

A WEEK IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE



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EPHESUS

The Interview**THE KNOCK ON THE DOOR ECHOED IN THE CRAMPED ROOM.**

It was not a luxurious room, but it was more comfortable than most of the rooms in which residents lived. It was sparsely furnished with a bed, a small table, and a few stools at which its occupant could take meals, visit with a guest, read, and write. The floor was made of stone, worn smooth by the pacing of previous occupants. The current tenant was no different and indeed may have worn down the stones even more than the others had.

A benefit of this particular room was that it had an exterior wall and thus a window. Most residents were not so fortunate and typically were housed deeper inside the compound. But the window was too high to allow a view of the courtyard, even with the assistance of a stool. It offered fresh air and sunshine, but never the sounds of birds—the constant din in the courtyard either masked the sound of the birds or simply kept them away.

The current resident was in many ways not unlike previous occupants. He was accused of breaching the local law and awaited a trial. It was his Roman citizenship in part that provided him with

the luxuries of this room. But the incessant din from the cobblestone courtyard and the occasional cries of prisoners being punished that came through the window were a constant reminder that he was not here by choice, nor was he guaranteed an escape from punishment should he be found guilty. Many of the previous occupants had themselves paced the floor, written a last letter at the table, and met with family for a final time all within earshot of the sounds in the courtyard.

The knock sounded on the door a second time. Preoccupied with the sheets of papyrus in front of him, the man hadn't heard the first knock. Now the sound aroused his attention, and he raised his head.

"Yes, yes, come in please," the man responded to a third, more insistent knock. He moved from his stool to the door, revealing another advantage he enjoyed: no chains restricted his movement or shackled him to the wall.

The heavy wooden door swung open and revealed the figure of a prison guard. "You have visitors," he announced. His face was partially hidden in the shadowy passageway.

"Thank you," the man said. "Who is it this time?"

"Demas and a stranger."

"Well, show them in."

The guard stepped aside, and a pair of figures emerged from the passageway and entered the dimly lit room. The first to enter, Demas, the man knew. He was from Thessalonica, where he was a merchant, but more recently he had been a traveling companion. He sometimes served as a messenger to the churches in the surrounding area.

Standing behind Demas was a young man, not as well dressed. It was clear he was not entirely comfortable in the prison, and he kept one eye cautiously on the guard as he stood waiting for Demas to introduce him.

“So, you are back from Colossae,” said the man. “How are the brothers and sisters?”

“Yes, Paul, I’ve been back about three weeks. Many in the Lycus Valley send greetings to you, Timothy, and Luke.” He paused,

PRISONS

In the Roman world, prisons were usually holding pens for those awaiting trials or punishment rather than facilities for long-term incarceration. Sometimes they were built purposely, but often a section of another building, such as a palace or a barracks, would also serve as a prison. Disused Roman quarries confined prisoners of war and noble citizens who were afforded more freedom of movement. Those in military custody would have been held at an army encampment. Some, like Paul in Acts 28:16, were restricted to a form of house arrest.

While most cities and smaller communities had some type of prison, those built and operated by the state were usually reserved for more violent criminals. Cells were often overcrowded and dark. It was not unusual for inmates to be chained or restricted some other way. Prisoners of high status, such as Roman citizens, were sometimes afforded privileges. These could include not being chained, less restrictive cells, the ability to receive visitors, and food supplies.

In Acts 16:24, Paul and Silas are placed in the innermost cell and their feet placed in stocks. Paul twice uses the Greek word *desmios* in Philemon, which can mean “chain” but can also mean “prisoner.” The idea of being chained was so closely associated with incarceration that it served as a metonymy (a word used to describe something commonly associated with it) for *prison*.

remembering. “Everyone is asking after Epaphras and his conditions here in prison and hopes you’ll both be released soon.”

By now the other young man was becoming visibly anxious. Demas asked Paul whether it was possible to have a private audience. At the apostle’s request, the guard left the room without further comment, closing the door and leaving the three men alone.

“So, Demas, who is this visitor you’ve brought to me?”

SLAVERY

Slavery was an accepted fact of Greco-Roman society. Slaves were visible in every aspect of life, and most people probably couldn’t imagine a world without them. While there were varying opinions as to how slaves should be treated, there is little evidence suggesting abolition was ever seriously considered. In spite of their highly visible presence and activity in society, slaves were not part of it. The division between slave and free meant that although a significant part of the population worked to create the benefits of and prosperity for society, they were unable to enjoy them. A slave’s life was lived on the margins, and his or her primary function was to assist and benefit the owner.

“This is Onesimus,” Demas answered. “He is a slave from the household of Philemon.”

“From Philemon’s home!” Paul exclaimed. “What a beloved brother he is! I hear good things about his ministry to the saints in those parts. I hope someday to visit Colossae and minister to the saints in his home.”

Paul put a hand on the slave’s shoulder. “So tell me, do you have a greeting to cheer my soul?”

Onesimus didn't reply. Instead he stood in awkward silence, his eyes on the floor. Puzzled, the apostle looked at Demas and then back to Onesimus.

"Tell me, young man, how is your master and his wife, Apphia? Are they well? Has something happened to them or to the church in their home?" The lack of response was causing Paul's own anxiety and impatience to rise. "Come now, don't make me wait. What's wrong?"

Demas cut in. In a low voice, he said, "Philemon and Apphia are fine. It's Onesimus." Demas paused again, trying to find the right words while avoiding the apostle's eyes.

"The fact is," he finally blurted out, "Onesimus has run away from Philemon. He's a fugitive."

Paul took a slow step back. Onesimus, meanwhile, was exhibiting all the symptoms of a man awaiting imminent death. He was a picture of panic, and now the apostle could understand why. A fugitive slave in the middle of a prison, with a guard standing at the door. What on earth was he doing here? It was the last place in the world a fugitive slave would want to be.

"Demas," Paul asked, "why have you brought a runaway slave to me here? What did you think I would do?"

"I brought him for an interview," Demas said quietly. "I thought perhaps you could help him."

"And what kind of help did you think I, a prisoner awaiting trial, could offer to a criminal? Did you think this is the last place the authorities would look for him? In my prison cell?" Paul muttered under his breath for a moment before going on. "Does Tiro know about this? Do you appreciate the consequences if he learns we are harboring a fugitive in his prison? Do you want me to lose my privileges?"

Demas cleared his throat. "We found him wandering in the marketplace here in the city. I recognized Onesimus from my

trips to Colossae and assumed he was in the city on business for Philemon. But when I began to speak with him, as you just did, I realized something was wrong. He was agitated and made as if to run away. But Tychicus, who was also there, assured him that if he cooperated, no harm would come to him. So we brought him back to my house.”

Demas paused long enough to gather his thoughts and then continued before Paul could interrupt.

“He refuses to tell us anything other than admitting that he had fled his master’s house. In the end, we decided to bring him to you.”

By now the apostle’s temper was beginning to appear. At times like this, he could be cantankerous and was not always so careful with his choice of words. “To me? What am I supposed

THE LOCATION OF PAUL’S IMPRISONMENT

In Philemon, Paul identifies himself as a prisoner, but he doesn’t say where he is imprisoned. Rome is the traditional location. Some have argued for Caesarea (Acts 24:26-27), but few have been convinced. A third option, adopted here, is Ephesus. Possible allusions to an Ephesian imprisonment may be found in 2 Corinthians, where Paul mentions hardships he experienced in Asia (2 Cor 1:8) and claims to have been imprisoned far more than his opponents (2 Cor 11:23).

More significant is the relationship between Colossians and Philemon. A comparison of the persons listed in Philemon 2, 23-24 with Colossians 4:10-17 reveals that the two letters are closely related. The theology of Colossians might suggest a time later in Paul’s life and thus imprisonment in Rome. But assuming Colossae was destroyed by an

to do for him? Did you think I don't have enough on my mind? Give me one good reason why I shouldn't call Tiro immediately and have this man arrested."

"Because," Demas answered slowly, "I thought you might be interested to speak with him. It's true he is a fugitive slave, but there is something else that you might be curious to hear."

"Well, out with it, Demas, and quickly, because I am not feeling very patient at the moment," sputtered the apostle.

Demas slowly turned his back to Onesimus and said quietly, "He lives in Philemon's home but is not a believer. He's never attended a meeting of the church. A church that meets in the home of a man known for his generosity. Remember the reports from Epaphras and others about the way churches treat slaves in the Lycus Valley?"

earthquake (circa AD 60–61), this means that Paul would have written the letters very early in his time in Rome.

However, the close proximity of Ephesus to Colossae (120 miles) means Onesimus could have reached Paul in less than a week. The distance between Colossae and Rome (1,200 miles) would have required a journey of several weeks or even months. Note too Paul's curious request that Philemon prepare a guest room for him (Philem 22). If Paul were in Rome, hoping to visit Spain (Rom 15:28), a trip to Colossae seems less likely. A final piece of evidence to suggest an Ephesian imprisonment is found in the prologue of Marcion (circa AD 85–160) to Colossians, which identifies the place of writing as Ephesus.

In the end, the location of Paul's imprisonment does not affect the interpretation of his letter to Philemon. Paul's imprisonment in Ephesus in this story was chosen for narrative rather than historical reasons.

Slowly Demas's words began to penetrate the apostle's angry demeanor as he remembered what he'd been told in the past.

With a bemused gaze, Paul looked at the slave and asked, "Tell me, Onesimus, do you worship the God of heaven and his son Jesus? Were you not in attendance at the gatherings in Philemon's house?"

His surroundings and the conversation were having a visible effect on Onesimus. Beads of sweat had formed on his forehead and were running down his face. He tried to speak, but his throat tightened, constraining any sound from passing through his lips. Demas and Paul rushed to his side, took an arm each, and led him to the bed. After a few moments off his feet and a

SLAVES AND RELIGION

There is little by way of direct information about the religious practices of slaves in the first century. Slaves worshiped, like everyone else, a variety of gods. It was assumed that slaves would worship with the family along with everyone else in the household. The presence of slaves at church meetings is evidenced by the way Paul addresses them in his letters (1 Cor 7:21-22; Eph 6:5-8; Col 3:22-25).

The role of slaves in temples and shrines is well documented, but these are usually slaves owned by the shrine or temple. A significant number of slaves held membership in the various *collegia* (associations), and some held offices alongside free men and freedmen. But they still represented a minority. Moreover, Roman law stipulated that slaves could only be members with their master's consent, and substantial penalties were imposed if they were admitted without it (*Digest* 47.22.3.2). Thus the master controlled all aspects of a slave's life, including the gods whom he or she worshiped.

cup of water, Onesimus was able to reply.

“I am not a follower of my master’s religion,” he said. “I am there when his friends come together, and I help serve their meal. But my master has never required me to worship his god. I am his slave, and I do what I am told to do.”

Even as he said these few words, the strain crept back on his face, and a look of terror returned to his eyes. After a quick, whispered consultation, Demas and

Paul agreed that he should lie down and rest while they conferred. They assured him of his safety. They would not inform the guard, and Onesimus would leave the prison the same way he entered it. Somewhat relieved by these promises, Onesimus lay down on the bed. The strain of the last few days had taken a tremendous toll on his body, and he was at the point of exhaustion.

Paul and Demas sat at the table and discussed the situation in hushed voices. It was clear they needed to use extreme caution to get Onesimus out of the prison safely. Any signs of distress would arouse suspicion. They needed a plan—not only to get Onesimus out of prison but to return him to Philemon with as little trouble as possible.



Figure 1.1. Gladiator relief with name “Philemon” inscribed in Greek. From Antioch of Pisidia, a city visited by Paul and Barnabas during Paul’s first missionary journey in Acts 14:21.

HOUSEHOLD CONVERSIONS

Early Christianity was a household movement. It sought the conversion of heads of households, whose dependents followed them into the new faith. This pattern is illustrated by the anonymous official (John 4:53), Cornelius (Acts 10:2, 24, 44-48), Lydia (Acts 16:14-15), the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:31-34), Crispus (Acts 18:8), and Stephanas (1 Cor 1:16). In the Greco-Roman world, the concept of the household included not only those related by blood but also slaves. This attitude is reflected in the New Testament household codes, which address not only family members but also slaves (Eph 5:22-6:9; Col 3:18-4:1; 1 Pet 2:18; 3:7). Slaves were considered property owned by their master, but they were also a vital part of the household family. Consequently, the conversion of slaves to Christianity would have been the normal result of their master's conversion.

“This is troubling,” Paul said more to himself than Demas. “I have seen many people become believers in Jesus. And although I have baptized very few people personally, it was usually the case that the whole household was baptized. Yet, you know that I have heard from Epaphras and others that the churches in the Lycus Valley do not always extend the gospel to everyone living in their household. Onesimus seems to be an example of Philemon neglecting this aspect of his ministry.

“The question now is how to proceed. I would like to speak further with Onesimus, but we need to be careful for Tiro’s sake. We don’t want to endanger him or his family. Has he been to your home recently?”

“Yes,” Demas said. “But he’s careful about it. I’m still concerned that his attendance doesn’t entirely stem from a desire to be a follower of Jesus.”

“Demas, you are a faithful worker, but your days as a businessman are still guiding the way you view people. Tiro has been a loyal friend since before I was in prison.”

“What do you propose we do?” Demas said, still unconvinced.

“Once he regains his composure, take him out just as you came in. Go back to your house so he can rest. Let him meet and associate with the believers, but there’s no need to announce that he’s a fugitive. I think it would do him good to experience the church here in Ephesus. Once I’ve had time to speak with Tiro, you can bring him back. I will try to discover why he fled and, if possible, convince him to become a believer. At the very least, we will send him back where he belongs, to Philemon.”

“I must object, Paul,” Demas said. “I’ve already taken a substantial risk by keeping him in my house for the last few days and then sneaking him into the prison. Do you realize the danger this will bring on me and my family?”

“Demas, my son, trust me. I know it is a risk, but we must take risks for the gospel every day. My concern is for the church, your family, Onesimus, and his master. I will speak with Tiro. If I can get him to agree to my meeting with Onesimus, I will send word to you. If I can’t get him to agree to a meeting, I will at least convince him to give Onesimus more time before we send him back to Philemon.”

“And if Tiro doesn’t agree? What then? Do I wait until they come to arrest him and me?”

“You must trust me, trust Tiro, but moreover you must trust God. I sense God has more to do with the separation between Philemon and Onesimus than we can yet understand. Now then.” The apostle cleared his throat. “Let’s wake him up and send you both on your way.”

The two men rose from the table and attended to Onesimus. After another drink of water, Paul informed him of their plan to

send him back to Demas's home. Onesimus's situation left him little room to argue. Had he known he would be back later in prison again, he would have probably found some way to escape that very night.

After a while, Onesimus was composed enough to leave. His face was still a mask of panic and apprehension, but as long as he didn't look directly at the guard, Paul and Demas hoped that everything would be fine.

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