

THE PRISON EPISTLES: NURTURE FOR OPPRESSED BELIEVERS

III. Philippians: Nurture In Living In Preoccupation With Christ

R. Gaining Peace With God's Effective Use Of Us In All His Ministry Assignments

(Philippians 4:21-23 with 1:12-13)

I. Introduction

- A. When Paul wrote the Epistle to the Philippians, his readers were concerned about his imprisonment for the faith as seen in Paul's words in Philippians 1:12-13 that encouraged his readers in view of his imprisonment.
- B. Indeed, due to humanly difficult circumstances, it is often very tempting for any believer to think he is not being effective in the ministry assignment he has received from the Lord.
- C. However, Paul's closing remarks in Philippians 4:21-23 in view of the historical context reveal how God was making Paul very effective regardless of his difficult Roman imprisonment, giving an insightful lesson for us:

II. Gaining Peace With God's Effective Use Of Us In All His Ministry Assignments.

- A. Paul's letter to the Philippians was penned during his first Roman imprisonment (Bible Know. Com., N. T., p. 647), the imprisonment mentioned in Acts 28:17-31 (Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, 1978, fn. to Acts 28:30).
- B. He had been legally forced to go to Rome as a prisoner for having appealed as a Roman citizen under charge to be judged by the emperor instead of a lower court (Acts 25:10-11), and God had encouraged Paul in a shipwreck crisis that he would arrive in Rome to be brought before Caesar (Acts 27:23-24). Paul's imprisonment was thus a divine assignment, as awkward and unsettling as it might have *humanly* seemed.
- C. In addition, being a prisoner of Rome to be brought before the emperor, Paul was put under the charge of the praetorian guard, a body of Roman soldiers living in the praetorian barracks attached to the emperor's palace as his personal guard, J. B. Lightfoot, St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians, 1974, p. 99-104; Ibid., B. K. C., N. T. 650-651. This guard had the prisoner bound by the hand to a soldier who guarded him, who stayed with the prisoner day and night, and the soldier was relieved by other soldiers in later shifts, Ibid., Lightfoot, p. 8.
- D. On top of all of this, Paul was in touch with people not only in the praetorian guard, but in Caesar's household (due to his remark in Philippians 4:22), and the intrigue that was beginning to influence the court of Rome's emperor at this time was overwhelmingly troublesome for Paul in view of the particular charge against him:
 1. When Paul arrived in Rome in the spring of 61 A. D., the first five years of Nero's rule had just ended, and Nero's murder of his mother, Agrippina, who had worked to enthrone him, had crushed the hope of people around Nero that his rule would be an edifying one, Ibid., Lightfoot, p. 3; Z. P. E. B., v. Four, p. 410-411.
 2. Also, Nero was apathetic and capricious as a ruler, often postponing hearings for no assigned reason (Ibid., Lightfoot, p. 4), and the political horizon was growing more and more tense with the death of Nero's most "upright adviser" in Burrus, the prefect of the praetorians, Ibid., p. 5. Nero furthermore divorced and slew his wife Octavia, only to replace her with "the cruel and shameless Poppaea" who had "become a proselyte to Judaism, and more than once advocated the cause of her adopted race before the emperor with zeal and success," Ibid. The charges against Paul had been made by opponents of his in Judaism (cf. Acts 24:1-9), so the Judaistic fervor of the emperor's new wife posed a special threat to Paul were Nero to hear his case!
- E. Nevertheless, Paul's conduct, attitude and efforts made him highly effective in this very difficult assignment:
 1. First, Paul refrained from making negative comments about emperor Nero or the intrigue of his court; he sought only to honor the king, not foolishly to jeopardize his case by making unwise remarks, 1 Peter 2:17.
 2. Second, Paul used the opportunity of being bound to soldiers of the praetorian guard to witness to each one, so that, as soldier after soldier left from their shift with him, they took the Gospel back to the barracks until the whole praetorian guard had heard it, Phil. 1:13; Ibid., Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, fn. to Phil. 1:13.
 3. Third, the close proximity of the praetorian guard barracks to the emperor's palace caused at least several of the employees of Nero's household to hear the Gospel, for some of them believed in Christ and sent their greetings to the believers at Philippi, Philippians 4:22; Ibid., Ryrie, fn. to Phil. 4:22. "There is no evidence of the conversion of a member of the imperial family until a generation later" so that the reference to "Caesar's household" (Phil. 4:22) likely means only "employees in the emperor's palace," Ibid.

Lesson: Facing a hard situation as a prisoner of Rome, Paul wisely did not dishonor the evil men around him, but faithfully, graciously witnessed the Gospel, and God turned Paul's hard situation into a great ministry outreach!

Application: (1) May we trust God to be so sovereign over every ministry assignment He gives us, even the hard ones, that we (2) function faithfully and graciously in them (3) that He might make us very effective in ministry!