

## *Slavery in the Roman World*

The institution of slavery was deeply ingrained in Roman society. Roman conquests often led to the enslavement of resident populations, and slave hunters captured victims in provinces not yet overtaken by Rome (cf. 1 Tim. 1:10; Rev. 18:13). Individuals could be sentenced to slavery as punishment for various offenses, and entire families were sold into slavery when someone defaulted on a debt. Since children born to slaves were automatically slaves themselves, the passage of generations guaranteed growth of a large slave population. By the time of Paul, between one-fourth and one-third of all people in the empire were slaves.

The life and condition of slaves seems to have varied enormously. Social decorum encouraged humane treatment, and the extreme abuse or killing of slaves was prohibited by law. Still, the welfare of slaves generally depended on the disposition of their masters. In some cases—notably, for slaves who worked in mines or rowed the oars of galley ships—the conditions of life were appalling. In other instances, however, slaves were given an education and provided with a lifestyle that they probably would not have been able to attain on their own. Indeed, many persons willingly sold themselves into slavery in exchange for being taught a trade or obtaining employment that would improve their lot in life.

Slavery was not always permanent. In some cases, slaves were paid a wage and allowed to purchase their freedom after a period of time; in other cases, slaves were automatically freed when they reached the age of thirty. Nevertheless, slaves had few legal rights. They could be beaten at the discretion of their master, they could not legally marry, and any children they produced were the property of their master (cf. Matt. 18:25, 34; 24:48–51; 25:30). They had virtually no autonomy—no ability to make decisions regarding their own lives or destinies—and in a world that valued honor above all else, they occupied the bottom tier of the social pyramid. A slave was a person with no honor—a person who literally lived in disgrace.