need of Christ** (cf. Gal 3:21-27). "**What the Law could not do, God did in sending His own Son as an offering for sin**" (cf. Rom 8:3). For those of you who have a difficult time understanding **the purpose of the Law in God's economy**, let me encourage you to study this issue in far greater detail. Since the primary emphasis of this study is to focus on what the New Testament teaches, let's now turn our attention to that...

When reading the New Testament, it is important that one understand the significance of "**the culture**" that existed in the ancient Greco-Roman world in the first century. By in large, the Romans were in control of the entire Mediterranean world at that time — it was a world that was strongly influenced by Greek (Hellenistic) ideas, customs, religion and language, but dominated by Roman law, governmental forms, ideas of class and status, and its military. Essentially, the term **Greco-Roman** refers to the interaction of Roman culture and society with Greek (Hellenistic) culture and society, a process that began in the third century BC (during the Intertestamental Period). Since the Romans were heavily influenced by Greek culture, the

civilization of the Romans was as much Greek as it was Roman. Before continuing on, let me identify the two individuals who were the most helpful in putting this study together: there is the work of **James Jeffers**, a fellow-graduate of Talbot Theological Seminary, and a professor of ancient history at both Biola University & California State University (Dominguez Hills) — he wrote a book titled “The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era,” it was published in 1999 by Inter Varsity Press. For those of you interested in a far more detailed explanation of many of the issues I address in this study, I would encourage you to read his book and other books that deal with those issues. Another source I used when writing this study was the writings of **Mark Cartwright**, a student of Greek philosophy and ancient history. One more comment before launching into those issues that strongly impacted the first century world — prior to dealing with “the primacy of slavery down through the ages,” which is far and away the most significant issue I deal with in this study), let me first briefly cover a few ancillary issues that help “give context” to much of what transpired during the ministries of Jesus and the apostles.

HISTORICAL CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

When Rome conquered the various people groups by whatever means, rather than abusing them and treating them badly, they incorporated them into their society. They would convince the upper classes of the conquered people to buy into their system; thus offering great rewards to those locals who supported them (even giving them local leadership roles & responsibilities). In 143 BC, Judea voluntarily allied itself with Rome and thereby gained a number of important advantages and rights... in part, its religion was officially recognized and accepted by Rome. Roman power in this part of the world was virtually unchallenged, and under the firm control of a single leader (Caesar).

Rome gave great honor to those wealthy persons whose income came from “agriculture;” 90 percent of the Empire’s workers were engaged in farming and herding (sheep, goats, cattle and pigs). Wealthy landowners generally hired day workers (cf. Lk 15:17, 19), and paid them at the end of the day (Mt:20:1-16). Commercial fishing was also a significant industry. Since a large portion of the Empire’s population were slaves, major landowners often farmed their land with large groups of slaves. Wealthy landowners often leased out 5-10 acre plots of land to tenant farmers (cf. Mt 21:33-41; Mk 12:1-9; Lk 20:9-16). Manufacturing in the ancient world was for the most part in the hands of small business and individuals; these individuals typically were uneducated and worked out of their homes; they performed such crafts as pottery, weaving, leather shoes, blacksmiths, sculptors, engravers, silversmiths, cloth cleaners, tentmaking, tanning and baking. The Roman world also respected the work of the “lawyer,” and saw it as a main route to higher public service.

Rome built and maintained hundreds of miles of roads (ultimately for the military); these roads connected all of the provinces and cities of the Empire, thus enabling Rome to respond quickly to uprisings from within or invasions from without. Most people who traveled by land had to walk; those with a modicum of wealth rode a donkey, horse, or camel; and the wealthiest used chariots and carriages pulled by mules or horses. Like the common man, Jesus and His disciples pretty much walked everywhere they went (cf. Mk 10:32; 16:12; Mt 4:18; 21:1-3; Lk 24:17; Jn 1:36; 7:1). Extensive shipping on the Mediterranean made travel by sea faster and cheaper than

travel by land — there were numerous large seaports in the first century including Alexandria, Rome, Seleucia, Ephesus, Puteoli, Corinth, Caesarea, Myra, etc. The Roman government cargo often amounted to as much as four hundred tons. There were 276 persons on board Paul's ship to Rome (cf. Acts 27:17 – most were crew); conversely, Josephus said he once sailed to Rome on a ship carrying 600 passengers.

The ancients enjoyed many of the same foods that we do — fresh fish, mushrooms (cooked with honey), poultry (cooked in olive oil, vinegar, honey, wine, mint, pepper, sugar, and various other seasonings), fruit, breads, vegetables, meats (beef, pork, venison, lamb, wild birds — their favorite was fish). Most clothing was made of wool and linen (made of flax); their sandals were made of leather (upper class were embroidered with silk, silver and gold). Though burial and cremation were equally popular in the first century, burial became predominate in the second century... Jews and Christians have long practiced burial.

Ancient Greek and Roman societies were organized around their cities — Farmers and shepherds came to town to sell their products and make purchases (daily markets, weekly fairs, and annual holiday bazaars). Only ten percent of the population lived in the thousand or so cities of the Empire in New Testament times. Pretty much all Christian missionary activity was done in the city in the first century; it wasn't until the second century that it began focusing on reaching those in the country side (*i.e.*, the “country dwellers” — the “*paganus*” in Latin). The cities and larger towns of the Roman Empire were situated on highways, at river crossings, and at harbors. Nearly every city had “city walls and city gates and narrow-winding streets” — most of them contained theaters, public baths, gymnasiums, temples, fountains, monumental arches, aqueduct, colonnades, public square, single-story private homes (except in the largest cities). Rome's population was about 1,000,000... Alexandria 600,000... Carthage and Antioch were about 500,000... Ephesus 400,000... Smyrna & Thessalonica were about 200,000... and several others with populations over 75,000. The city of Rome in the first century had an accumulation of wealth unsurpassed in Western society until fairly recent times. Marble facades graced the massive public buildings of its forums; miles of aqueducts brought spring water to public fountains and the homes of wealthy Romans, and sewers removed the city's waste. Incidentally, no city in the Western world had a population greater than 1,000,000 until the 1800s. Shopkeepers generally closed their shops between noon and two o'clock to eat the main meal (lunch) and escape the heat of day; the shops typically stayed open until sundown; the shopkeepers would return home just before dark... 350 soldiers patrolled Rome at night.

Provincial governors were set out for one-year terms with the kind of autonomous power that military commanders were granted in conducting war. These governors had the freedom to govern as they saw fit, as long as the taxes were collected and any insurrection was put down. The governor wielded the power of Rome in his province; he made deals with the local authorities in the cities or tribes; he exercised police powers; he heard law cases and pronounced capital sentences; provincial governors were deeply involved in the politics back in Rome — the welfare of people in their provinces rarely ranked at the top of their priorities. Rome did not care how local cities and regions in the provinces were governed, so long as the taxes were collected and allegiance to Rome remained firm. In this sense the Empire was an association of over one thousand cities ruled indirectly by Rome (most cities in the Empire had ten to fifteen thousand inhabitants; though some only had a few thousand). Direct government normally was left to

provincials whom Rome had co-opted into its system, and thus could be trusted to do Rome's bidding; so Rome allowed "local leaders" to do most of the governing (including the collection of taxes). The governors of Judea came from a group of imperial administrators named procurators or prefects, they were used to govern relatively small areas that required special treatment.

The Romans organized their empire into provinces (there was a total of sixteen of them); they were ruled from the capital cities of each province by Romans of senatorial or equestrian rank. For instance, Athens (with a population of some 400,000) was the capital city of the Roman province of Achaia (which essentially consisted of southern Greece, and was located just south of the province of Macedonia). Athens was known as an intellectual and cultural center (it was the ancient home of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle)... Roman emperors contributed heavily to various building projects in Athens (the Parthenon and Mars Hill)... another major city in this province was the seaport city of Corinth that had a population of over 100,000. Ephesus was the capital city of the Roman province of Asia; it occupied the western third of Asia Minor and included the cities of Colossae, Laodicea, Patmos, Pergamum, Philadelphia, Sardis, Smyrna, Thyatira, Troas; the province of Asia contained the most enthusiastic supporters of the cult of the emperor; it should be noted, most cities in Asia had large Jewish communities. Ephesus had a population of over 400,000 in the first century; it was located on the west coast of Asia Minor; it was a strategic center for "sea trade," thus making it the most important commercial center in the province of Asia. The church father Irenaeus and the church historian Eusebius claim that the apostle John spent the last five years of his life in Ephesus, during which time he wrote the five books of the New Testament that are ascribed to him; the apostle Paul had passed through Ephesus several times, and his young convert Timothy was later stationed in Ephesus (1 Tim 1:3). And then there was the Roman province of Galatia; it was located in eastern Asia Minor, and included the cities of Iconium, Derbe, Antioch of Pisidia, Lycaonia & Lystra. The other thirteen Roman provinces were Cappadocia, Cilicia (Tarsus was the capital), Crete, Cyprus, Italy (Rome was the capital), Egypt (Alexandria was the capital), Macedonia (noted cities included Philippi, Berea, and Thessalonica), Sicily, Pamphylia-Lycia, Pontus-Bithynia, Syria, Spain and Judea (Jerusalem was the capital).

The apostle Paul was a Roman citizen... while most people in the eastern part of the Roman Empire were not Roman citizens, a number of citizens do make an appearance in the accounts of the New Testament. Roman citizenship during the first century was a valuable commodity; only about five million (i.e., 10%) of the more than fifty million inhabitants of the Empire were free and full Roman citizens... those who possessed it were entitled to special protection by the Roman government from the accusations of non-citizens and from the more extreme forms of punishment. Citizenship exempted one from many taxes, and had the full protection of the Roman Law; as such, citizens were held in higher honor than non-citizens. The simplest way to become a citizen was to be "born a citizen" (cf. Acts 22:25-28; 25:11); citizenship could also be acquired by legal grant; non-Roman soldiers were given citizenship upon discharge from the army (which usually involved 25 years of service).

By the time of Christ, Jews were widely dispersed throughout the Roman Empire. In New Testament times, only about 2.5 million Jews lived in Palestine, while more than 5 million lived outside of Palestine; so two-thirds of the Jewish population did not live in Judea. Keeping those numbers in mind, that meant 10-15% of the Empire's population were Jews. The regions of

Mesopotamia, Syria, Asia Minor and Egypt each had more than one million Jewish residents, while Italy and North Africa each had around 100,000 Jews. The Jews in Egypt basically lived in and around Alexandria and made up about 10-15% of the population. There was a substantial Jewish population in virtually every town of any decent size in the Mediterranean region — the largest Jewish urban populations in the Empire were the 200,000 Jews in Alexandria and the 50,000 Jews in Rome. Since the Hebrew Scriptures had already been translated into Greek (that work was completed by seventy-two Jewish scholars in the city of Alexandria by the middle of the second century BC; this particular rendering of Scripture is referred to as “*the Septuagint*”), indicates that by the second century BC, many Jews could not read Hebrew. Jews were often educated in the Greek gymnasium, including its training in athletics and in rhetoric. Jews in the cities adapted their lives to the larger Gentile society to greater or lesser degrees. Some actually gave up their religious beliefs and practices entirely. Jews in the modern world continue to deal with the pressure to assimilate, and give up many of their traditional beliefs and practices. The synagogue in the Jewish community basically governed the administrative, educational, social and juridical needs of their congregations; they distributed a large portion of donated funds to their poorer members. Gentiles showed various degrees of allegiance to Judaism, attracted by its monotheism, high moral standards, the sincerity of the Jews and their well-defined identity; new proselytes often received a formal cleansing baptism, and males were circumcised (hence full conversions were apparently few). Others accepted Jewish teachings and ways of doing things but did not fully convert; they were attracted to the moral teachings of traditional Judaism and kept the Sabbath, and were taught from the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. It should be noted, even the Lord Jesus quoted from the Septuagint at times (thus endorsing it as a reputable translation). The early congregations of Christianity also learned a lot from the Jewish synagogues; for example, Christian worship, Scripture reading, interpretive teaching, prayers and common meals were all rooted in Jewish tradition.

The synagogue was not the only model that influenced early Christians, they also saw themselves as a *household* and met in homes (cf. Acts 2:42, 46; 8:3). For three centuries Christians were unable to meet and worship freely because Christianity was not recognized by the Romans as a “*legal religion*.” Rome was nervous about unsanctioned organizations, fearing that they could be politically subversive. The earliest Christian churches seem to have been regarded as part or sect of Judaism by the Roman authorities, allowing Christians to meet at first without registering as a separate association; however by the end of the first century it had become clear to Rome that Christianity was a distinct religion. Somehow the Christian community escaped the notice of the authorities most of the time... they did this by registering as one of the kinds of associations allowed by Rome; thus they were able to legally meet — Rome allowed the groups to meet freely, to collect funds and to hold various rituals, but they prohibited the clubs from undertaking any kind of political activity. Roman repression of religions was selective, sporadic and short-lived. Emperors typically moved against a cult when they believed it threatened law and order. Overall, Rome was not very successful at controlling religious innovation; as it turned out, Christianity was the main beneficiary of this lack of control. By the late second century, the congregations throughout the Empire came to accept the authority of *one bishop* over all of the churches in a given city; incidentally, the members of Christian congregations participated to some degree in decisions made by their leaders.

To reiterate, history is important because the key to understanding the New Testament is “context.” If you do not try to put yourself into the context of the original readers of Scripture, in all likelihood, you will end up reading your own culture into a passage and might wrongly arrive at a distorted understanding of what the author intended... and therefore what it should mean to you. The Greek language became the dominant language of the world under the leadership of Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC... it became the language of governance, trade, commerce, education and the arts. When Alexander conquered a land, he would establish Greek cities as centers of governance and Greek culture... he would even order his top officers to marry local women as a symbol of the integration of Hellenistic and local ways. When Rome replaced Greece as the world power, it inherited all of the advantages made by the Greeks. Many Romans believed that just as it was the fate of the Greeks to bring culture and education to the world, it was the fate of the Romans to bring law and order to the world. The Romans found monarchy strongly distasteful, and they were determined to never be ruled by a single powerful leader again... thus they set up a Centuriate Assembly to deliberate everything; the assembly made laws and oversaw the courts and elections; the senate was made up of about 300 current and former elective office-holders, and dominated the state in this era. All state offices were unpaid, honorary positions. Rome was a highly structured society; thus those at the top believed that societal stability was based on everyone knowing and accepting his or her place in the social order.

SLAVERY IN THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

Slavery had a long history in the ancient world... as you might recall, it was practiced in ancient Egypt, as well as ancient Israel (cf. Gen 37:25-28, 36; Ex 13:3; 20:2; Lev 25:39-46; Deut 6:21; Ezra 9:9; Neh 9:36; Ecc 2:7; Mic 6:4). Most slaves during the time of Roman Empire were foreigners, and had nothing to do with one's race. Slavery in ancient Rome played an important role in society and the economy... slaves served in households, on farms, in mines, in mills, in the military, manufacturing industries, craftsmen, midwives, traders, transportation, construction, aqueduct and road building, public baths, and a wide range of domestic services in cities — slave labor was used in every sphere of Roman life except public office; thus they even held highly skilled jobs and professions, including being accountants, physicians and educators. It was on the farms & plantations, however, where slavery had its greatest effect. As many as one-third of the population of Italy, and one-fifth of the Empire itself were slaves during the first century (obviously those numbers varied over time and place); it was upon this foundation of “forced labor” that the Roman state and society were built. At the height of the Empire in the second century AD, most scholars believe the slave population was about 10,000,000... and the population as a whole was about 50,000,000. Slavery in the ancient world meant “the complete mastery of one individual over another;” slavery was not considered an evil but a necessity by Roman citizens. The fact that slaves were taken from the “losers of battle” (i.e., those countries that were conquered through war), was helpful not only in justifying but confirming Rome's perceived cultural superiority & their divine right to rule over and exploit others for their own purposes (that was the essence of religious thought in the first century world); it was common to “respect and honor the gods of those who were victorious in battle” (cf. Josh 2:9-11; 9:3-11; 2 Kg 17:41; Dan 4:30-37; Jon 1:15-16; Zeph 2:11; Mal 1:14). Aside from the huge numbers of slaves taken as “war captives,” slaves were also acquired via piracy and trade; “slave markets” proliferated in

nearly all of the world's larger cities. New slaves were primarily acquired by wholesale dealers who followed along behind the Roman armies — Julius Caesar once sold the entire population (53,000) of a conquered region (in Gaul) to slave dealers on the spot. Within the empire, slaves were most often sold at public auctions wearing a plaque describing the slave's origin, health, character, intelligence, education, and skill-set; the Romans wanted to know exactly what they were buying. The dealer was required to take a slave back within six months if the slave had defects that were not revealed during the sale; obviously, the price paid for a slave varied with his/her age and quality. Many people who bought slaves wanted strong slaves (*i.e.*, mostly men). Slaves had "no rights or legal status" at all in the Greco-Roman world — they were simply the "property" of a particular owner; owning large groups of slaves was a status symbol for many wealthy Roman elites (an estimated 49% of all slaves were owned by the elite, who made up just one-and-a-half percent of the Empire's population. Incidentally, slavery wasn't just reserved for the Roman world, it was the common practice of all nations. In ancient warfare, the victor had the right to "enslave a defeated population;" if a settlement was reached through diplomatic negotiations or formal surrender, the people were often spared violence and enslavement. When the Roman Emperor Titus captured Jerusalem in AD 70, he enslaved 180,000 Jews because of their refusal to defer to Roman rule.

Though it was possible for a slave to "achieve freedom," it generally took years of faithful service to acquire it. In most cases, freedom was actually bought by the slaves themselves with all of their savings and possessions; thus allowing the owner to replenish his workforce. The prize of freedom & integration back into society was also used by owners and those in authority to convince slaves of the benefits of working hard and obeying them. Once slaves were freed, they often returned to their former owner and did the work they did prior to receiving their freedom. By the first century, it was recognized that "harsh treatment of slaves" was counter-productive, thus over time laws were passed to reduce mistreatment by cruel owners... since owners were at liberty to treat their property as they thought best, they had the right to subject their slaves to corporal punishment if they felt it was necessary. "Treatises" were written advising the best methods of managing slaves... what food and clothing was best... what the most efficient methods of motivation were (*e.g.*, giving time off or better food rations)... and how to create divisions amongst slaves so that they did not align themselves with each other and form dangerous protest groups. Should a slave escape, he would be hunted down and returned to his owner (often for a reward). In addition to the foregoing, there were also many cases of poor people selling their children to richer neighbors as slaves in times of hardship.

SLAVERY AND CHRISTIANITY

Somewhere inside most people is the "desire to be free;" if the demands of those who exercise authority over us are too onerous, the longing for freedom will eventually become a significant motivation to us. Slaves in the Roman world were especially drawn to the gospel and Paul's message — "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (cf. Gal 5:1; Rom 8:2; 8:15; also read Eph 6:5-9; Col 2:20-23). Paul also said, "In Christ the distinction between slave and free [in some sense] had ceased to exist" (cf. Gal 3:28); that is, social distinctions that so easily divide people in the world at large, don't exist in the Christian community. Yet many slaves discovered that this new found freedom in Christ carries with it "new constraints and new responsibilities." What many slaves

failed to see was that freedom in Christ does not release slaves from “obligations to those in rightful authority over them.” The apostolic leaders of the Church recognized that those outside the Christian world might wrongly see them as being a group that encouraged insubordination; so they took steps to counter that kind of thinking that some slaves apparently were adopting — just because one became a believer did not mean they had a right to be insubordinate to their masters. Due to the fact some Christian slaves began to treat their masters with disrespect now that they had embraced Christianity, Paul & Peter both issued corrective injunctions (cf. Eph 6:5-8; Col 3:22-24; 1 Pet 2:18-20) — the long and short of it was this: “Slaves needed to submit to those in authority over them,” just because they now had a “higher Lord” did not release them from this obligation... if anything, it obligated them all the more to be “models of obedience” — all such service to human masters essentially was service to the Lord (cf. Col 3:22-25). So the obedient, respectful conduct of slaves was a protection of God’s name and the Christian message (Titus 2:9-10). It was also common in the early church to find Christian slaves and their Christian masters in the same house church (cf. Eph 6:9; Col 4:1; Philemon 1:10-20). The reality was, having a common bond and a common Lord had implications for both the slave and the master (cf. Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:22-4:1). Slaves not only needed to serve their masters with excellence because those who benefit from their service were believers, but Masters and those in authority needed to respond to their servants with mutual respect — to give a little practical application to this concept even in our modern day world, we each have a number of relationships in our world where at one point we are in a position of authority, and at another point we are to be in a position of submission. For example: citizens are to be in submission to their government leaders... students are to be in submission to their teachers... children are to be in submission to their parents... employees are to be in submission to their employers... and wives are to be in submission to their husbands — essentially the point is this: just because one is in a position of submission, and another is in a position of authority, doesn’t mean one person is inferior or superior to another person: we each simply have “different roles” to play in different situations — sometimes we are the person in authority, and at other times we are the person who is to be in submission. When we’re driving down a road and a police officer stops us for running a red light, he is in a position of “authority” over us (even if we happen to be the governor of our state), and we are to submit to his authority. The various “roles” that we have in life have nothing to do with us being inferior or superior human beings. Think about it, none of us as parents are “superior beings” to our children — such does not exist in the human family: “we are all created equal.” One of the principle problems of the human family is that people struggle with “accepting their roles” — everybody want to be “the kingpin” or “the authority” in life; being “in submission” seems to be an aggravation to the human soul. The principle is really not that difficult a one; it’s the stubbornness of the human heart that refuses to bend the knee (cf. Mt 7:12; Heb 13:17; Jam 4:7; 1 Pet 2:13, 18; 3:1). In our first century world it was incumbent upon slaves to be good servants and respect their masters; likewise, it was important that masters mutually respect their servants and treat them well — this would be of great benefit to the church’s ministry. Whereas insubordination would be a liability to the ministry & witness of the church, respectability would be a tremendous asset. Historically, the Christian church and its policies regarding slavery made a strong impact upon the thinking of the world at large, despite the fact that it and its priests often owned slaves as well.

The metaphor of “redemption” in Scripture includes the ideas of... loosing from a bond, setting free from captivity or slavery... buying back something lost or sold... exchanging something in one’s possession for something possessed by another, and ransoming something.

In the Old Testament, redemption involved deliverance from bondage based on the payment of a price by a redeemer. The Hebrew word *gaal* is a legal term for the deliverance of some person or property that is achieved by a “redeemer;” this term is found 18 times in the OT (13 times in Isaiah). It was the duty of a man’s redeemer (usually his next of kin) to buy back the freedom that he had lost through debt — an example of such redemption is found in Leviticus (25:47-49), where an Israelite who had to sell himself into slavery because of poverty may be redeemed by a kinsman or himself... likewise, property sold under similar conditions could be redeemed, thus keeping it within the family (cf. Lev 25:24-25; Ruth 4:1-6; Jer 32:6-9). As one who delivers His people, Yahweh is called “Israel’s Redeemer” (cf. Is 41:14; 43:1; 44:6; 47:4). Yahweh’s redemptive activity in the Old Testament is seen in His delivering Israel from Egyptian bondage and from Babylonian captivity. The redemptive activity of God is most often described in terms of physical deliverance... but these redemptive acts were not devoid of spiritual significance. The redemption of Israel from Egypt was but the foreshadowing in history of the great act of delivering us from our sins through the cross of Christ, and forever deliver us from the kingdom of darkness (cf. Rom 3:24; Eph 1:7; Col 1:13-14; Titus 2:14; Heb 9:11-12; 1 Pet 1:18-19). Fundamental to the message of the New Testament is the announcement that Jesus of Nazareth is the fulfillment of Israel’s messianic hope and that in Him the long-awaited redemption had arrived. Deliverance of humankind from its state of alienation from God was accomplished through the death and resurrection of Christ (cf. Rom 4:25; 2 Cor 5:18-19). In the New Testament, redemption requires the payment of a price — humankind is held in the captivity of sin from which only the atoning death of Jesus Christ can liberate.

When reflecting upon the work of Jesus Christ, New Testament writers often utilized different images (e.g., atonement, sacrifice, justification). The concept of redemption is conveyed by the Greek words *agorazo* and *lyo* — these terms have in mind the context of a marketplace transaction with reference to the purchase of goods or the releasing of slaves; i.e., the deliverance from bondage or captivity by means of a ransom price that’s been paid. The noun “ransom” (*lytron*) only appears in three locations in the New Testament — in each case it is applied to Jesus’ death (cf. Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45; 1 Tim 2:6). Paul’s usage of the noun “redemption” (*apolytrosis*) is limited and essentially conveys the meaning of deliverance (cf. Rom 3:24; 8:23; 1 Cor 1:30; Eph 1:14; 4:30); Christ’s blood is depicted as the means of redemption (cf. Eph 1:7). Jesus conceived His mission to be that of the Son of Man, who came to offer Himself in obedience to God’s redemptive plan (cf. Mk 9:31; 10:33-34; Mt 8:17; Acts 8:32-33; 1 Pet 2:22-25). With regard to Jesus’ understanding of His redemptive work, He declared that His mission not only included self-sacrificial service, but also involved giving His life as a “ransom for many” (cf. Mk 10:45). Thus, Christ’s death is portrayed as “the payment price” for the deliverance of those held captive by Satan (the ransom metaphor must be understood in the light of Jesus’ offering Himself in obedience to the Father — not interpreted as a payment to Satan); Paul expresses it this way: “You were bought with a price” (cf. 1 Cor 6:20; 7:23; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 1:18-19; Rev 5:9). As the means of redemption, the death of Jesus provides a deliverance that involves not only forgiveness of sin (cf. Eph 1:7; Col 1:14), but also newness of life (Rom 6:4). Even though Christ’s redemptive work is perfect (cf. Heb 9:25-28), its full expression will not be completed in us until the return of Christ (cf. Lk 21:28; Rom 8:23; Eph 4:30). The central theme of redemption is that God has taken the initiative to act compassionately on behalf of those who are powerless to help themselves. Scripture clearly teaches that divine redemption involves God’s identifying with humanity in its plight...

and liberating humankind through the obedience, suffering, death, and resurrection of His incarnate Son.

SLAVERY IN GOD'S ECONOMY

Slavery was the most paramount issue in God's economy, with regard to His rulership over the human family — it has far-reaching effects and implications. Since the earliest years of human history, the institution of “slavery” has been a part of human existence; beginning with the fall of man in the Garden of Eden, humanity has been “enslaved to sin.” The institution of slavery in the human family was not the invention of man or mere happenstance, it was the inevitable plan of God whereby He would convey truth (spiritual truth) to a fallen world; thus it was in accord with God's divine purposes (cf. Is 14:24; 25:1; 40:8; 46:9-10; 55:8-11; Ps 33:11; Prov 19:21; Ecc 7:13-14; 12:13-14; Acts 5:39; Eph 1:11; 3:11; Rom 8:28ff). Throughout history, God in His wisdom has been teaching man what it means to be in bondage and be enslaved, and He did this principally through “a conceptual understanding of human slavery.” The children of Israel were “placed in bondage” (i.e., they were enslaved) time after time (cf. Judges 2:13-14; 4:1-2; 6:1; 10:6-7; 13:1; etc.), because of her incessant disobedience and her continuance in transgressing God's Laws. God told His people through His servant Moses that He would “bless them” if they would diligently obey Him (cf. Deut 28:1-14)... but that He would “curse them” should they not obey Him (cf. Deut 28:15-68) — the curses of God involved being subjected to scarcity, barrenness, crop failure, pestilence, disease, blight, drought, defeat in battle, fright, adversity, calamity, powerlessness, and “captivity in foreign lands” (read Deut 28:15-68); here are a few of the curses God mentions:

- Your carcasses shall be food to all the birds of the sky and beasts of the earth (v. 26)
- You shall betroth a wife, but another man shall violate her (v. 30)
- Your sons and daughters shall be given to another people (v. 32)
- You shall be taken to nations that neither you nor your fathers have known (v. 36)
- Your sons and daughters shall be taken into captivity (v. 41)
- You shall be at the mercy of aliens in your own land (vv. 43-44)
- You shall serve your enemies whom the Lord shall send against you (v. 48)
- God will delight in making you perish and destroying you if you disobey Him (v. 63)
- You shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves (v. 68)

Beloved, these are the words of GOD... not the diabolical thoughts of MEN. As incredible as it may seem, it was through the issue of “slavery” that God taught His people the importance of “authority and submission” (both physically & spiritually); the reality is, both authority and submission play extremely vital roles in God's economy. By definition, slavery is the state of a person who is the property of another; thus a slave is subjected to the dominating influence of another, and is held in servitude to him. When Adam and Eve fell in the Garden, the entire human family became “slaves of Satan” and “slaves of sin” (i.e., slaves of unrighteousness and children of wrath — cf. Rom 3:10-18; 6:6, 16; Eph 2:3; 5:6; Rom 1:18); the entire unbelieving world is in servitude to Satan (cf. Jn 8:44; Acts 10:38; 26:18; 2 Cor 11:14; 1 Jn 3:8-10). It is Satan who energizes the children of disobedience (cf. Eph 2:2)... and blinds the minds of the unsaved (cf. 2 Cor 4:3-4)... and holds the unconscious world in his arms (cf. 1 Jn 5:19). Only those who are born again (Jn 3:3) have been redeemed by God and delivered from the domain of darkness — that was done through the

redemptive work of Christ on the cross (cf. Eph 1:7; Col 1:13-14; Deut 9:26; Is 43:1; 44:22-24). The whole of human history is a struggle against the empire of Satan (*i.e.*, evil, and all of the world forces of darkness & spiritual forces of wickedness; cf. Eph 6:11-12). When Adam sinned he lost his blessed estate in which he had been created; thus he became subjected to both spiritual & physical death (cf. Gen 2:17); and the sin of Adam was henceforth imputed to the entire human family (cf. Rom 5:12-14). So monumental was the fall, the entire created order was cursed as well; as such it is in a constant state of decline as the second law of thermodynamics attests (cf. Rom 8:22-23; 2 Pet 3:10-13; Rev 21:1).

Slavery was well in place during the time of Abraham (which was very early on the human calendar); he had 318 servants who had been born in his house when his nephew **Lot** was taken captive after becoming a resident of Sodom (cf. Gen 14:14). It was Sarah's maid **Hagar** who bore Abraham a son (Ishmael); but after having done so, Hagar despised Sarah... so Sarah dealt with her very harshly, thus causing Hagar to flee from her presence... when the angel of the Lord found Hagar in the wilderness, he said to her: “**Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority**” — remember, Hagar was a “**servant**” (slave) of Sarah; so Sarah was her “**master**” (by definition, Hagar was obligated to obey her master). When Abraham was advanced in age, he said to **his servant** (the oldest of his household, **who had charge of all that Abraham owned**), “Please place your hand under my thigh, and I will make you swear by the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you not take a wife for my son Isaac from the daughters of the **Canaanites**, but you shall go to my country and to **my relatives**, to secure a wife for him” (cf. Gen 24:1-4) — the justification of this request was God's declaration: “**To your descendants I will give this land**” (cf. Gen 24:7); “thus God will send His angel before you, and you will take a wife for my son from there.” As the Lord so decreed, **Rebekah** would be the wife God predestined for Isaac (cf. Gen 24:58, 67). Not many years later **Joseph** was sold to some **Ishmaelites** (how's that for coincidence?) who took him to Egypt where they sold him to **Potiphar** (an important official in the Egyptian royal court — cf. Gen 37:36). Note again the significance of “**slavery**” in the history of God's people. Over & over again throughout the Old Testament, God refers to His representatives of choice as “**His servants & possessions**” (cf. Ex 4:10; 14:31; 20:10, 17; Num 12:7-8; Deut 34:5; 1 Sam 3:9; 2 Sam 3:18; 1 Kg 3:6; 11:34; 2 Kg 5:20; 9:36; 19:34; Job 1:8; Ps 78:70; 105:6, 26; Is 20:3; 41:8; 44:21; Dan 6:20; 9:16-17); in like manner, God also asks us to be “**His servants**” (cf. Rom 12:1; 1 Cor 4:1-2; 2 Cor 6:4; 1 Th 1:9; Heb 9:14; Rev 22:3); **whereas believers serve the Creator, unbelievers serve the creature** (cf. Rom 1:25). It is also interesting to note that Christ was called “**God's servant**” (cf. Is 49:5-6; 52:13; 53:11; Mt 12:18; 20:28; Acts 3:13, 26). Regarding being a servant, remember the words of the Lord Jesus — “**You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only**” (Lk 4:8). “**No one can serve two masters; you cannot serve God and mammon**” (cf. Lk 16:13). Writes Paul, “**You are slaves of the one whom you obey**” (cf. Rom 6:16).

While there were a number of people “employed” in ancient Israel on a temporary basis (cf. Job 7:1; 14:6; Mk 1:20), many ancient societies (including Israel) had **servants or slaves** (men and maid servants) who were the **property** of those individuals who purchased them. Because the Israelites were servants of God, when they became servants of their brethren they were to be treated respectfully as hired servants, and be ruled over with **kindness** (cf. Lev 25:39); when someone experienced hardship and poverty, he naturally had to find a means of subsistence, so he would sell himself into slavery. Conversely, when someone committed a crime of some kind and needed to make restitution, he had to hire himself out. Every Israelite, male or maid,

who had become a slave could be redeemed at any time by relatives; if they weren't redeemed, Jewish Law held that they were to be set free after six years of service, with a present of cattle and fruits (cf. Ex 21:2; Deut 15:12-15). A Hebrew servant also had the option of remaining in his master's house, should he so choose, and become a *"lifelong servant."* The majority of non-Hebrew slaves were *"war captives"* (cf. Num 31:26); many of them were purchased from foreign slave dealers (cf. Lev 25:44-45)... others may have been resident foreigners who were reduced to this state either by poverty or crime. Slaves were described as the *"possession"* of their master (cf. Lev 25:45-46), and as their master's *"money"* (cf. Ex 21:21); such expressions showed that they were highly regarded.

It is the issue of "slavery" that gives context and understanding to our salvation. According to Scripture, prior to being saved *"we were enslaved to sin"* — i.e., sin was our master — being enslaved to sin and its dominating influence meant we were in *"bondage"* to it (i.e., *"enchained"* to it). Our *"innate sin nature"* is simply the expression of who we are: *"sinners"* (cf. Rom 3:9-10, 23; Gal 3:22; Lk 18:19). By definition, sin (*hamartia*) means to *"miss the mark;"* thus as sinners we fail to meet God's standard of righteousness. If we think of sin as only being that which is *"overtly evil"* (lying, stealing, immorality, malice, anger), then we are simply relegating sin to expressed behaviors; but sin is far more than that — *"it is an issue of the heart that is the very foundation of our being."* Regarding the heart, God Himself said, *"The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?"* (cf. Jer 17:9; Mt 6:21; 15:8, 18-19). So sin is the governing principle or power that completely dominates the unbeliever's life. Essentially the reality is this: *when we have a self-orientation in life, rather than a God-orientation, we are being ruled by sin instead of righteousness.*

When we place our faith in Christ, we become a "brand new creation;" i.e., born again (John 3:3; 2 Cor 5:17). We are delivered from the *domain of darkness* (that diabolical realm to which we were enslaved), and transferred to the *kingdom of God* (cf. Col 1:13) — He becomes our new Lord and Master (cf. Eph 5:8; Mt 4:10; 22:37; Ps 100:2). It is important to notice the unique distinction that exists for us as believers — *"we are not enslaved to Christ"* (i.e., we are not in bondage to Him); rather, we willfully of our own volition choose to become *"His bondservants,"* because of His incredible love for us (that's the motivation factor). As Christians, *"we have been set free to serve and love Christ;"* we are not forced to do anything; we love and obey Christ because He graciously paid our debt on the cross that we might be delivered from death and the bondage of sin. Therefore our obedience to Christ is *out of gratitude* to Him for being merciful and extending grace to us (cf. 1 Jn 4:10, 19), *not out of obligation.* In the following passages, you will note that the apostles referred to themselves as *"bondservants of Christ"* (cf. Rom 1:1; Jam 1:1; 2 Pet 1:1; Jude 1:1; Rev 1:1); i.e., *they chose to be His servants & be slaves of righteousness! and they did it from the heart!* (cf. Rom 6:16-19; 2 Cor 9:7; Eph 6:5-6; 1 Pet 1:22). As Paul says, *"We are not under law, we are under grace!"* (Rom 6:14). *"We have been set free from the Law of sin and death through the cross!"* (cf. Rom 8:2); whereas we were in bondage to sin and death (i.e., enslaved to it) prior to salvation, that is no longer the case! As Jesus stated, *"Those whom the Lord sets free are free indeed!"* (Jn 8:36). Said Paul, *"It was for freedom that Christ set us free!"* (Gal 5:1). Conversely, said Peter, *"Use your freedom to be bondservants of God!"* (cf. 1 Pet 2:16). *Beloved, you are no longer a "slave of Satan!" You have been redeemed by the blood of Christ!* (cf. Eph 1:7; 1 Pet 1:18-19). I'm reminded of the lyrics to the chorus of, *"Amazing Grace, My chains are Gone"* — *"My chains are gone, I've been set free; my God, my Savior has ransomed me."*

In his letter to the Romans, Paul speaks of “being a slave of righteousness” (cf. Rom 6:19), but he realizes that believers (*i.e.*, those who belong to God) are NOT actually slaves (*i.e.*, they are not in bondage); he was simply speaking in “human terms” in order to shed light on this spiritual reality. Remember, “slavery” was a very prominent issue in their first century world; it was not only foundational to their culture, it was foundational to their understanding several spiritual truths as well; without a fairly good understanding of the issue of slavery, one might struggle with many of the doctrinal precepts of the Christian faith. Keeping that in mind, Paul felt it was helpful to illustrate spiritual truth by utilizing the culture of slavery with which they were familiar. As unbelievers, they had surrendered their bodies as slaves of unrighteousness... but now as believers, they needed to present their bodies as slaves of righteousness (he was contrasting the two positions). The reality is, God has placed His Spirit in us so that we can “walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4) and no longer walk in darkness and sin. Though believers in Christ technically are not “slaves” in the strict sense of the word (*i.e.*, they are not in bondage to God), they should of their own volition choose to be God’s servants in this world — that should be the natural outgrowth of experiencing God’s redemption. Being a servant of Christ has nothing to do with complying with some divine ordinance... it is the residual effect of realizing the magnitude of God’s love for us — obviously without a significant awareness of God’s kindness toward us, we will not be that motivated and inspired to serve and love Him. **Truth realized is the only thing that is transformational**; *i.e.*, it is the only thing that truly affects a change in the way in which we live life (that’s how motivational & inspiring truth of God’s love is) — thus the more one truly believes in God’s love for him, the greater will be his sanctification (cf. 2 Cor 3:18; 1 Pet 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18; Jn 17:17). The reality is, one cannot have a shallow view of God’s love for him, and expect to experience a vibrant fruit-bearing life (Jn 15:5, 9-10); either God’s love for you is an incredible dynamic in your heart and faith, or you will simply be living much of your life in your own strength — as a believer, you must make Christ your life (cf. Gal 2:20; Eph 5:1-2; Phil 1:21; Col 3:4). The Lord Jesus Himself said, “The greatest among you shall be your servant” (cf. Mt 23:11); *i.e.*, they will submit to the lordship of Christ and obey and serve Him. “Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when He comes” (Mt 24:46). Undoubtedly the most poignant words any of us will ever hear in all of eternity are these: “Well done, good and faithful slave... enter into the joy of your Master” (cf. Mt 25:21); those words are unfathomable. As Paul states, “You are no longer a slave, but a son” (cf. Gal 4:7); “You have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons... you are children of God” (Rom 8:15-16). The night before Jesus went to the cross He said to His disciples: “No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I heard from My Father” (cf. Jn 15:15). Until this point, Jesus had called His disciples servants (cf. Jn 12:26; 13:13-16) — a servant does what he is told and sees what his master does, but does not necessarily know the meaning or purpose of it... on the other hand, a friend knows what is happening because friends develop strong intimate relationships with each other, and fellowship with each another; they are always communicating with each other. Obviously servants don’t have an intimate relationship with their master’s like friends do... the slave’s task is to simply do what he is told; so the servant-master relationship is a far more impersonal relationship than that of close friends — close friends share a level of intimacy that servants do not. With that in mind, our relationship with Christ as believers is to be one with a high degree of “intimacy,” not one that simply has a “behavioral orientation.”

Various New Testament Constructs that Use Slave Terminology

- * *A **slave** is not greater than his master* – John 13:16
- * *Who is the faithful and sensible **slave**?* – Matt 24:45
- * *Well done, good and faithful **servant*** – Matt 25:23
- * *Whoever wishes to be first among you shall be **slave of all*** – Mark 10:44
- * *Blessed is that **slave** whom his master finds so doing when he comes* – Luke 12:43
- * *By your own words I will judge you, you **worthless slave*** – Luke 19:22
- * *Everyone who practices sin is the **slave of sin*** – John 8:34
- * *He who was called while a free man, is **Christ's slave*** – 1 Corinth 7:22
- * *I buffet my body and make it **my slave*** – 1 Corinth 9:27
- * *You are no longer a **slave**, but a son* – Gal 4:7
- * *You have not received a **spirit of slavery**, leading to fear again* – Rom 8:15
- * *All creation will one day be set free from its **slavery to corruption*** – Rom 8:21
- * *It was for **freedom** that Christ set us free* – Gal 5:1
- * *No longer do I call you **slaves**... I now call you friends* – John 15:15
- * *As believers we should no longer be **slaves to sin*** – Rom 6:6
- * *You are **slaves of the one you obey*** – Rom 6:16
- * *Having been set free from sin, you became **slaves of righteousness*** – Rom 6:18
- * *You formerly presented your members as **slaves to lawlessness*** – Rom 6:19
- * *You were bought with a price, do not become **slaves of men*** – 1 Corinth 7:23
- * *Be **slaves of Christ**, doing the will of God from the heart* – Eph 6:6
- * *We are **servants of God*** – 2 Corinth 6:4
- * *You shall worship the Lord your God and **serve Him only*** – Matt 4:10
- * *No one can **serve** two masters (i.e., God and mammon)* – Matt 6:24
- * *Jesus did not come to be served, but to **serve*** – Matt 20:28
- * *We **serve** in newness of the Spirit, not oldness of the Law* – Rom 7:6
- * *Through love **serve** one another* – Gal 5:13
- * *If anyone **serves Me**, let him follow Me* – John 12:26
- * ***Serving** the Lord with all humility* – Acts 20:19
- * *I am of flesh, sold into **bondage to sin*** – Rom 7:14
- * *We were held in **bondage** under the elemental things of the world* – Gal 4:3
- * *Be fervent in spirit, **serving the Lord*** – Rom 12:11
- * *Employ your gifts in **serving one another*** – 1 Pet 4:10
- * *Whoever **serves**, let him do so by the strength which God supplies* – 1 Pet 4:11
- * ***Serve the Lord with gladness*** – Psalm 100:2