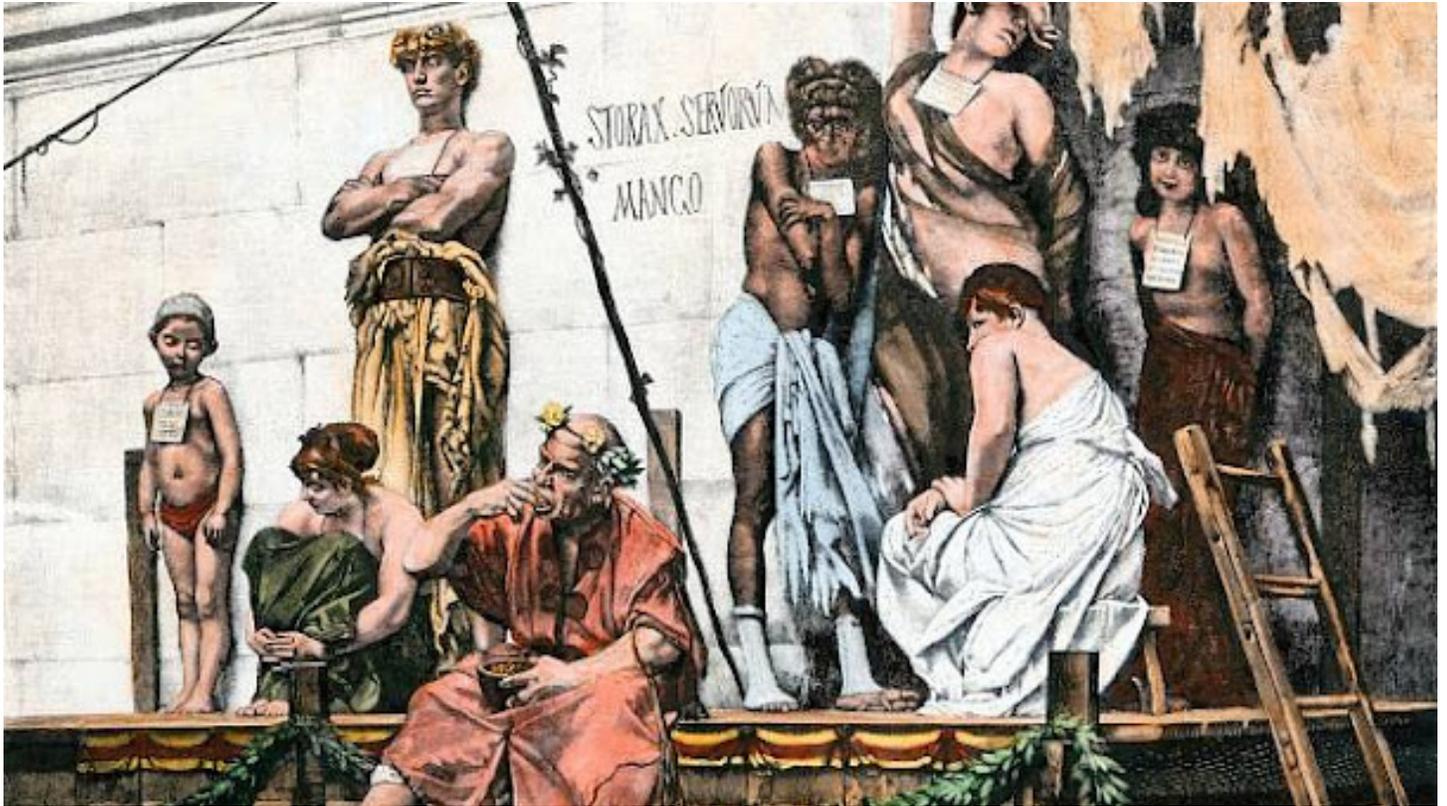


## Roman Slavery



For our modern ears, it may not seem natural for advice to be shared about Masters and Slaves after all the discussion on family matters (Ephesians 6:1ff).

However, nearly every household was affected (or even dominated) by master/slave relationships.

It has been estimated that there were some 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire, and that as many as one third of the populations of large cities such as Rome, Corinth, and Ephesus were slaves.

Some in the Ephesian church were masters, as was Philemon in the Colossian church. Many in the church were either slaves or ex-slaves (called “freedmen”). And some were slaveless citizens who, because of their lack of servants, were often poor. So virtually everyone in the Ephesian church had an interest in the God’s wisdom for masters and slaves.

In order to understand what the directions meant then, so we can apply them helpfully to today’s relationships, we need to know what slavery was like in New Testament times.

This will involve exploring some common misconceptions. The greatest of these is that the average slave was subject to extreme exploitation. This simply was not so!

Before Christianity, slaves were considered a kind of “living tool” – a “possession with a soul” and “not a legal person” before reforms were instituted.

It is true, too, that some slaves had suffered terribly at the hands of their owners, such as the slave of Augustus who was crucified because he killed a pet quail. It is also a fact that there had been major slave rebellions, such as that led by Spartacus, but those were pre-Christian (between the years 140–70 B.C.).

The fact is, by the time of the Christian era and the writing of Ephesians, sweeping changes had been introduced which radically improved the treatment of slaves.

Slaves under Roman law in the first century could generally count on eventually being set free.

50 percent of slaves were freed before the age of thirty.

A slave could own property — including other slaves! — and completely controlled his own property, so that he could invest and save to purchase his own freedom.

We also must understand that being a slave did not indicate one's social class. Slaves regularly were given the social status of their owners.

Regarding outward appearance, it was usually impossible to distinguish a slave from free persons. A slave could be a custodian, a salesman, or a CEO.

Some people sold themselves into slavery in order to become a Roman citizen. Roman slavery in the first century was far more humane and civilized than the American/African slavery practiced in this country much later. This is a sobering and humbling fact!

I have attempted to clarify the status of first-century slaves for two reasons.

First, to answer those who criticize Christianity because the New Testament nowhere directly attacks or condemns slavery.

The reasons it did not do so are:

- 1) because of the positive reforms then in effect in regard to Roman slavery;
- 2) because the institution of slavery was not generally considered evil by slaves or masters;
- 3) because to attack slavery would have wrongly labeled Christianity as economically destabilizing (the immediate demise of slavery would have reduced both slaves and masters to poverty); and
- 4) because the radical brotherhood and equality explicit in the gospel would bring the death of slavery (cf. Philemon 16, Galatians 3:28, and the entire Book of Ephesians).

The other reason we have dispelled some of the false conceptions about first-century slavery is to help us understand that there are parallels between the relationships of first-century slaves and masters and between modern employees and employers. God's wisdom to the Ephesian church is directly applicable to today's bosses and workers (Ephesians 6:5-9).

## Slavery in Colonial North America and the United States

August 20, 1619, is the approximate start of slavery in the British North American colonies. “Twenty and odd Africans were sold by a Dutch ship in the Jamestown colony.” About four percent of the total slave trade went to the British North American colonies. Half of the slaves were men, less than twenty-five percent were children.

Throughout the 17th century, European settlers in North America turned to enslaved Africans as a cheaper, more plentiful labor source than indentured servants, who were mostly poor Europeans. Though it is impossible to give accurate figures, some historians have estimated that 6 to 7 million enslaved people were imported to the New World during the 18th century alone, depriving the African continent of some of its healthiest and ablest men and women.

After the American Revolution, many colonists—particularly in the North, where slavery was relatively unimportant to the agricultural economy—began to link the oppression of enslaved Africans to their own oppression by the British, and to call for slavery’s abolition.

There were no anti-slavery societies, newspapers, or magazines before the American Revolution.

Quakers originated the anti-slavery movement in the North American colonies.

Rodger Williams and Chief Justice Samuel Sewall, who wrote *The Selling of Joseph* (1700), were the first colonists to oppose slavery.

Slavery itself was never widespread in the North, though many of the region’s businessmen grew rich on the slave trade and investments in southern plantations. Between 1774 and 1804, most of the northern states abolished slavery or started the process to abolish slavery, but the institution of slavery remained vital to the South.

Enslaved people in the antebellum South constituted about one-third of the southern population. Most lived on large plantations or small farms; many masters owned fewer than 50 enslaved people.

Landowners sought to make their enslaved completely dependent on them through a system of restrictive codes. They were usually prohibited from learning to read and write, and their behavior and movement were restricted.

Many masters raped enslaved women, and rewarded obedient behavior with favors, while rebellious enslaved people were brutally punished. A strict hierarchy among the enslaved (from privileged house workers and skilled artisans down to lowly field hands) helped keep them divided and less likely to organize against their masters.

Though the U.S. Congress outlawed the African slave trade in 1808, the domestic trade flourished, and the enslaved population in the United States nearly tripled over the next 50 years. By 1860 it had reached nearly 4 million, with more than half living in the cotton-producing states of the South. After the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, the production of cotton became much more profitable.

There were sixty-five recorded North American slave revolts. The three best known were led by Gabriel Prosser (1800), Nat Turner (1831) and Denmark Vesey (1822).

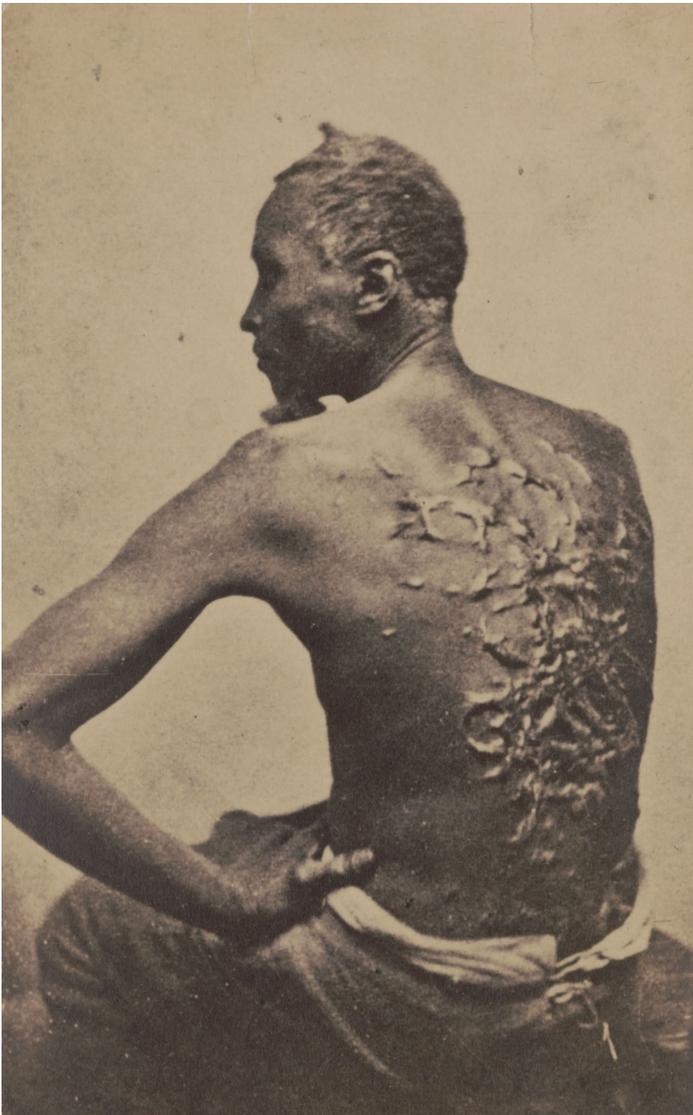
The revolt that most terrified enslavers was that led by Nat Turner in Southampton County, Virginia, in August 1831. Turner’s group, which eventually numbered around 75 Black men, murdered some 55 white people in

two days before armed resistance from local white people and the arrival of state militia forces overwhelmed them.

Supporters of slavery pointed to Turner's rebellion as evidence that Black people were inherently inferior barbarians requiring an institution such as slavery to discipline them, and fears of similar insurrections led many southern states to further strengthen their slave codes in order to limit the education, movement and assembly of enslaved people.

From the 1830s to the 1860s, the movement to abolish slavery in America gained strength, led by free Black people such as Frederick Douglass and white supporters such as William Lloyd Garrison, founder of the radical newspaper *The Liberator*, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, who published the bestselling antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

While many abolitionists based their activism on the belief that slaveholding was a sin, others were more inclined to the non-religious "free-labor" argument, which held that slaveholding was regressive, inefficient and made little economic sense.



*An escaped enslaved man named Peter showing his scarred back at a medical examination in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1863. The man in the photo became known as "Whipped Peter."*