
THE METAPHORS OF PAUL'S WRITINGS

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DAY 2: SLAVERY, FREEDOM, AND THE LAW

INTRODUCTION

In Roman thinking, there were basically two kinds of people in the world—slaves and freemen. Both were governed by law but with different levels of rights and support.

Today we don't encounter slavery very often but in the ancient world it was a fact of daily life. Scholars estimate that there were 2-3 million slaves in Italy alone and that the majority of the population in Rome was freed slaves (Romans typically freed their slaves at 30). The Old Testament accepts slavery as a fact of life, giving rules of kindness and tolerance to Jewish masters. Paul used this common institution to teach some of his most important doctrines. Slaves could earn money and have jobs, and some slaves became quite wealthy in their own right, even sometimes able to buy their own freedom. But many had hard, pitiful lives and earned just enough to keep themselves fed and clothed.

Note: The word 'slave' only occurs twice in the KJV Bible, Jeremiah 2:14 and Revelation 18:13. But the Hebrew and Greek words (*ʿeBeD* and *doulos*, respectively) for slave are found hundreds of times, translated as "servant."

SLAVERY AND FREEDOM

CHOOSE YOUR MASTER

Paul taught that without Christ we are slaves to sin and to the devil in **Romans 6:16-23**. He likened sin to slavery but said we can also choose to be slaves to God: "his servants [slaves] ye are to whom ye obey" (6:16). The Romans were slaves to sin previously but because they "obeyed from the heart" (6:17), they had become "free from sin" (6:18) and "the servants [slaves] of righteousness" (6:18). Paul assured his listeners that he was speaking metaphorically—"I speak after the manner of men" (6:19); they were not truly slaves but the image was appropriate. The difference is in the reward—being a slave to sin brings death, but being a slave to God brings eternal life.

BRANDING

Sometimes slaves were branded on their foreheads as a mark of ownership or perhaps as a punishment. In Greek, these **marks** were called *stigma* (singular) or *stigmata* (plural). Slaves weren't the only ones to get them; some soldiers would brand or tattoo the name of the commanding officer on their forehead to show their loyalty. Religious devotees might also brand the name or sign of their god in their foreheads, showing that they were 'holy slaves' to that god.

Paul represented himself as carrying the *stigmata* of Jesus (**Galatians 6:17**). This does not mean he branded Jesus' name in his forehead but used it as a metaphor to represent his commitment to Christ. It could also have reference to wounds and scars received as a result of his ministry and travels, saying in effect, 'My body proclaims my allegiance.'

Today the word 'stigmata' has come to mean have wounds or marks that mimic the wounds Jesus suffered in his crucifixion, but that is not the meaning in Paul's day. (The term is also the origin of the word "astigmatism," which means 'without a mark'.)

The concept is found elsewhere in the New Testament—notably in Revelation where people receive "the mark, or the name of the beast" (Revelation 13:16-17) in their hands and foreheads. The word there is *charagma*, which is similar to stigma in that it represents a stamp or imprinted mark such as would be received by an animal or slave.

BECOMING A SLAVE

A common way of acquiring slaves was through war. The conquered nation had to surrender and often faced deportation and enslavement of its citizens. Most of the slaves in the early days of the empire were gained in this way. This was the situation Paul referred to in **Romans 7:23-25**, likening sin to the attacking army making war on him (his "members," 7:23) and battling Christ's law which is firmly planted in his thinking and emotions ("mind," 7:23). Any victory by sin brings with it "captivity," slavery to the attacking sin, causing Paul to exclaim, "O wretched man that I am!" (7:24). He thanked God that it was his desire to live "the law of God" (7:25) but still recognized that the war continued and he sinned according to the flesh.

Recognizing this propensity to sin, Paul explained to the Corinthians (**1 Corinthians 7:27**) that he beat his body ("keep under") and brought it into slavery ("subjection"). Paul did not literally beat himself black and blue but was again speaking of the victor leading the conquered from battle into slavery; Paul does not want to be a slave to sin, so he takes his own body into slavery, fighting back against the control that Satan attempts to have on him.

PURCHASING SLAVES

Slaves were bought and sold and otherwise treated as property. Corinth in Greece was a well-known center for slave purchasing. So Paul referenced the practice twice in his letter to them (**1 Corinthians 6:19-20; 7:22-23**), telling them they were "**bought with a price.**" Some have seen in this a reference to the Hebrew concept of a redeemer (which will be discussed shortly) but the context shows that in both cases he was speaking of the buying of slaves.

FREEMEN

1 Corinthians 7:22 also illustrates another aspect of slavery—being freed. Unlike slavery in the pre-Civil War United States, slavery in the Roman Empire generally ended in freedom, typically at age 30. Slaves could also purchase their own freedom as they earned money from a trade or craft. A freed slave was called a *libertus* in Latin or a *apeleutheros* in Greek (the word Paul used)—translated "freeman" in this verse. A freeman became a Roman citizen if his master was one, so for many slavery was a way to elevate themselves beyond that they could otherwise enjoy. As a result, the freeman owed allegiance to his former master who now became his patron. In many cases, the former slave remained in the employ of his patron, even living in his house rather than face the world alone. This is the circumstance of Paul's comments in this verse—the former slave to sin is

now a freeman in the Lord, owing his respect, loyalty, and service. And in a gospel paradox, those who were not slaves to sin before their conversion are now slaves to Christ, willing and able to serve him with their whole being. Either way, the Christian is fully committed to Christ and his kingdom. Paul made a similar statement in **Romans 6:22**, noting that freed from sin, they were now slaves to God.

SLAVE WAGES

Staying with Romans 6 for a moment, it was mentioned that slaves could sometimes earn money to keep for themselves. Faithful slaves might even be set up in a business venture by their master, paying him back through the gains of the business. The slave could be given assets to manage—animals, land, or a business of some kind—and allowed to keep some of the profits for himself. Some masters even paid their slaves a wage. So Paul declares that sin pays **wages** to its slaves—**death (Romans 6:23)**. But when you are God's slave, his wage of "eternal life" is infinitely more generous, so much that it is "the gift of God...through Jesus Christ our Lord."

REDEMPTION

As a Jew, Paul would have understood two concepts of redemption. First, from the Old Testament was the idea of a *ga'al*, someone who paid a ransom or other price to free another from prison, slavery, or debt. Land was also redeemed (if someone in the family sold it to an outsider out of financial distress) as were widows (such as Boaz 'redeeming' Ruth). This is why the oldest son got a double portion of the inheritance—to have funds to redeem other family members, if needed.

But Roman thinking about a redeemer was only someone was paid a ransom to bring another out of slavery—the other situations were never considered as part of redeeming. Paul's use of the metaphor is nearly always in the Roman sense and rarely the Jewish.

Consider **Ephesians 1:7**, where he says that in Christ "we have redemption." In other words, Jesus paid the ransom for us so buy our freedom as slaves to sin and Satan. But the ransom was not gold or silver but "his blood." We receive "the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace."

In **1 Timothy 2:6**, Paul says that Jesus paid the ransom for us. The Greek word used for "ransom" is *antilutron*, appears to be created by Paul to convey the full sense of a ransom (*lutron*) paid by substitution (*anti*, meaning 'instead of' or 'in behalf of'). In other words, the ransom is not just a payment but one person substituting himself for another. Jesus was able to be this substitute-ransom because he was without sin and thus an appropriate exchange for all of us who are enslaved by sin (compare Matthew 20:28, "...to give his life as a ransom for many").

THE LAW

THE WILL

Similar to our law today, a person recorded a last will and testament, determining the disposition of their assets, etc. A will, once executed, cannot be changed in any way; it is binding on all parties. Paul compares God's promise of salvation to such a will in **Galatians 3:15-18**.

The word he uses, *diathēkē*, is translated "covenant" but strictly speaking that is a *sunthēkē*, an agreement between two equal parties. A *diathēkē* is the will, a one-way agreement that is binding

and cannot be changed. Paul uses the great example of a *diathēkē* of God to Abraham from Genesis 12:3-7 (and others) where nothing is recorded that would cause of to think that Abraham merited these great promises in any way, nor did God demand anything of Abraham in exchange—it was simply God’s grace that offered him magnificent unilateral promises of blessings, land, and posterity. Paul points out that this promise—God’s ‘will’ to Abraham—predates the Law of Moses, and thus the Law can have no effect on the promise (“cannot disannul” or “make the promise of none effect”). His point of this whole chapter is captured in verse 13 and ties back to the last section: “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us” (**Galatians 3:13**). Thus the promise (‘will’) of salvation through God is unalterable and eternal.

CITIZENS AND ALIENS

In the Roman Empire, someone with Roman citizenship had special privileges. Their marriages were recognized by Roman law, which ensured the rights of inheritance. They could conduct business under the protection of that same law, and they had access to the Roman court system (discussed next). They were less likely to suffer poor treatment when arrested, something Paul invoked more than once. Citizenship was something that only a minority of the population experienced.

Noncitizens were *peregrini*, or aliens, either from conquered or allied territories; anyone else was technically considered an enemy and would probably be made slaves if captured. Aliens had some legal rights, too. Some groups could self-govern, as Rome generally allowed the Jews to do (thus the Sanhedrin in Jesus’ day could function relatively independent of Rome). Likewise, Roman citizens living outside of Italy could form self-governing colonies which, in essence, extended Roman law to their location, letting them be governed as if they were on Italian soil. This was called a *politeuma*. Philippi was such a colony (Acts 16:12), and Paul’s letter to them thus highlights those two situations—citizens and aliens living together.

Appealing to their Roman colony status, he said, “Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ” (**Philippians 1:27**). “Conversation” refers not to talking but to action, and the verb translated “becometh” is *politeuma*, making a better rendition, ‘Live as a citizen [in a colony], worthy of the gospel of Christ.’ In other words, you may be living far away from God physically, but you are still part of his kingdom and should live accordingly.

Likewise to the Ephesians, Paul evoked the same metaphor when he said that the Gentile converts were “without Christ [before their conversion], being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope” (**Ephesians 2:12**). The atonement of Christ took them who were “far off” and made them “nigh by the blood of Christ” (2:13). Jesus “hath broken down the middle wall of partition” (2:14), referring to the marked wall in the courtyard of the temple in Jerusalem said, ‘No Gentiles past this point.’ The Savior tore it down and opened the worship of God to all, so that they were “no more strangers [aliens] and foreigners [living outside the borders], but fellowcitizens [*sumpolitēs*] with the saints, and of the household of God” (Ephesian 2:19).

ADVOCATE

Roman law was a great achievement in Paul’s day. The peace generally enjoyed in the Mediterranean world at that time was in large part due to the codified laws of the Empire. Roman citizens were the only ones that access to the full law, but others were impacted by it in large and small ways. Based on former religious practices, legal proceedings followed precise formulae—not

adhering to the rules would cause you to lose more quickly than having a poor case. Thus you needed someone with you who 'knew the system' in order to have any hope of victory.

Two roles were common in Paul's day. The *advocatus* was a legal advisor, much like an attorney today. Once in the court, the *patronus* spoke on your behalf, an orator who knew how to present the case and argue for his client. Paul needed both of these people when he was arrested the second time in Rome but instead, stood alone: "At my first answer [*primo actio* or first hearing] no man stood with me, but all men forsook me" (2 Timothy 4:16). Paul was writing to Timothy between this first hearing and his formal trial, saying that no *advocatus* or *patronus* had stood with him, so he spoke for himself. But Paul was not really alone: "Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; ...and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion" (2 Timothy 4:17). Paul had a divine *advocatus*. He trusted that God would deliver him "from every evil work" and preserve him—not for something else in this life but "unto his heavenly kingdom" (2 Timothy 4:18).

Earlier in his life, he used this image of the dramatic courtroom scene in his letter to Rome. He speaks of prayer, exclaiming that when we approach the judgment bar of God, we don't even know the words we are supposed to use in prayer—a clear reference to the complexities of the Roman judgment system. But we don't need to worry because the Holy Spirit will be our *patronus* and speak words in our behalf that are so powerful that they cannot even be repeated. In addition, we have a second *patronus* and *advocatus* who stands in the privileged position on the right hand of the judge. He also intercedes on our behalf and directs us in our own defense. With an advocate who gave everything for us and already paid the price for our crimes, how can the judge not hear him? How can the charges not be dismissed?

CALLED

Staying with Romans 8, we see another reference to a legal activity: "Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also **called**: and whom he **called**, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified" (Romans 8:30). To be "called" in this example is to be summoned to court or to the judgment bar of the Lord (the *bēma* or platform where the judges sit and hear the cases; see Romans 14:10 and 2 Corinthians 5:10; note that *kaleō* also means to call out and get attention [related to this] and to call someone/something by name or even give them a name, as in 'called his name Jesus'). Once at the bar, the cry goes out: "Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect?" (8:33), or, 'Who will bring charges against God's elect?' Where is the prosecuting attorney?, they ask. We are ready to try the case, with the accused called and in the court.

JUSTIFICATION

That leads to the next legal term, one which we hear often in an LDS context—justification. Each day in Roman courts, plaintiffs were called and heard, sometimes condemned, sometimes acquitted. When they were acquitted, they were declared *dikaioō*—justified, acquitted of any crime. To be justified did not mean the person was any different, just that they were absolved of the crimes of which they were accused. In other words, justification changed to status of the person from suspected of wrong-doing to free to return to their life but did not change the person himself or herself.

But what causes the Lord to declare us justified when we clearly don't deserve it? **Romans 3** explained this conundrum: "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10). Paul offered example of many sins that would alienate us from the Lord in the next verses (11-18). He stated that under the Law of Moses, "no flesh shall be justified," for the Law is so complex that to

understand it just bring “the knowledge of sin” but no relief from its demands (3:20), “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (3:23). But God still justifies—forgives and acquits his people—“freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (3:24). Christ can redeem and justify us because “God hath set [him] forth to be a propitiation [a sacrifice of reconciliation] through faith in his blood” (3:25). And because God declared him “just” [upright and righteous], he became “the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus” (3:26).

When are we acquitted/justified? When we are baptized; when we worthily take the sacrament; when the Spirit speaks forgiveness to our souls. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” (8:35). Christ, our *advocatus* and *patronus*, will allow nothing “to separate us from the love of God” (8:39).