

SESSION THREE

THE POWERS OF DARKNESS

Paul walked into Philippi in 50 AD, proclaiming the good news that Jesus, God's Messiah, the Savior of the world had come and opened the doors of the kingdom of heaven to everyone who believed in him. Many believed and submitted to God's reign in their lives. Living in Philippi as citizens of heaven, they became a faithful, vibrant community that extended God's kingdom one person, one household at a time.

However, another kingdom already existed in Philippi. The city was a Roman colony, literally an extension of the kingdom of Imperial Rome. It too proclaimed a gospel: the official good news that Caesar, *divi filius* (the son of god), the savior of the world, was lord of all. Although Paul never attacked or criticized Caesar's gospel, his proclamation of the gospel of God's kingdom raised serious questions about the validity of Caesar's kingdom.

Like Jesus before him, Paul understood that he was involved in a great clash of kingdoms. Paul understood that the enemy of God's kingdom was not any person who tried to silence him or any nation that opposed him. The enemy was not the corrupt Jewish leadership or the Roman authorities. The real enemy was far greater than Rome could ever be: it was Satan, the Evil One, who from the beginning of God's story rose up against the Almighty.

Ejected from heaven, Satan is the source of evil behind all human wickedness and injustice. He captures the minds and hearts of people and uses them to further his kingdom, the kingdom of this world, which thrives on the chaos that results from defying

God. He does not easily surrender the territory he has captured. So it should not surprise us that a fierce struggle broke out when Paul began proclaiming in Philippi that the kingdom of God had come.

The first sign of that struggle came from an unlikely source. A young girl, a slave to the power of the Evil One and her owners, began a protest that threatened to interrupt Paul's proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Although the power of evil is very great, the kingdom of God is greater—and it prevails. So in the name of Jesus, the King of kings, Paul confronted "the powers of this dark world" (Ephesians 6:12) and set the young girl free.

Though the story of this unnamed girl takes up only three verses in the Bible, it is a powerful plea for each person who has been restored to God's family and is called to represent his kingdom on earth to reach out and offer hope and help to those who live in chaos. Her gripping story reminds us that the grasp of the Evil One is powerless when confronted by the power of the Lord Jesus. It helps us to recognize that the enemy of God's kingdom is not those who disagree with us, those who believe differently than we do, or those who oppose us. The enemy is the very one Jesus and Paul overcame, and by the name of Jesus we have the power to overcome him as well.

Opening Thoughts (3 minutes)

The Very Words of God

Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves.

1 Peter 2:16

Think About It

Throughout history people have valued their freedom—their ability to live life as they desire, to raise their families, to engage in productive and profitable work, and to participate in mutually beneficial community relationships. When one person, group, or nation exerts power over another, it results in a loss of freedom—perhaps a limitation as to where one may live, how one may earn a living, or who one may associate with. Of course, the total loss of freedom, slavery, may lead to great personal suffering, physical harm, or even death.

How often do we give thoughtful consideration to the freedom we have in Christ?

How highly do we value, respect, use, and guard that freedom?

What is at risk if we use our freedom carelessly or are unaware of the ways by which we become enslaved to the kingdom of this world?

Video Notes (30 minutes)

The kingdom of God confronts the powers of darkness

A young slave girl

Slavery in the Roman Empire

A python spirit

The Oracle at Delphi

Hungry for a word from the gods

Rock of Gaia and the Pythia

Receiving an oracle from Apollo

The last oracle

Set free . . .

From bondage at the temple of Apollo

By the power of Jesus' name

Bought with a price to serve Jesus

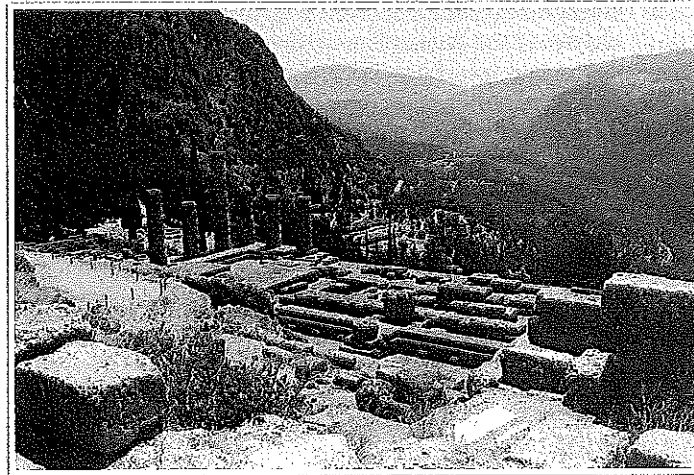
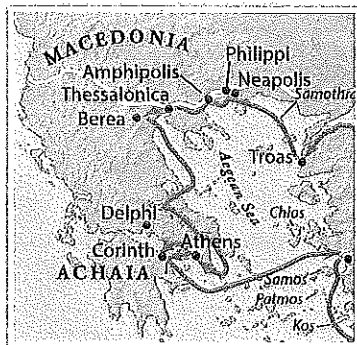
Video Discussion (6 minutes)

1. What new insights into everyday life in the Roman Empire did you gain by learning more about the practice of slavery during the time of Jesus and the apostles?

How does that knowledge help you to understand why the gospel message was often viewed as “radical” or “dangerous” and caused such concern for those in power?

2. It is obvious from what remains of the structures at Delphi that the oracle and temple of Apollo were extremely important to people. Locate Delphi on the map and consider the effort people expended to get there. Even today access roads through this mountainous region are winding, steep, and narrow.

What do the size and remote location of Delphi say to you about the hunger of ancient people to receive divine counsel from their gods?



THE APOLLO TEMPLE AT DELPHI HIGH ON THE SLOPE OF MOUNT PARNASSUS

In what ways do you think people today seek to satisfy their yearning for supernatural counsel and power, and how much effort do they put into that pursuit?

3. What new understanding did you gain about the power of the kingdom of this world to hold people in bondage and to oppose the gospel message and the advancement of the kingdom of heaven?

4. Imagine yourself as a person who lived in the “slave society” of the Roman Empire during the first century. How might your knowledge of slavery and the process of manumission (or other means by which a slave could be freed by his or her owner) impact your understanding of the gospel message and your response to it?

Small Group Bible Discovery and Discussion (15 minutes)

Free, Yet a Slave of God

Slavery was a significant part of life in the Roman Empire during New Testament times.¹ The empire had become a “slave society” built and maintained by hundreds of thousands of slaves. There were no trades or social structures that were not dependent on slave labor. Even most gladiators were slaves. Some estimates indicate that one in four or as many as one in three of the Roman Empire’s 70 million people were slaves!² In the larger cities such as Rome or Ephesus and in Roman colonies such as Philippi, slaves would have accounted for an even higher portion of the population.

The gulf between slave and free was enormous. Socially, slaves were considered part of the owner’s household or family. But by law, slaves were property—just above livestock. When a person became a slave, all status, security, and stability vanished. Contracts the person may have had or debts owed to the person were no longer valid. Political positions were voided. Marriages were terminated. If a slave gave testimony in court, torture was used to prove that the slave was telling the truth.

Any free citizen could own a slave, so most Romans owned one or more, and the very wealthy may have owned hundreds. Typically, a person who had been sold and became a slave remained a slave for life. There were few ways out of that bondage. Some slaves obtained freedom from their owners as the reward for their faithful service; some were released so that they might marry their owners; and some were manumitted. In other cases, a family might remain enslaved for generations.

Although readers of the New Testament today may not readily understand the images and metaphors of slavery that Paul and other writers used to communicate the gospel message, these images communicated vividly to people who lived during the first century. Let’s consider how Paul used the process of sacred manumission as a metaphor for what Jesus did to set the human race free from bondage to sin, and why those who follow him are both “free” and “slaves.”

1. What essential truth did Paul communicate in the following passages that would have shocked his listeners, especially those who were Roman citizens, not slaves? (See Romans 6:16–21; 7:21–24; 8:1–2; Galatians 4:8; Titus 3:3.)

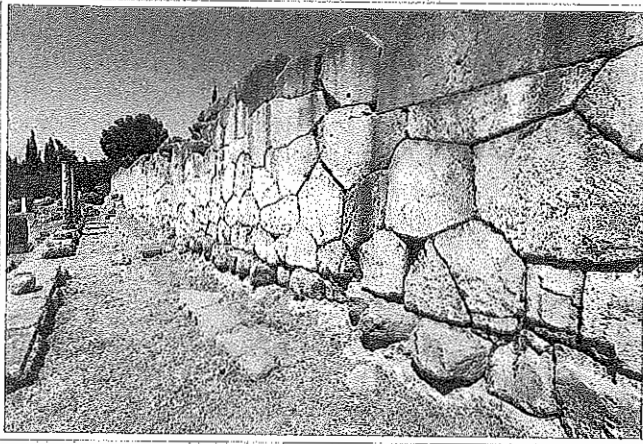
What impact do you think this message may have had on Paul’s hearers?

What hope do people have for escaping this condition on their own?

DATA FILE

The Practice of Sacred Manumission

Many worship cults in the ancient world offered sacred manumission as a way for slaves to be set free from their owners. The process followed a generally accepted pattern³ that required the slave to save a sum of money equal to his or her worth. Although few slaves could accumulate enough money to pay their own ransom, those who did would entrust the money to the temple priests (or priestesses) for safekeeping. Next, the slave would have to persuade the owner to sell the slave to the temple. If the owner was agreeable, the owner and slave would go to the temple where, before witnesses, the owner sold the slave to the god for the amount entrusted to



POLYGONAL MASONRY WALL AT THE APOLLO TEMPLE IN DELPHI

the temple priests. The owner went away with the money, and the slave was then considered redeemed—a free person.

Even then, the person wasn't entirely free. He or she now belonged to the god. Out of gratitude, manumitted slaves were often devoted to the service, worship, and praise of the god who had set them free.

Much of our knowledge about sacred manumission comes from the Apollo temple at Delphi, including the polygonal masonry wall that serves as a retaining wall for the temple platform. This unusual structure is enormous—nearly 12 feet tall and 100 yards long—and can't be avoided as a person approaches the Apollo temple. An example of highly skilled masonry work, the wall is made of randomly shaped polygonal stone blocks—some as large as six feet across—that fit together perfectly without mortar. The exposed faces of the stones are finished smooth to allow for carved inscriptions.

Each inscription—and there are more than 1,200 of them—records the manumission of a slave by the god Apollo at his temple in Delphi. Stone after stone expresses gratitude and admiration for the god who set slaves free. It is deeply moving to stand in front of the wall and imagine the suffering of the slaves who went there to find freedom, and the exhilaration they experienced when they were set free.

2. Paul's explanation of how deliverance from slavery to sin occurs in God's kingdom sounds similar to the practice of manumission. But there is a key difference. Slaves in the Roman Empire had to raise their own purchase price. Who pays the price of redemption from slavery to sin in the kingdom of heaven? (See Romans 3:23–24; 8:3; 1 Corinthians 6:19–20; Ephesians 1:3, 7–8; 1 Timothy 2:3–6.)

“Bought with a price” is the very phrase used to describe a slave who was manumitted by a temple. What might people have thought and how might they have responded when they learned that God himself paid the price to set people free from slavery to sin?

3. A slave freed by sacred manumission was no longer bound to whatever had made him or her a slave, but instead became a slave to the god who arranged the redemption. The manumitted slave was committed to a new purpose in life: to serve the god by honoring, worshipping, and proclaiming the god's greatness in everything he or she did. Let's consider the freedom that the blood of Jesus has bought for those who accept God's gift of redemption from slavery to sin.
 - a. A manumitted slave was said to be “redeemed,” and Paul occasionally used the same term to describe God's gift of grace through Jesus that sets those who believe free from bondage to sin. But for those who were familiar with the Hebrew Text, the word had a greater meaning than manumission alone. In ancient times, a patriarch would rescue or redeem a marginalized family member, paying whatever debt kept that person in bondage, in order to restore the person to the community and to the protection of the family household (*beth ab*). What does God's work to redeem us from bondage to sin and death also provide that we could never receive through any other means? (See Galatians 4:4-7; Ephesians 1:3-8; Colossians 1:13-14.)

- b. Paul eagerly declared that those who have been bought by the blood of Jesus are free—free from sin, death, and everything else that controls and keeps people in bondage. What freedom does the blood of Jesus buy for those who follow him, and what responsibility comes with that freedom? (See Romans 6:6-7, 17-23; Galatians 5:1; 1 Peter 2:16; Revelation 1:5-6.)
- c. As you read the following passages—Romans 1:1; 1 Corinthians 4:1; 2 Corinthians 6:4; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:1—notice how Paul described the nature of his relationship with God and how seriously he viewed his role as a *doulos* (meaning “slave” or “servant”). In what ways does his understanding of being a follower of Jesus and serving God as a *slave* challenge our thinking about what it means to follow Jesus, to say we belong to him, and to serve him?

Faith Lesson (5 minutes)

It can be difficult for Western people who love the ideas of freedom, independence, and democracy to think of being a slave to anyone, even to God. We much prefer the idea of being a *servant* to that of being a *slave*. But the Scripture is clear. If we have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus, we belong to God. We are free to be his slaves.

The Greek word *doulos*, which can mean “slave” or “servant,” is often translated as “servant” in English Bibles. That usage is more a function of the cultural situation when the first English Bibles were translated than how the word was understood during the first century. In a culture where slaves accounted for nearly a third of the population, few people had servants, and they would have understood that Paul intended “slave” to be his meaning. So how did we come to understand our role as “servants” of God rather than his “slaves”? John MacArthur points out that early English Bible translations were affected by the controversial slave trade in the British Empire. Using the term “slaves of Christ” seemed too negative, so translators chose “servant” instead.⁴

We must be careful not to minimize what God has done for us. He has redeemed us—just as certainly as he redeemed the Hebrews from the brutal bondage of slavery to Pharaoh—from bondage to the Evil One that inevitably leads to death. Through the shed blood of Jesus, God has set us free to receive eternal life! It is our incredible privilege and honor to belong to him and with hearts of gratitude become his “slaves,” laboring for the advancement of his kingdom.

So, who really owns us? Will we choose to be slaves of Jesus, not just servants?⁵

1. The Heidelberg Catechism, which I learned as a child, reads, “My only comfort in life and in death is that I am not my own but belong, body and soul, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.” In Jesus, we belong to God; he owns us. We are not servants who are free to leave his service to serve another. What does it mean to you to be a “slave” owned by God?

2. A servant may choose how to serve his or her employer; a slave must obey the owner’s command. Jesus commands those who follow him to submit completely to his will and to walk as he walks. Are you willing to be God’s slave and serve him according to all that he commands?
3. As people redeemed by God, we are set free from the power of all other bondage: to self, to Satan, to sensual pleasure and lust, to material accumulation, and to accomplishment. As free people, we must live in total submission to the One to whom we belong. Are you so completely owned by God that you will not become enslaved to evil again?
4. When we view ourselves as slaves to Christ—owned by him, accountable to serve him completely—how does it affect the way we express honor to him, worship him, proclaim his greatness, and display his character to the world around us?

Closing (1 minute)

Read 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 aloud together: “Do you not know that . . . you are not your own; you were bought at a price.”

Then pray, thanking God that he paid the price—a price we could never earn—to redeem us from bondage to sin. Thank him for the privilege of joining in his great plan of redemption as his slaves, serving him with all our heart, soul, and strength. Pray that those who are in bondage to sin will come to know Jesus and be set free from the power of darkness.

Memorize

Do you not know that . . . you are not your own; you were bought at a price.

1 Corinthians 6:19–20