

# **CLASS NOTES - PHILEMON**

**Taught By Robert Stapleton**



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**CLASS INSTRUCTIONS PHILEMON**  
**Robert Stapleton**

**CLASS DESCRIPTION:**

1. This class will provide a verse-by-verse study of the book of Philemon
  - A. We will note the emphasis Paul puts upon the relationship of Christian brethren, regardless of their status in life, to each other.

**COURSE ASSIGNMENTS:**

1. The book of Philemon is to be read weekly during the quarter, with a reading log kept.
2. Instructions concerning reading log.
  - A. Keep a typewritten log of your reading, with dates and chapters read.
    1. Your log is to be turned in to instructor no later than the beginning of class day during the finals week.
3. Read and critique the book, A Commentary on the New Testament Epistles, by J.W. Shepherd, Volume V, A Commentary on the Epistle to Philemon with a reading log kept.
  - A. Instructions concerning critique and reading log.
    1. Critique should be a three to five page double-spaced paper, Times New Romans, 12 font, 1-inch top, and bottom and side margins.
      - A. Watch your grammar and spelling.
    2. Turn in critique and reading log to instructor no later than the beginning of class day during the finals week.
    3. Critique will count for 20% of your total grade.
4. Tests:
  - A. Two scheduled tests will be administered.
    1. Each will account for 40% of your total grade.
    2. Any additional credit will be at the instructor's discretion.
5. Memory Verses:
  - A. The following verses are to be committed to memory:

Philemon 4  
Philemon 7  
Philemon 20

- B. Memory work must be done in the American Standard Version, English Standard Version, King James Version, or New King James Version unless the instructor grants permission to use another version.

## **PHILEMON**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

1. This letter is the shortest of his epistles.
2. It is the only personal, private letter of Paul's that has been preserved.
3. Written to Philemon who was a Christian and slave owner.
  - A. Deals with his runaway slave, Onesimus, who had been converted by Paul and was being sent back to Philemon.
    1. History suggests there were 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire during the 1st century.
    2. A person could become a slave in one of three ways:
      - A. Be born of parents who were slaves.
      - B. Be captured in war.
      - C. Be sold into slavery for debts owed.
  - B. Roman slave owners had the power of life and death over their slaves.
4. Philemon is one of Paul's "Prison Epistles."
  - A. These were written during his first imprisonment in Rome - Acts 28:30, 31.
  - B. These epistles are: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon.
5. This epistle has been called "a masterpiece of Christian courtesy and intercession."

### **BODY:**

#### **1. WHO WROTE THE BOOK?**

- A. Writer refers to himself three times as Paul - 1, 9, 19.
  1. Is incarcerated in Rome - 1, 20, 22.
  2. Writer's associates are Timothy, Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke who are all known associates of Paul - 1, 23, 24.
- B. External evidence points to Paul.
  1. Writers such as Tertullian and Origen indicate that Paul wrote Philemon.
  2. Appeared among the epistles of Paul in Marcion's Canon, the Muratorian Canon and in the Old Latin and Old Syriac Versions.

#### **2. TO WHOM WAS THE BOOK WRITTEN?**

- A. Addressed to Philemon.
  1. Described as a fellow laborer who was beloved of Paul - verse 1.
  2. Converted to Christ by Paul - verse 19.
  3. Resident of Colossae - Colossians 4:7-18.
  4. Apparently a wealthy man.
    - A. Owned slaves.
    - B. Church met at his house - Philemon 2.
- B. Also addressed to Apphia, Archippus, and the church - Philemon 2.
  1. Apphia is believed to be the wife of Philemon.
  2. Archippus is believed to have been the son of Philemon - Colossians 4:17.

#### **3. WHEN AND WHERE BOOK WAS WRITTEN**

- A. Written from Rome while Paul was incarcerated - Acts 28:30, 31; Colossians 4:7-18; Philemon 1, 9, 10, 22-24.

- B. Tychicus probably was the bearer of this epistle as he was the one who bore the epistle to the church at Colossae - Colossians 4:7-9.
- C. This would date the time of writing to be around A.D. 62 at the same time as Colossians.

#### **4. WHY WAS BOOK WRITTEN?**

- A. Onesimus had run away from his owner Philemon.
  - 1. Onesimus - meant profitable.
  - 2. He had wronged his master by perhaps stealing from him - verse 18.
  - 3. He traveled to Rome.
  - 4. Came in contact with Paul and was converted - verse 10.
- B. Onesimus was being sent back to his master Philemon by Paul.
  - 1. Paul desired Onesimus to remain with him but would not keep him without the permission of Philemon - verses 11-14.
  - 2. Paul knew that Philemon had the legal right to punish Onesimus.
    - A. He, therefore, pleads on his behalf.
      - 1. Rather than command, which he could have, he chose to plead with Philemon instead - verses 8-10.
    - B. Paul suggests that perhaps it was providential that Onesimus had run away and became a Christian - verses 15, 16.
      - 1. His having done so resulted in him becoming a Christian brother who should be treated that way instead of as a slave.
    - C. Philemon is asked by Paul to treat Onesimus as he would treat Paul - verse 17.
    - D. Paul indicated that if Onesimus had done wrong Paul would pay for it - verses 18, 19.

#### **5. OUTLINE OF PHILEMON**

- A. Salutation - verses 1-3.
- B. Thanksgiving and appreciation for Philemon - verses 4-7.
- C. Paul's request on behalf of Onesimus - verses 8-21.
- D. Paul's expression of his belief he would be released soon - verse 22.
- E. The companions of Paul send their greetings - verses 22-25.

#### **6. LESSONS WE LEARN FROM PHILEMON**

- A. Paul continued to preach the gospel even while in Prison - Acts 28:30, 31; Philemon 10, 11.
- B. Christianity makes a difference in one's life.
  - 1. Onesimus was now profitable, although he had once been unprofitable - verse 11.
- C. Restitution is required when real repentance is there.
  - 1. Philemon had been wronged by Onesimus when he ran away.
  - 2. It was now necessary he return and make good his wrong - Matthew 3:8.
- D. God's providence works to bring the sinner and preacher together - verse 10.
- E. Gospel was responsible for the gradual abolition of slavery.
  - 1. Not done by war or decree, but by teaching.
  - 2. Application of "Golden Rule" would do away with slavery - Matthew 7:12.
  - 3. Under the influence of Christianity many founders of the U.S., such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson freed their slaves.
- F. Just because one is in Christ does not mean that the barriers of society are removed.

1. A slave was still bound to his master - 1 Corinthians 7:20-23.
- G. Slavery was regulated by Christianity until its principles eradicated it - Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-4:1.

**CONCLUSION:**

1. Paul is shown as a man of courtesy, tact, and diplomacy.
  - A. What he could have commanded as an apostle, he sought to persuade willingly.
2. Nothing is known as to whether Philemon followed the advice of Paul or not.

## COMMENTARY, PHILEMON

### Verse 1

1. Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, . . .
  - A. No doubt as to whom Paul was.
    1. Writer of nearly half of the New Testament.
  - B. The phrase “a prisoner of Jesus Christ” is found here and in verse 9 as the only places where it is found in the New Testament.
    1. When one studies the life of the Apostle Paul, it does not take long to see the frequency of his imprisonments for his faith in Christ.
      - A. To the Corinthians, he indicated how he had been “in prisons more frequent” - 2 Corinthians 11:23.
      - B. From the last chapters of the Book of Acts, we note he spent the last four years of his earthly life in a Roman prison - Acts 23-28.
    2. However, this was not what he referred to in this brief epistle.
      - A. Rather, he stressed the fact that he was “a prisoner of Jesus Christ.”
        1. Similarly, he had indicated in his epistle to the Philippians, that both he and Timothy were “bondservants of Jesus Christ,” as seen in Philippians 1:1 in the New King James Version.
          - A. The footnote in the English Standard Version for Philippians 1:1 states, “Or *slaves*” (for the contextual rendering of the Greek word *doulos* see Preface”) (emp. theirs).
        2. To the Romans he made mention of his being “a servant” or “bondservant” “of Jesus Christ” - Romans 1:1.
        3. To Titus, he mentioned he was both “servant of God, and an apostle of Jesus Christ” - Titus 1:1.
      - B. We are able to see the depth of this relationship in Acts 21:13, where Paul stated, “What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”
    - C. Paul moved away from his normal description of himself as “an apostle” - 1 Corinthians 1:1; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:1; Ephesians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; 1 Timothy 1:1; 2 Timothy 1:1.
      1. It seems self-evident as to why he did so when we understand the purpose of this epistle.
        - A. His being a “servant” or “slave” will better convey what needs to be done than his being an “apostle” when he addresses Philemon concerning Onesimus.
  2. . . . and Timothy our brother, . . .
    - A. Timothy was a participate in the greeting, but not in the authoring of this epistle.
      1. We see Timothy and Paul joining “ranks” on Paul’s second missionary journey - Acts 16:1.
      2. Paul looked upon Timothy as one “likeminded” with him - Philippians 2:20.
      3. He was one of Paul’s sons “in the faith” - 1 Timothy 1:2.
  3. . . . unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer,
    - A. Little is known about Philemon.
      1. He was a member of the church at Colossae - Colossians 4:9.

2. He hosted the Colossian church in his home - Philemon 2.
3. He was a slave owner.
4. There appears to be a close relationship between him and Paul - Philemon 1.
5. Some have suggested that he “became bishop of Colossae and suffered martyrdom,” but this is “legendary” (Vincent, 1887, p. 515).
- B. The word “fellowlabourer” is from the Greek phrase “sunergoi hemon,” and indicated his being a “co-worker” in the work of the church at Colossae.

#### Verse 2

1. And to our beloved Apphia, . . .
  - A. The American Standard Version states, “and to Apphia our sister” while the English Standard Version states, “and Apphia our sister.”
    1. Less is known of her than Philemon.
      - A. She was a member of the church at Colossae.
      - B. Some have suggested that she may have been either the sister or wife of Philemon, but there is no way to confirm either.
2. . . . and Archippus our fellowsoldier, . . .
  - A. A member of the church at Colossae, who was their “fellowsoldier.”
    1. It has been suggested that he may have been related to Apphia and Philemon.
      - A. Some have said he may have been Philemon’s son, and if Apphia was married to Philemon, her son also.
      - B. Of course, none of this can be proven.
  - B. The word “fellowsoldier” is from the Greek word “sunstratiotei,” and is only used in Philippians 2:25 where it was used of Epaphroditus and here of Archippus.
    1. It is a military term, indicative of being in Christian warfare.
      - A. We think of Paul’s words to the Ephesians and their putting on “the whole armour of God” - Ephesians 6:11-17.
      - B. We get the point that he was prepared for the spiritual battle before them at that time, and was actually participating in it.
3. . . . and to the church in thy house:
  - A. Although Paul’s purpose in writing this epistle was to deal with the matter of Onesimus and Philemon, he involved the whole church in the matter.
    1. It was not until the 3<sup>rd</sup> century that special places of assembly came to be.

#### Verse 3

1. Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
  - A. A very similar greeting as seen written in other epistles by Paul - 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2; Colossians 1:2, et al.
    1. “Grace,” from the Greek word “charis,” has reference to their being in God’s favor.
    2. “Peace,” from the Greek word “eirene,” describes “the harmonious relationship between God and man, accomplished through the gospel” (Vines, n.d., pp. 851, 852).
  - B. It is not possible to say for sure, but Paul’s use of the word “Lord,” (“kurios”) may have been intentional from the perspective of the issue at hand.
    1. As such, he was showing that everyone, including both masters and slaves, were under the authority of “the Lord.”
      - A. This would help Philemon to submit himself to the Lord as his Master.



#### Verse 4

1. I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers,
  - A. Paul commonly used the phrase “I thank my God” - Romans 1:8; 1 Corinthians 1:4; Philippians 1:3.
    1. Paul switched here from the plural pronoun “our” to the singular pronoun “I,” and switched from writing to the larger group to specifically writing to Philemon.
    2. Notice the personal association - “my God.”
  - B. Paul was constant in his prayers on behalf of so many, as is seen in a number of passages such as above.
    1. There is a little conflict as to what Paul meant when he said “always.”
      - A. Was he speaking of how he prayed “always.”
      - B. Or was he speaking of the frequency of his mentioning those to whom he wrote in his prayers.
        1. It may be that we cannot tell, however both Robertson and Vincent associate the word “always” with prayer (Robertson, 1931, p. 465; Vincent, 1887, p. 516).

#### Verse 5

1. Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints;
  - A. Paul had previously heard about the activities of the church at Colossae from Epaphras and Onesimus - Colossians 1:7, 8; 4:12.
    1. Here we see Paul expressing what it was that he was thankful for.
  - B. This passage presents itself in the form of what is referred to as a chiasmus, which is “In rhetoric, **chiasmus** (from the Greek: χιάζω, *chiázō*, ‘to shape like the letter X’) is the figure of speech in which two or more clauses are related to each other through a reversal of structures in order to make a larger point; that is, the clauses display inverted parallelism.” (Wikipedia, emp. theirs).
    1. Here is how it could be laid out.
      - A. A - “Your love”
      - B. B - “Faith”
      - C. B - “Toward the Lord Jesus”
      - D. A - “Toward all saints”
    2. So what we see here by the use of this device is the love of Philemon directed “toward all saints,” and his faith is directed “toward the Lord Jesus.”
  - C. The word “saints” is “hagios,” and had reference to the idea of “holy ones.”
    1. Paul, writing to the Romans, wrote of those who had been “called *to* be saints” - Romans 1:7.
      - A. This “calling,” no doubt, would be by the gospel - 2 Thessalonians 2:14.

#### Verse 6

1. That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.
  - A. Some translations, such as the English Standard, New American Standard, New International, and Revised Standard begin this passage with the phrase “and I pray,” or one similar to it.
    1. However, these words are absent from the Greek text, no doubt having been added to

- reconnect this verse back to verse 4.
- B. The word “communication” is from the Greek word “koinonia,” and is translated “fellowship” in other locations.
    - 1. The New International Version’s rendering here, “I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith,” does not seem to get the actual point across.
    - 2. It was not that Paul was instructing Philemon to be more active in reaching out to the lost with the gospel.
      - A. Rather, Paul’s instructions had to do with the issue of Philemon, a slave owner, and his faith as a Christian.
  - C. The word “effectual,” from the Greek word “energes,” could also be translated “energy,” indicating the idea that his response, one way or the other, to what Paul was writing, would indicate what type of faith he had.
    - 1. If he responded favorably, then his faith would be “effective” or active.
    - 2. If, on the other hand, he responded unfavorably, his faith would be seen as ineffective or inactive.
  - D. The phrase “by the acknowledging of every good thing” had reference to the acknowledgement of what good Philemon had done resulted in others seeing what should be the case in the life of the faithful child of God.
    - 1. As such, it seems that Paul is laying the foundation to move on to the issue at hand in so far as Onesimus is concerned.
      - A. It is as if Paul was saying, knowing what good you have done in the past, we expect the same of you concerning Onesimus.
  - E. There is some confusion relative to the last phrase of the passage, “which is in you” when it comes to the pronoun used here.
    - 1. A number of translations use the plural “in you” (American Standard, King James, New King James, New American Standard Versions) while others use the plural “in us” (New International, Revised Standard Versions).
    - 2. Robertson states, “Some MSS. have *en hemin* (in us)” while Vincent states “Read *in us*” (Robertson, 1931, p. 465, Vincent, 1887, p. 517).
    - 3. Commentaries are fairly much mixed when it comes to this portion of the passage.
    - 4. For what it is worth, to me it seems more consistent for this to refer to Philemon, given the use of the pronoun “thy” or “your” used earlier in the passage.
      - A. But whether inclusive of only Philemon or Paul and others, nothing is changed in so far as Philemon is concerned, as he would be included in the larger group.

#### Verse 7

- 1. For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, . . .
  - A. This verse is also not without some controversy in so far as to whether it is part of the prayer in verse 6.
    - 1. McClarity stated, “Whether or not verse 7 is part of Paul’s prayer in verse 6 has been debated. It seems to serve as a ‘hinge’ as the prayer turns toward Paul’s entreaty in verse 8.” (McClarity, 2005, p. 511).
    - 2. Vincent stated, “Connect with *I thank* in ver. 4, giving the reason for thankfulness as it lay in his own heart” (Vincent, 1887, p. 517).
  - B. Paul expressed here that he saw himself a better Christian because of his relationship with

Philemon.

- C. The word “consolation” is from the Greek word “paraklesis,” and refers to the idea of the lifting up of the spirits of another.
  - 1. Therefore, Paul felt himself to have been “lifted up” or encouraged by Philemon.
- 2. . . . because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.
  - A. The English Standard Version states here, “because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you,” which is easier to wrap our minds around.
    - 1. Paul used the word “bowels” frequently, in reference to man’s inward parts - 2 Corinthians 6:12; 7:15; Philippians 1:8; 2:1; Colossians 3:12; Philemon 7, 12, 20.
      - A. When doing so, he sought to express the idea of man’s heart, and the impact that was being had upon it, as seen here.
  - B. To be “refreshed,” from the Greek word “anapauo,” referred to the idea of their having been “relieved” or “revived.”
    - 1. Due to Philemon’s love, etc., two results are seen.
      - A. Paul was filled with joy and comfort.
      - B. Philemon’s fellow Christians had been “refreshed” in their spirits.

Verse 8

- 1. Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient,
  - A. “Wherefore,” or “therefore” as seen in modern translations, takes us back to what Paul had already said, and encouraged a response in view of that.
  - B. Paul could “boldly” present his case on behalf of Onesimus as a command.
    - 1. This “boldness” is similar to that expressed in Hebrew 4:16, and how one should come before God in prayer.
      - A. We see in this “the absence of fear in speaking boldly” (Vines, n.d., p. 140).
  - C. The phrase “in Christ,” though, puts everyone concerned on a “level playing field.”
    - 1. Recall Paul’s point made to the Galatians - Galatians 3:28.
  - D. The word “enjoin” is from the Greek word “epitasso,” and referred to the idea of a command issued with authority.
    - 1. As an apostle, Paul could have simply commanded Philemon concerning Onesimus.
      - A. But it was better to handle it another way.
        - 1. His was going to be an approach of one brother to another regarding yet another brother.
  - E. The phrase “that which is convenient” is translated “what is fitting” in the New King James Version.
    - 1. Literally, the idea of what was the proper thing to do as a Christian under the circumstances before him.
    - 2. In the end, Paul was leaving it up to Philemon to decide what was best after setting forth the argument that he does.
      - A. We can see the wisdom in this, can’t we?
        - 1. Paul was telling him to make up his mind and do what was right, rather than commanding him to do what was right.

Verse 9

- 1. Yet for love’s sake I rather beseech thee, . . .
  - A. Here is where Paul presents his reason for Philemon to do “what is fitting.”

1. Action, based on Philemon's love, as expressed by Paul - Philemon 5.
  - A. It is as if Paul is saying, "For love's sake, Philemon, do what is right."
- B. The phrase "I rather beseech thee" represents an appeal from Paul, as he commonly used such when he sought for a response from those whom he wrote - Romans 12:1; 1 Corinthians 1:10; Ephesians 4:1; Philippians 4:2.
  1. To "beseech," from the Greek word "parakaleo," "... is used for every kind of calling to a person which is meant to produce a particular effect . . ." (Vines, n.d., pp. 121, 122).
  2. A clear contrast here between the command that Paul had every right to issue, and the appeal presented her.
2. . . . being such an one as Paul the aged, . . .
  - A. Paul seemed to keep the attention directed inward until he could lay the proper ground work to address the issue at hand.
    1. It may be that the Lord did something similar in John 8:1-11.
  - B. At the time of this epistle Paul was probably in his late 50's.
    1. Some years earlier, he had been referred to as "a young man" - Acts 7:58.
    2. Robertson stated, "Hippocrates calls a man *presbutes* from 49 to 56 ("elder man, R.W.S.) and *geron* (old man, R.W.S.) after that." (Robertson, 1887, p. 466).
  - C. Some translations, such as the New International and the New Revised Standard Versions, translate the Greek word "presbutes," used here, to mean "ambassador."
    1. However, it seems that Paul was "working overtime" to keep from saying anything that would be understood to refer to him exercising apostolic authority.
      - A. Remember, Paul has just indicated that although he had the right to issue a command, he did not want to do so.
3. . . . and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.
  - A. The same Greek word used here as in verse 1, indicating him to be a "bondservant" to Christ.
    1. You might jump back there for a moment to remind yourselves what we saw.

#### Verse 10

1. I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, . . .
  - A. The Greek reading of this passage is very different from the English in so far as the sentence structure is concerned.
    1. The Greek reading of this passage, "parakaloó se perí tou emoú téknou hón egénneesa en toís desmoís Oneésimon." (Interlinear Transliterated Bible, 2006).
    2. The English reading as per the Greek above, "I beseech thee for my son whom I have begotten in my bonds: Onesimus." (Interlinear Transliterated Bible, 2006).
  - B. We saw the word "beseech" in verse 9, so there is no reason to spend time on it here.
  - C. The phrase "for my son" is from the Greek "peri tou emou teknou," and literally refers to Onesimus as his child, rather than his son.
    1. Paul referred to others this way - 1 Corinthians 4:17; Galatians 4:19; 2 Timothy 1:2; Titus 1:4.
  - D. The name "Onesimus" meant "useful."
    1. Some believe this was the name given when he became a Christian, however such cannot be proven.

2. . . . whom I have begotten in my bonds:
  - A. So far Paul mentions his imprisonment three times - Philemon 1, 9, 10.
  - B. It was while in prison that Paul taught Onesimus, leading to his conversion.

Verse 11

1. Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, . . .
  - A. From this statement it appears that prior to his running away, Onesimus was “useless” to Philemon; although we are not necessarily told in what specific areas that was the case.
    1. Some have suggested he may have been a thief due to what Paul says in verse 18.
  - B. Some, like Robertson, have suggested that there is a “play on words” here with the name “Onesimus” meaning “profitable” and Paul claiming him to have been unprofitable.
    1. However, it should be noted that the words “useless” (“achrestos”) and “useful” (“euchrestos”) are two different words in the Greek so the “so-called” “play on words” may not carry as much weight as alleged.
2. . . . but now profitable to thee and to me:
  - A. Some have thought that Paul’s words here served to encourage Philemon to release Onesimus in order that he might return to Rome and assist Paul while still imprisoned.
    1. However, there is no evidence to confirm such a claim.

Verse 12

1. Whom I have sent again: . . .
  - A. As to why Onesimus ran away from Philemon we are not told.
    1. Several suggestions have been made, but none can be proven.
  - B. Paul returned Onesimus to Philemon.
    1. Since Paul was in prison, it appears Onesimus so trusted him that he willingly followed his directions and returned to Philemon, although he would not know for sure what he was to face upon his arrival.
      - A. As a runaway slave, Onesimus faced the possibility of severe punishment to the point of death.
      - B. Tychicus probably accompanied Onesimus back to Colossae as it would have been unsafe for him to travel alone.
    2. From Deuteronomy 23:15, 16 we gather information on the handling of a run-away slave during Old Testament times.
      - A. This is quite different to what we see in the New Testament - Ephesians 6:5-8; Colossians 3:22-25.
2. . . . thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:
  - A. Philemon was instructed to receive Onesimus as he would receive the very heart of Paul.
    1. Paul knew Philemon to be a loving, kind person.
      - A. As such, the wording here would “tug” at the heart of such a man since he cared so much for Paul.
    2. The English Standard Version states, “I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.”

Verse 13

1. Whom I would have retained with me, . . .
  - A. The New King James Version states, “whom I wished to keep with me” from the Greek phrase “eboulomen.”

1. Literally, Paul “was wishing” to be able to retain him.
- B. Paul’s use of the personal pronoun “I” has the emphatic sense and, as such, seems to stay with Paul keeping the attention on himself rather than Onesimus.
  1. This could have the effect of keeping Philemon’s anger in check, if he were of the nature to express such.
2. . . . that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel:
  - A. Paul attributes the good that Onesimus had done him to Philemon’s account.
    1. This sounds like what Paul said of Epaphroditus’ service to Paul credited to the Philippian church - Philippians 2:25-30.
  - B. The fourth allusion to Paul’s imprisonment - Philemon 1, 9, 10, 13.
    1. This might have been done to impress upon Philemon how valuable Onesimus had been to him in the condition he was in, in contrast to what little value he might have been to Philemon.

#### Verse 14

1. But without thy mind would I do nothing; . . .
  - A. The phrase “without thy mind” is better seen as per the English Standard Version for clarity purposes, “but I preferred to do nothing without your consent.”
    1. Regardless of how much Paul would have liked to have kept Onesimus at Rome to assist him, he would not do so without approval from Philemon.
    2. This situation put Paul in a difficult position, but he was going to do what was best for all concerned.
2. . . . that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.
  - A. We have seen that Paul, as an apostle, could have “enjoined” (commanded) Philemon concerning this matter but, rather, as brother to brother, he chose to “beseech” (appeal) him instead so he would do as Paul wished of his own free will.
    1. We find a valuable lesson in this.
      - A. The ends do not always justify the means.

#### Verse 15

1. For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, . . .
  - A. Paul’s use of the word “perhaps” leaves us faced with a question.
    1. In other words, “maybe Onesimus’ departure was for some hidden benefit.”
      - A. This reminds us of Joseph’s words to his brothers following the death of their father Jacob - Genesis 50:20.
  - B. The phrase “for a season” referenced the idea of “A brief season” (Robertson, 1887, p. 522).
    1. Some have suggested that Paul used this phrase to downplay the length of time he was gone so as to minimize the situation.
2. . . . that thou shouldest receive him for ever;
  - A. A couple different ideas might have been in mind here.
    1. Onesimus would return “a changed man,” and as such he would now be “profitable” “forever” to Philemon.
      - A. This would have more impact if Philemon did not return Onesimus to Paul.
    2. There might be a spiritual connection here in view of the spiritual relationship that had been established which would carry over into eternity.

Verse 16

1. Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?
  - A. Literally, “now no longer a slave” or “bondservant” as seen in the English Standard Version.
    1. Philemon was to look upon the newly formed spiritual relationship that overshadowed the physical one - 2 Corinthians 5:16, 17.
    2. Remind yourself what we have already noted in Galatians 3:26, 27.
    3. Nothing is seen in this that would suggest that Paul thought that Philemon would release Onesimus from his status as a slave.
      - A. Perception is what is being considered in so far as to how Philemon was to look upon Onesimus.
  - B. We see the depth of the love that Paul had for Onesimus.
    1. He was not only a “brother,” he was a “beloved brother,” from the Greek “adelphos agapeton,” referring to their spiritual relationship in Christ.
      - A. The physical status of Onesimus was not changed in that he was still a slave.
      - B. However, the spiritual status was now different.
    2. See Appendix # 1, Defending The Bible’s Position On Slavery. pp. 17-32.

Verse 17

1. If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.
  - A. The word “partner,” is from the Greek word “koinonos,” and was commonly used to refer to those who were partners in a business venture, such as seen in Luke 5:10.
    1. The Greek word used here comes from the root word from which the word “koinonia” comes that we saw in verse 6.
    2. We, also, note that Paul had indicated the relationship they had as “fellowlabourers” in verse 1.
  - B. The use of the phrase “if thou count me therefore a partner,” is not so much a question, per se.
    1. Literally, Paul’s thought was more or less, “since you count me as one you are in fellowship with, receive Onesimus as you would me.”
  - C. For Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would Paul seems to be designed to indicate that if there were some issues between the two, Philemon should look beyond them.
    1. Until this point in the epistle, Paul had refrained from issuing an imperative.
      - A. Now, though, he commands Philemon to “receive” (“accept” New American Standard Version) Onesimus in a similar way that God accepts those who turn to Him.
      - B. This is the same idea seen when we note passages that refer to Christians receiving one another - Romans 14:1; 15:7; Philippians 2:29.
    2. We recall Jesus’ words concerning extending acts of kindness toward others have the result of our having done so to Him - Matthew 25:40.

Verse 18

1. If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account;
  - A. For the phrase “If he hath wronged thee,” Robertson stated, “Condition of the first class, assumed to be true” (Robertson, 1931, p. 468).

1. Of course Onesimus had “wronged” Philemon by running away, but there seems to be something else in mind here.
  - A. The word “wronged” is “adikeo” in the Greek, and was a term used when discussing commercial activities.
    1. Paul had previously used this word when writing to the Colossians concerning slaves who “wronged” their masters - Colossians 3:25.
- B. The phrase “or oweth thee ought” was also commercial language.
  1. Jesus used it in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant - Matthew 18:28-30.
  2. Some have suggested that Onesimus may have stolen from Philemon in order to have the necessary funds for his trip to Rome from Colossae.
    - A. But even if this is not true, he defrauded Philemon out of his services while he was in Rome.
- C. The phrase “put that on mine account” was also a use of commercial language by Paul.
  1. The Greek word “ellogeo,” used here literally referred to the idea of placing a financial obligation upon someone.
    - A. In this case, the obligation that belonged to Onesimus was to be placed upon Paul.
  2. The same Greek word is found in Romans 5:13, but is translated “imputed,” indicating the idea of an account.

#### Verse 19

1. I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: . . .
  - A. Although common for Paul to close his epistles with that which would serve to prove the epistle was from him, as seen in 1 Corinthians 16:21; Galatians 6:11; Colossians 4:18; 2 Thessalonians 3:17, this is not the case here.
    1. Rather, as Robertson stated, “This is Paul’s promissory note.” (Robertson, 1931, p. 468).
    2. Once again, the use of commercial or financial language seen in the Greek word “apotino,” which indicated his wiliness to pay whatever damages Philemon felt due him.
2. . . . albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.
  - A. A shift in Paul’s “strategy” here.
    1. He now calls to Philemon’s attention the “debt” he owed Paul.
      - A. Not a financial one, but a spiritual one.
        1. Paul saw himself as “debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians, both to the wise, and to the unwise” - Romans 1:14.
    2. We sometimes sing, “He paid a debt He did not owe, I owed a debt I could not pay.”
      - A. Although of another nature, this is what we see here.
        1. Philemon “owed” the “debt” of his conversion to Paul, which Paul points out was a much greater spiritual debt than any monetary one that Onesimus could possible owe.

#### Verse 20

1. Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord.
  - A. Once again, Paul uses the word “brother” to keep the spiritual relationship upfront in the discussion.
- B. The English Standard Versions translates the next phrase thusly, “I want some benefit



from you in the Lord.”

1. Therefore, Paul was indicating his desire to obtain some benefit for all of this.
2. Some see this as another instance where Paul made a play on words since the verb form of the name Onesimus, “oninemi,” meant “beneficial” or “useful.”
  - A. This is a reversal of what we saw earlier, in that now Paul seeks for Philemon to be “useful” instead of Onesimus.
  - B. The phrase “refresh my bowels” had reference to the heart of Paul being “refreshed” by Philemon as he had “refreshed” the hearts of the Christians at Colossae - Philemon 7.
  - C. The phrase “in the Lord” was often used by Paul to stress the authority or power behind whatever it was that he was referring to.
    1. Here, of course, is reference to the fact that those who were “in Christ,” were bondservants to Him regardless of their status in life.
      - A. So, whether we talk about the Apostle Paul, the slave owner Philemon, or the slave Onesimus, they were all one “in Christ” and as such each needed to fulfill that responsibility.

#### Verse 21

1. Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, . . .
  - A. The phrase “Having confidence” (“Confident” in the English Standard Version) is indicative of that which Paul already had, as it was a perfect participle in the Greek.
  - B. Since Paul had not commanded Philemon as to what he should do, this more than likely had to do with obedience in the sense of his obeying God.
2. . . . knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.
  - A. Knowing Philemon as he did, Paul felt he would “go the extra mile” here.
    1. Although Paul had not instructed Philemon to release Onesimus, there can be little doubt that his desire was such so that he might return to Rome to assist him.

#### Verse 22

1. But withal prepare me also a lodging: . . .
  - A. Asking Philemon to prepare him a place to lodge would be a subtle way of indicating that this matter had not caused a problem between the two.
    1. He still considered him to be a “dearly beloved” brother - Philemon 1.
2. . . . for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you.
  - A. The pronoun “your” here is plural, thus indicating that Paul trusted in the “prayers” of those at Colossae.
  - B. Paul was putting the possibility of his release squarely on the shoulders of God.
    1. Remember, Paul had previous plans that should he be released he intended to go to Spain - Romans 15:24.
      - A. Needless to say, a “side trip” to Colossae would be out of the way by several hundred miles.
        1. This is not to say that such could not be done.
      2. But, perhaps, all that he was saying was that should he be released, he counted on God to cause it to happen.

#### Verse 23

1. There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus;
  - A. Robertson stated concerning Epaphras, “The Colossian preacher who apparently started

the work in Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea, and who had come to Rome to enlist Paul's help in the fight against incipient Gnosticism in the Lycus Valley." (Robertson, 1931, p. 469).

1. The personal pronoun "thee" is singular, and seems to suggest that the greeting from Epaphras was to Philemon only.
- B. The word "fellowprisoner" may have indicated that he was under house arrest with Paul - Acts 28:30, 31.

#### Verse 24

1. Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers.
  - A. "Marcus," would be John Mark, Barnabas' cousin.
  - B. "Aristarchus" was "a Macedonian of Thessalonica" - Acts 27:2.
    1. He was with Paul since the Ephesus riot.
    2. In his epistle to the Colossians, Paul referred to him as his "fellowprisoner" - Colossians 4:10.
  - C. "Demas," is best known for having deserted Paul due to his love for the "present world" - 2 Timothy 4:10.
  - D. "Lucas," would be Luke, writer of both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts.

#### Verse 25

1. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.
  - A. The typical closing by Paul.
  - B. The phrase "with your spirit" would have been in reference to their inward man previously addressed.

## **APPENDIX # 1**

### **DEFENDING THE BIBLE'S POSITION ON SLAVERY**

**Kyle Butt, M.A.**

Through the millennia, some of the worst atrocities perpetrated on humans have been linked to the institution of slavery. Historically, slavery has not designated one particular ethnic group as its singular victim. The Hebrews were slaves to the Egyptians during the days of Moses. During the reign of King David, the Moabites were subjected to slavery (2 Samuel 8:2). Alexander the Great forced almost the entire inhabited world to cower and serve him. Truth be told, practically every nationality of people that exists today could point to a time in its past history when it fell victim to slavery. Hitting closer to home, the pages of history dealing with the formative years of the United States are despoiled with gruesome stories of ships carrying slaves sold to the Americas by their fellow Africans (and others, e.g., Arabians). These slaves frequently were packed so densely in lower ship decks that many of them died of disease or malnutrition. Those who lived to see the States soon learned that their fate hinged upon those who purchased them. Some slaves were ushered into homes with kind masters, decent living facilities, good food, and freedom to worship. Other slaves were purchased by cruel, greedy people who overworked them, abused them, underfed them, and allowed them no freedom.

Friction soon arose between those who wanted to maintain slavery, and those who wanted to outlaw the practice as inhumane and unjust. It can be argued convincingly that the American Civil War was fought primarily over this very issue. Politicians raged on both sides of the matter. Interestingly, so did religious people. Abolitionists, as well as pro-slavery advocates, went to the Bible to marshal arguments for their particular view. Abolitionists armed themselves with verses such as: "Therefore whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them: for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7: 12); or "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you all are one man in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). Religious pro-slavery activists fired impressive scriptural guns by quoting passages such as: "Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh" (1 Peter 2:18); and "Servants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of your heart, as to Christ" (Ephesians 6:5). Can we determine with accuracy what the Bible really says on the topic of slavery? Does the Bible condemn it as a social injustice? Does the Bible condone the practice? And how does the Bible's position on slavery mesh with the idea of a loving God?

For years, skeptics have railed against the written Word, insisting that its pro-slavery tendencies should alert any reader who has a scrap of common sense to the idea that an all-loving God could not have inspired such atrocious material. Morton Smith and R. Joseph Hoffman, in a book titled *What the Bible Really Says*, commented:

[T]here is no reasonable doubt that the New Testament, like the Old, not only tolerated chattel slavery (the form prevalent in the Greco-Roman world of Paul's time) but helped to perpetuate it by making the slaves'

obedience to their masters a religious duty. This biblical morality was one of the great handicaps that the emancipation movement in the United States had to overcome. The opponents of abolition had clear biblical evidence on their side when they argued (1989. pp. 145-146, parenthetical item in orig.).

Following a similar line of thinking, Ruth Green wrote that “it was the Old and New Testaments of the Bible that were the authority for keeping humanity in serfdom for centuries and for legitimizing slavery in America, making a bloody civil war necessary to give slaves human rights under our Constitution” (1979, p. 351).

**Has** the Bible been responsible for the oppression of slaves in the past? No, it has not. In fact, an in-depth look into the biblical account that reveals God's attitude toward slavery shows just the opposite.

### **SLAVERY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

In Matthew 19:3-10, the Pharisees came to Jesus, attempting to trap Him with questions about the Old Law. They asked: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?” Jesus informed them that divorce was not in God’s plan from the beginning. Thinking they had trapped Him, they inquired: “Why, then, did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce and to put her away?” If it was in the Old Law, they suggested, then it must be God's ideal will. But Jesus’ answer quickly stopped that line of thinking. He responded:

Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.

Jesus’ point was crystal clear-some things permitted in the Old Testament did not necessarily represent the ideal. Due to the hardness of ancient Israel’s heart, God tolerated (and regulated) some things under the Old Law that He did not endorse. As He did so, however, He progressively revealed His divine will to mankind, clarifying that will more fully through Christ. Many of the injunctions found in the Old Testament pertaining to slavery fall into the category of regulating something that was “less than ideal.” Even in the Old Testament, God desired that all people love their neighbors as themselves (Leviticus 19:18). Yet, in a time when God used the children of Israel as His arm of justice to punish evildoers, certain questions arose. What was to be done, for example, with the survivors of those wicked nations? What was to be done with a man who was so far in debt that he could not repay his lender? These issues, and others like them, necessitated that God institute some form of humane regulations for “slavery.”

Often, those who attack the Bible skirt the real crux of the slavery issue. They point to verses in the Old Testament that offer a particular regulation for slavery. From there, they proceed to

argue that the Bible is a vile book that does not condemn, but actually condones slavery. And, they argue, since all slavery is morally wrong, the Bible must not be the product of a loving God. However, those who take such a position fail to consider that certain types of slavery are not morally wrong. For instance, when a man is convicted of murder, he often is sentenced to life in prison. During his life sentence, he is forced by the State to do (or not do) certain things. He is justly confined to a small living space, and his freedoms are revoked. Sometimes, he is compelled by the State to work long hours, for which he does not receive even minimum wage. Would it be justifiable to label such a loss of freedom as a type of slavery? Yes, it would. However, is his loss of freedom a morally permissible situation? Certainly. He has become a slave of the State because he violated certain laws that were designed to ensure the liberty of his fellow citizen, whom he murdered. Therefore, one fact that must be conceded by anyone dealing with the Bible and its position on slavery is the fact that, under some conditions, slavery is not necessarily a morally deplorable institution.

Taking that into account, we also must ask: Who has the right to determine when slavery can be imposed on a certain person or group of people? The answer, of course, is God. In the Old Testament, immoral nations who practiced unspeakable evils surrounded the Hebrews. In order to rid the world of their destructive influence, the children of Israel dealt with them in several ways. One of those ways included forcing the wicked nations into slavery. Many of the slave regulations in the Old Testament deal with the treatment of individuals and nations who had committed crimes against humanity that were worthy of death. The wicked people were graciously allowed to live, but they were subjected to slavery, much like a lifetime prison sentence in modern criminal cases. Let us look more closely at this situation. In Leviticus 18:21, 24 we read that the Lord told Moses to instruct the Israelites as follows:

And you shall not let any of your descendants pass through the fire to Molech.... Do not defile yourselves with any of these things: for by all these the nations are defiled, which I am casting out before you.

In order to understand this scenario, it is important that we understand what the phrase, “pass through the fire to Molech,” means in verse 21. In brief, it means that the nations around the Israelites were burning their own children as human sacrifices to a pagan god named Molech (for further information on Molech and this practice, see Harrison, 1988, 3:401). Fitting this into our discussion, would it be morally permissible for God to allow a government (e.g., the Israelites) to punish those people who were viciously murdering their own children? We must answer in the affirmative. What punishment would be appropriate for a person who had committed such heinous crimes as to murder his or her own innocent children? The answer to that question rages even in our own society today when instances of child homicide arrive before the courts of our land. Legitimate answers often include the death penalty, or a life in prison in which many freedoms are revoked.

As additional evidence along these lines, in Exodus 22:1-3, the Bible discusses a situation in which a man was caught in the act of thievery. The thief was instructed to restore what he stole, returning four sheep, and five oxen, for every one stolen. The text further states: “He should

make full restitution; if he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft” (vs. 3). Being sold into slavery was often a government-regulated punishment based on a criminal action. One can see, then, that it is morally permissible to revoke the freedoms of certain people or groups of people based on their inappropriate conduct.

Accordingly, many of the slavery regulations in the Old Testament pertained to people who deserved far worse. Dan Vander Lugt commented:

Old Testament laws regulating slavery are troublesome by modern standards, but in their historical context they provided a degree of social recognition and legal protection to slaves that was advanced for its time (Exodus 21:20-27; Leviticus 25:44- 46). We must keep in mind that on occasion it was an alternative to the massacre of enemy populations in wartime and the starvation of the poor during famine (2001, p. 1).

### **A Mutually Beneficial Relationship**

Frequently, “slavery” in Bible times was much more of an employer/employee relationship than an owner/slave situation. Even the words used to delineate between a hired servant and a slave are difficult to separate. As Herbert Lockyer noted:

In the ancient world, service and slavery were closely related, so much so that one can scarcely distinguish the one from the other. The original words used for “servants” and “service” carry a variety of meanings between which it is not always easy to determine what is meant (1969, p. 197).

Arndt and Gingrich documented that the Greek word *doulos* meant “slave,” but that it also was used “in a wider sense” to denote “any kind of dependence.” In 2 Corinthians 4:5, the apostles are called the *doulo* (plural of *doulos*) of the Christians. Christ took on the form of a *doulos*, as stated in Philippians 2:7. Paul designates himself as a *doulos* of Christ in Romans 1:1, Philippians 1:1, Galatians 1:10, and numerous other passages (1967, pp. 205-206). The term can describe a person who is obligated in some way, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, to another person. Due to this broad use, various translations have employed a wide range of words to render the meaning of *doulos* in English. Using Romans 1:1 as a case in point, the NKJV has “bondservant,” the New Living Translation has “slave,” the KJV and ASV have “servant,” and the Darby Bible has “bondman.”

The Hebrew word *ebed* is similar to the Greek *doulos*, in that it can be translated as “slave” or “servant.” In Exodus 4:10, Moses referred to himself as the “servant” (*ebed*) of God. Abraham called himself the *ebed* of the angels who came to visit him in Genesis 18:3. In Genesis 39:17-19, Potiphar’s wife described Joseph as the Hebrew *ebed*, and Genesis 24:2 talks about the eldest *ebed* in Abraham’s house, who “ruled over all he had.”

The purpose of including this brief description of the two most common terms for a slave is to show that our modern use of the word slave generally evokes mental images of cruelty, injustice, and bondage against a person's will. While such ideas could be included in the biblical usage, they do not necessarily fit every time the words are used. Instead, the picture that we often see when the biblical words for "slave" are employed is a mutually beneficial arrangement similar to an employer/employee relationship. Job describes this relationship quite well:

If I have despised the cause of my manservant (*ebed*) or of my maidservant, when they contended with me; what then shall I do when God riseth up? And when he visiteth, what shall I answer him? Did not he that made me in the womb make him? And did not one fashion us in the womb (Job 31:13-15)?

Obviously, Job's dealings with his slaves provided a mutually acceptable situation for master as well as slave.

To illustrate further the true nature of much Old Testament slavery, Abraham's relationship with his slave Eliezer should be examined. In Genesis 15:2-3, Abraham lamented the fact that he was childless. In his dialogue with God, he stated that the heir of his wealth was Eliezer of Damascus. In verse three of chapter 15, Abraham described Eliezer as "one born in my house." Later, in Genesis 24:2, Abraham's oldest servant (probably Eliezer) "ruled over all that he had." Add to this the fact that Abraham armed 318 trained servants (Hebrew *ebed*) to bring back Lot after he had been captured (Genesis 14: 14-15). If the slave/owner relationship was anything less than mutually trusting, Abraham most likely would not have intentionally armed his slaves. Due to the mutually beneficial nature of much Old Testament slavery, some slaves did not even want to leave their masters. Deuteronomy 15:16 -17 deals with that very situation:

And if it happens that he [a slave-KB] says to you, "I will not go away from you," because he loves you and your house, since he prospers with you, then you shall take an awl and thrust it through his ear to the door, and he shall be your servant forever. Also to your maidservant you shall do likewise.

Do the actions and words of Abraham's slaves, or those found in Deuteronomy 15, seem like the actions and words of tyrannized, oppressed people? Hardly. Rather, they seem more like the words and actions of people enjoying a mutually beneficial and consensual relationship. Even during New Testament times, slavery often provided a mutually beneficial relationship to both owner and slave. As Paul Copan remarked:

During Paul's time, the master-slave relationship provided sufficient benefits and opportunities, such that it dampened any thoughts of revolutionary behavior. One freed slave had inscribed on his tombstone: "Slavery was never unkind to me ..." More often than not, it was the **free** workers rather than slaves who were

abused by foremen and bosses. (After all, an owner stood to have an ongoing loss if he abused his slave.) [2001, p. 172, parenthetical item and emp. in orig.].

But suppose a master did abuse his slaves in Old Testament times, and those slaves decided to run away. In Deuteronomy 23:15-16, God made it unlawful for runaway slaves to be returned to their masters. The text states:

You shall not give back to his master the slave who has escaped from his master to you. He may dwell with you in your midst, in the place which he chooses within one of your gates, where it seems best to him: you shall not oppress him.

This passage is particularly revealing because it shows how costly cruelty to slaves was. It also shows that slaves had the freedom to choose where, and with whom, they wanted to live. Wright noted that this passage proves that

[s]lavery as such is not protected or rendered sacrosanct under Israelite law. At the very least it can be said that such a law probably presumes that runaway slaves will be the exception, not the rule. This lends further weight to the view that normally slavery in Israel was not oppressively harsh. It would certainly not have been, if the spirit of the slavery laws of Exodus and Deuteronomy were put into practice (1983, pp. 181-182).

Add to this the fact that kidnapping a man and selling him as a slave was a crime punishable by death, as noted in Exodus 21:16: “He who kidnaps a man and sells him, or if he is found in his hand, shall surely be put to death.” Certainly, any parallel to slavery in early America can be easily refuted.

Also note that the slavery regulated in the Bible had absolutely nothing to do with race, color, or ethnic background. While it is true that certain nations, as a whole, were captured and enslaved because of their wicked, idolatrous practices, it is not true that they were enslaved due to their allegedly inferior nationality. Leviticus 19:34 states: “But the stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself: for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.” Deuteronomy 24: 14 reads: “You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether one of your brethren, or one of the aliens who is in your land within thy gates.” And, although certain regulations applied only to Hebrews who found themselves enslaved (Deuteronomy 15:12-14; Exodus 21:2), it was not because they were a “superior” race or nationality, but simply because they were citizens of the nation of Israel (a similar concept would be the fact that a person who is born in the USA is not inherently any less or any more valuable than any other person, but, under the law system of the United States, that person would possess certain rights and privileges that a non-citizen would not enjoy). Deuteronomy 10:17-19 illustrates God’s impartiality well:



For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality nor takes a bribe. He administers justice for the fatherless and widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing. Therefore, love the stranger; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

The New Testament further underscores the idea of human equality in passages such as Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one man in Christ Jesus.” Job’s statement regarding his slave’s equality—due to the fact that God formed him in the same way that God formed Job (31:15)—provides a perfect example of the biblical idea that all men possess the same inherent value. The idea that one nation or race is superior to another does not come from the Bible. Racism like that displayed by many during the slavery years of the United States has always been a sin (Acts 17:26-31).

A valid question naturally arises from the comment above, that, on occasion, nations as a whole were enslaved because of their wickedness. What about the children of those wicked men and women? Must they become slaves as well, suffering for their parents’ evil actions? First, let us acknowledge that, even today, children often suffer because of their parents’ poor decisions. Consider the sad and pitiful plight of a child whose father is an alcoholic or child abuser. That child will suffer physically, emotionally, and financially. Even in modern times, the children who are born in poverty or cruelty often remain slaves of those elements their entire lives. Second, let us ask a more pertinent question: Would it be better for that child to grow up in a country where the slave laws protected him or her, or would it be better for the child to have to “pass through the fire to Molech”? To ask is to answer, is it not? When nations were conquered by the Israelites, what was to happen to the nations’ children who remained alive? They could be left to die on their own, or they could be given homes, food, and jobs. Which of the two options is more humane? Again, to ask is to answer. Furthermore, if the child grew up and did not like his master, he or she could simply run away and live wherever he or she wanted (Deuteronomy 23:15-16).

As we consider further the situation of slaves in ancient Israel, it is interesting to note that every slave was entitled (by God) to have a part in the Sabbath rest once every week. Exodus 20: 10 states:

[B]ut the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your **manservant, nor your maidservant**, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates (emp. added).

Along these same lines, every slave also was entitled to partake in the eight-day festivities surrounding the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles (Deuteronomy 16:9-17). The welcome rest provided on these occasions shows that God’s regulations for slavery in Israel were humane and fair. Furthermore, the year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:10) provided freedom to “all the

inhabitants” in the land of the children of Israel. [This provision included the bulk of the slaves, with possible exceptions such as those slaves who had chosen to stay with their masters and have their ears pierced as a sign of their situation.]

And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a Jubilee for you; and each of you shall return to his possession, and each of you shall return to his family.

Certainly, God kindly provided rest and freedom for slaves under the Did Testament in order to quell abuses that might arise.

### **Slaves of Debt**

Another aspect of Old Testament slavery had to do with severe debt accumulation. In Old Testament times, no bankruptcy legislation held sway over the Israelites. What was to be done for the person who was drowning in a sea of debt? Was his lender simply to wave his hand and forgive the debt? Would that be a fair situation for the lender? Hardly. Therefore, many of the slave situations arose because of such debt. Herb Vander Lugt commented:

Remember too, at that time no nation had the ability to deal with people who had gotten themselves hopelessly in debt. So they were allowed to sell themselves into slavery (often temporarily) in exchange for release from their financial obligations (Ex. 21:2-4; Lev. 25:39-43; Dt. 15:12) [1999, p. 11, parenthetical item in orig.].

Leviticus 25:47-49 provides an example of slavery caused by debt:

Now if a sojourner or stranger close to you becomes rich, and one of your brethren who dwells by him becomes poor, and sells himself to the stranger or sojourner close to you, or to a member of the stranger’s family, after he is sold he may be redeemed again. One of his brothers may redeem him; or his uncle or his uncle’s son may redeem him: or anyone who is near of kin to him in his family may redeem him: or if he is able he may redeem himself.

Would it be fair for a society to allow a person who had accumulated a huge amount of debt to sell his labor to another person to pay that debt? Yes, it would. However, God-aware that abuse might arise in any situation-even regulated debt slavery, and provided for the rights and privileges of the slave to be guarded.

### **DIFFICULT LAWS TO UNDERSTAND**

Admittedly, even with all the humane slave laws contained in the Old Testament, there are

certain laws that we, in modern times, have a difficult time understanding. For instance, Exodus 21:20 reads:

And if a man beats his male or female servant with a rod, so that he dies under his hand, he shall surely be punished. Notwithstanding, if he remains alive a day or two, he shall not be punished: for he is his property.

In the first place, how could God allow a slave owner to beat his slave at all? To answer this question, we must remember who many of the Old Testament slaves were. They were members of the wicked, sinful nations who had been delivered into the hands of the Israelites because of their immorality. Suppose that a slave from one of those nations had made up his mind to do as much damage to his owner as possible. The slave had the option of running away to a gentler owner whenever he wished (Deuteronomy 23:15-16). However, suppose that he chose to stay and steal from the owner, or break the owner's equipment intentionally, or destroy the owner's crops. What could the owner do to stop such sabotage? Herb Vander Lugt put it like this:

Then, too, no matter how well the slaves were treated, some might have been rebellious and defiant. Forgetting that they were alive because they were taken as war captives instead of being executed, they might have blamed their master for their slave status. They might have shown their resentment by destroying property, abusing fellow slaves, or refusing to work. The master may have had no other way to bring his slave in line than to use physical punishment (1999. p. 17).

As appalling as it is to the sensitivities of most United States citizens, many countries still employ some type of beating or bodily harm to deter crime (some readers may recall the controversy over "caning" in Singapore in the early 1990s). When a modern-day prisoner violates rules while incarcerated, more stringent punishment (such as solitary confinement) often is required. If a slave deserved the death sentence, yet was allowed to live under certain conditions-and then did not comply with those conditions-would it be feasible to suggest that his death sentence could be reinstated? Even though it seems harsh to us, Exodus 21:20 does not militate against the justice of God.

In fact, the more closely the passage is scrutinized, the more it manifests the idea that God was protecting the slave. Concerning the punishment that a master would receive if he did beat his slave to death, Christopher Wright noted that the word "punished" as used here actually means "avenged." And,

in any other context [it] would mean that the guilty party would be liable to death himself at the hands of his victim's family .... This law's natural sense is that the murderous master was to be executed by the legal community on behalf of the slave, who had no family to avenge him (1983, p. 180).

While not all commentators are as confident as Wright is (that in this passage the death penalty is involved), there is no concrete case which argues that the death penalty is not at least a possibility in this situation. The authors of the Pulpit Commentary observed how this fear of punishment would protect the slave.

Involving, as the death of the slave did, criminal proceedings, and, on conviction, severe punishment, the mere danger of a fatal result ensuing would be a powerful deterrent from exceptional violence.... The mere risk of incurring such a penalty would inspire salutary caution (Spence and Exell, n.d., p. 179).

Adding additional weight to the argument that the restriction in Exodus 21:20 was for the benefit of the slave, Burton Coffman wrote:

This was a protective right granted to slaves that they should not be beaten to death! If that seems like a small blessing to us, let it be remembered that under the system in vogue all over the pagan world of that era, and extending down even till apostolical times, the Roman Law, in force all over the world, provided as a penalty against slaves, even for trivial and unintentional violations, that shame of the whole pagan world “*flagellis ad mortem*” (beaten to death), a penalty usually inflicted in the presence of all the other slaves of a master. God here provided that punishment should be meted out to a slave-owner for following that pagan custom (1985, pp. 309-310).

By way of summary, then, Exodus 21:20 documents that under certain circumstances, beating could be morally acceptable as punishment. This passage, however, provided rights that did not exist in other pagan cultures for the protection of the slave.

Exodus 21:26-27 provides another example of a law that seems difficult for us, in the present day, to understand as coming from a righteous God.

If a man strikes the eye of his male or female servant, and destroys it, he shall let him go free for the sake of his eye. And if he knocks out the tooth of his male or female servant, he shall let him go free for the sake of his tooth.

Again, let it be noted that physical punishment might be the only solution to an unruly, rebellious slave who should have received the death penalty. However, something else of interest emerges from this verse that, rather than expressing the cruelty of Old Testament laws regulating slavery, shows instead God’s care for those enslaved. The text states that the eyes and teeth of slaves should not be knocked out or destroyed. However, the nations around the Israelites did not adhere to any such standards. When the Philistines captured Samson, they “took him and put out

his eyes; and brought him down to Gaza. They bound him with bronze fetters; and he became a grinder in the prison” (Judges 16:21). Also, when the Babylonian soldiers raided Israel, capturing King Zedekiah, “they killed the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, put out the eyes of Zedekiah, bound him with bronze fetters, and took him to Babylon” (2 Kings 25:7). God’s regulations for the treatment of slaves provided the slaves with many more rights than they had in the nations surrounding Israel.

Another of the most startling regulations concerning slavery is found in Leviticus 19:20-22:

And whosoever lieth carnally with a woman, that is a bond maid, betrothed to an husband, and not at all redeemed, nor freedom given her; she shall be scourged; they shall not be put to death, because she was not free. And he shall bring his trespass offering unto the Lord, unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, even a ram for a trespass offering (KJV).

Of course, skeptics have a heyday with this reading from the King James Version, which seems to indicate that if a free man has sexual intercourse with a slave woman who is betrothed, then the slave woman is to be scourged and the man simply supplies a ram as a trespass offering. However, upon further investigation, it can be seen that this passage says something far different. In the first place, the translators of the KJV most likely mistranslated the part of the text “she shall be scourged.” The ASV translators rendered the passage as follows:

And whosoever lieth carnally with a woman that is a bond maid, betrothed to a husband, and not at all redeemed, nor freedom given her; they shall be punished; they shall not be put to death, because she was not free. And he shall bring his trespass -offering unto Jehovah, unto the door of the tent of meeting, even a ram for a trespass-offering.

The NKJV translators offered this reading:

Whoever lies carnally with a woman who is betrothed to a man as a concubine, and who has not at all been redeemed nor given her freedom, for this there shall be scourging; but they shall not be put to death, because she was not free. And he shall bring his trespass offering to the Lord, to the door of the tabernacle of meeting, a ram as a trespass offering.

A brief look at these three translations shows that the recipient(s) of the punishment is not as clearly delineated as the KJV indicates. Keil and Delitzsch, in their commentary on the Pentateuch, noted that the scourging “referred to both parties, as is evident from the expression, ‘they shall not be put to death’” (1981, p. 422). G.J. Wenham has introduced another interesting solution regarding this passage by translating the disputed passage about scourging as “damages

must be paid” (1979, p, 270). Concerning this translation he wrote:

This is the most problematic phrase in this law: literally, “there will be a biqqoret.” The word biqqoret occurs only here in the OT, and its meaning is therefore quite uncertain.... Other renderings of biqqoret have less to commend them. “An inquiry shall be held” (RSV: cf. NEB) is vacuous: every legal dispute would have involved inquiry. “She shall be scourged” (AV) goes back to an old Jewish interpretation, **probably based on the dubious derivation of biqqoret from baqar**, “ox, i.e., an oxhide scourge” (pp, 270-271, emp. added).

Taking these things into account, it appears that the passage does not indicate that the female should be scourged apart from the guilty male. Rather, whatever punishment was inflicted should be applied equally, except for the fact that the guilty male alone shoulders the responsibility of supplying the ram for the trespass offering.

According to God, the Israelites did not have absolute control over their slaves, as is evinced by the instructions in Exodus 21:20, 26-27 and Leviticus 19:20. This idea was a departure from the generally accepted notions of slavery in the Near East during the Israelites’ day. “Any demeaning or oppressive treatment of slaves was condemned as wrong by biblical writers” (Copan, 2001, pp. 173-174). God’s laws in the Old Testament not only regulated slavery (so that those enslaved would be given many rights that they otherwise would not have had), but they also supplied the means whereby fairness could be meted out with regard to criminal activity and debt. Every regulation of slavery in the Old Testament can be shown to be in harmony with the principles of justice and fairness.

## SLAVERY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

As we look into the New Testament, we see a strikingly different picture with regard to the biblical injunctions pertaining to slavery. The New Testament does not contain the specific regulations dealing with slavery that can be found in the Old Testament. In fact, for the most part, the New Testament says very little in its regulation of slavery. And herein lies one of the skeptic’s primary challenges to the New Testament’s stance on slavery. If the New Testament is supposedly a book inspired by an allowing God, why does it remain virtually silent on slavery? Smith and Hoffman, in their attack on the Bible, stated:

Slave-owning was the order of the day and, so far as we are told, Jesus never attacked the practice. He took the state of affairs for granted and shaped his parables accordingly.... If Jesus had denounced slavery, we should almost certainly have heard of his doing so (Smith and Hoffman, 1989, p. 143).

The other challenge to the New Testament’s stance on slavery centers on the passages that teach slaves to be humble and obedient servants to their masters. In Colossians 3:22, Paul commanded:

“Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord” (NRSV). Although several modern translations insert the word “servants” at the first of this verse, “slaves” is probably a better translation of the Greek word *douloi* in this passage (Arndt and Gingrich, 1967, p. 205). Other similar passages include 1 Peter 2:18-20, 1 Corinthians 7:21-24, and Ephesians 6:5-9. Ruth Green, after presenting her case to suggest that the Bible condones slavery, wrote:

Those who deny my contentions about the Bible should turn to the Epistles to see what Paul and Peter have to say about “servants” and masters. Here are only two examples: “Servants, be subject to your masters in all fear” (1 Peter 2:18). “Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters...with fear and trembling” (Ephesians 6:5). There are many more instructions about slavery in the Christian Holy Book (1979, p. 352).

Does the New Testament remain silent in its condemnation of all slavery? And why does it specifically instruct slaves to be obedient to their masters?

First, it must be acknowledged that many of the types of servanthood or slavery in the New Testament are identical to the morally permissible types discussed earlier in this article. For instance, much first-century slavery discussed in the Bible centered on the fact that a person had accrued massive debt, and thus had become a slave or servant due to this debt. As an example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: “Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny” (Matthew 5:25- 26). From Christ’s comments, it can be ascertained that the person in this text who does not make the effort to agree with his adversary could risk being thrown into prison until that person “paid the last penny.” This situation involved a revoking of individual freedoms due to the fact that the individual owed an unpaid debt—a debt that originally was owed to the adversary, or one that resulted from a fine imposed by a judge.

In Matthew 18:21-35, Jesus told a story about a servant who owed his master ten thousand talents. A talent was a huge sum of money that would be the modern equivalent of many thousands of dollars. It could easily have been the case that this servant had become a servant due to this enormous debt, or was being kept a servant because of the debt. Debt slavery was still a very real form of restitution in New Testament times. Such a condition absolutely cannot be used to argue that God is an unjust God for letting such take place.

Furthermore, it is a false notion that God condones something just because He mentions it without an immediate condemnation of it in the surrounding verses. Skeptics point to verses like 1 Peter 2:8 and Ephesians 6:5, and then insist that God condones abusive slavery because He instructs servants to be obedient to their masters. But, let us analyze that line of thinking. In Matthew 5:39, Christ instructed His listeners: “Do not resist an evil person. But whoever slaps

you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.” Because Jesus told His listeners to be kind and turn the other cheek, does that mean that He condones the actions of the one who did the slapping? Absolutely not! Or what about the fact that Paul, through divine inspiration, instructed his readers to be subject to civil governments and to pay taxes to those governments. Was Paul condoning all practices of all governments to whom his readers would be subject and pay taxes? Certainly not. God never has condoned such unjustified behavior on the part of any individual or group.

### **Biblical Principles and Abolition**

As a concluding argument, let it be clearly stated that the principles set forth by Jesus and His apostles, if followed, would result in the abolition of all types of abusive relationships. Slavery would have been nonexistent if everyone from the first century forward had adhered to Jesus’ admonition in Matthew 7:12: “Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them.” Any discussion of slavery would be moot if the world had heeded the words of Peter: “Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another, love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous” (1 Peter 3:8). Truly, the teachings of the Lord and the apostles would have abolished slavery like no other social reform system ever known. As Herb Vander Lugt accurately observed:

Jesus and the apostles didn't go on an anti-slavery crusade, because doing so would have been futile and a hindrance to their primary mission. The priority of Jesus was the provision of salvation. For the apostles it was the proclamation of the gospel. But both Jesus and the apostles undermined the basis for slavery by making it clear that God equally loves rich and poor, free and slave, male and female. The apostles also welcomed into the church and gave equal status to all who believed, regardless of race, gender, nationality, or social position (1999, p. 26).

Furthermore, an outright condemnation of kidnapping, or slave trading, is found in the New Testament. In 1 Timothy 1:9-10, Paul wrote:

We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for **slave traders** and liars and perjurers-and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine... (NIV, emp. added).

Other versions render the Greek word *andrapodistais* as “kidnappers,” or “menstealers,” but it also is translated slave dealers or slave traders (Arndt and Gingrich, 1967, p. 63). Therefore, in keeping with the Old Testament injunction that anyone kidnapping and selling a person involves himself in immoral conduct, Paul certainly distinguished between certain types of slavery practices that were inherently wrong, and others that were not intrinsically sinful.



## CONCLUSION

The fact is, certain types of “slavery” not only are permissible, but sometimes necessary to the well-being of a society at large. For the biblical stance on slavery to be condemned as unjust, it must be established that the specific regulations of slavery described in the text are immoral and unfair. However, when closely scrutinized, the biblical stance on slavery aligns itself with true justice. All regulations found therein were established for the just treatment of all parties involved. Many times, slavery as regulated in the Old Testament was a mutually beneficial relationship between servant and master, similar to an employee/employer relationship. Furthermore, slavery often was a substitute for the death penalty-which certain nations deserved. Debt accumulation caused many free persons to sell their labor and become slaves. The skeptic’s criticism that the New Testament does not speak against the abolition of slavery is misguided for any number of reasons. First, an attempt to generalize and condemn all types of slavery fails to take into account prison, personal debt, indentured servanthood, and a host of other morally permissible situations. Bankruptcy laws, prison terms, community service hours, and garnished wages are morally acceptable modern equivalents to certain types of slavery that were prevalent during the time of the biblical writers. Second, Jesus and the New Testament writers always condemned the mistreatment of any human being, instructing their followers to be kind, loving, and compassionate, whether they were slaves or masters of slaves.

In *The Social Record of Christianity*, atheist Joseph McCabe wrote: “Slavery is the last word that any Christian apologist ought to mention” (1935, p. 27). But he missed one of the main points in the Bible-that point being that everyone is a slave to something. As the apostle Paul wrote through inspiration:

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? 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. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness (Romans 6: 16-18).

Some people are slaves to drug addiction, sexual promiscuity, attitudes of pessimism and complaint, or any number of other vices. Others, however, are slaves to righteousness, teaching the Gospel, helping the sick, and taking care of the poor. We each must decide which master we will allow to control our lives. As the psalmist so beautifully stated it many years ago, “I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness” (Psalm 84:10).

God’s injunctions and instructions pertaining to slavery have a clear ring of justice, compassion, mercy, and kindness to them. When analyzed fairly and fully, the idea of slavery gives the honest person one more piece of evidence that points to the perfection of the God of the Bible.

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