

THE PRISON EPISTLES: NURTURE FOR OPPRESSED BELIEVERS

IV. Philemon: Nurture In Living Godly Lives Amid Evil World Systems

A. Encouraging One Another Unto Gracious Godliness In Living Amid Evil World Systems (Philemon 1-7)

I. Introduction

- A. When Paul wrote the Epistle of Philemon, he and his Christian readers had to deal with the evil institution of slavery that was legally protected by the Roman Empire that God required them to obey, cf. Romans 13:1-5.
- B. Thus, the Epistle of Philemon "is not an attack against slavery as such, but a suggestion as to how Christian masters and slaves could live their faith within that evil system," Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, 1978, p. 1727.
- C. Philemon 1-7 reveals the need for believers to encourage one another to live graciously godly lives amid evil world systems they must face, and we view this passage for our insight and edification (as follows):

II. Encouraging One Another Unto Gracious Godliness In Living Amid Evil World Systems, Philemon 1-7.

- A. Paul wrote the Epistle to Philemon in his first Roman imprisonment (Ibid.) in 61 A. D., and as a prisoner whose case was to be ruled by Emperor Nero, Paul was in no position to counter the evil institution of slavery:
 - 1. In Rome's chaotic era from 146 B. C. to 46 B. C., slaves contributed to the disorder by ravaging Sicily in 104 B. C., and in 73 B. C., 70,000 of them led by Spartacus held at bay leading Roman officials for a year until he was slain in battle "and six thousand of his followers were captured and crucified," E. M. Burns, West. Civ., 6th ed., 1963, p. 216. In view of the historical enmity the government had against uprisings by slaves, it was unwise for Paul whose case would be heard by Nero to condemn slavery as an institution!
 - 2. Besides, the reigning Roman emperor was Nero, and he had just murdered his mother, Agrippina, who had worked to enthrone him, crushing the hope of people around him that his reign would be edifying, J. B. Lightfoot, St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians, p. 3; Zon. Pict. Ency. Bib., vol. Four, p. 410-411. Thus, it was unwise for Paul to condemn the evil institution of slavery as a prisoner of such an unstable Roman Emperor in addition to the historical enmity the Roman government had for uprisings against slavery!
- B. Thus, **instead of countering it**, Paul *rose above* the evil institution of slavery by *first* getting believing slave owner, Philemon, to be **encouraged** unto **gracious godliness** in **living amid** the **evil system**, Philemon 1-7:
 - 1. Paul began his epistle referring to himself unlike he did in any other of his Scripture epistles, calling himself a "prisoner of Christ Jesus," Phm. 1a,b; Moulton & Geden, Con. to the Grk. Test., 1974, p. 189-190. Paul used it again in Philemon 9 where he clarified he used the title to avoid referring to his apostolic authority so as to appeal humbly to Philemon to be gracious in a special case; Ibid., Ryrie, ftn. to Phm. 9.
 - 2. Paul also addressed Philemon's wife, Apphia as the "beloved," and Archippus, a Roman soldier who was part of the household as a "fellow soldier," identifying closely with these other members of Philemon's household in emphasizing the deep spiritual brotherhood they shared with Paul in Christ, Philemon 2, 3.
 - 3. In the introductory section (Philemon 4-7), Paul labored to emphasize the great value of Philemon's ministry to the rest of the Church body in terms of its gracious edification of the saints:
 - a. Paul expressed how he always mentioned in his prayers his thanksgiving to God for Philemon's faith toward the Lord Jesus and his love toward all of the saints, Philemon 4-5.
 - b. In his prayer at verse 6, Paul held he asked God that the "fellowship" (*koinonia*, Arndt & Gingrich, A Grk.-Eng. Lex. of the N. T., 1967, p. 439-440) others enjoyed with Philemon in his faith (cf. Phm. 17; J. B. Lightfoot, St. Paul's Epis. to the Col. and to Phm., 1974, p. 335) might become "effective" (*energes*, Ibid., Arndt & Gingrich, p. 265) in acknowledging every good thing that is in all us Christians (the better reading is *hemin*, "us," not *humin*, "you," Bruce M. Metzger, A Text. Com. on the Grk. N. T., 1971, p. 657.
 - c. The central "good thing" Paul had in mind is expressed in Philemon 7, that other believers had great joy and consolation in Philemon's love, for the "bowels," a figurative expression for "innermost feelings" (*splagchnon*, Ibid., Arndt & Gingrich, p. 770; Ibid., Ryrie, ftn. to Phm. 7) of the saints were "refreshed; cheered" (*anapauo*, Ibid., Arndt & Gingrich, p. 58) by Philemon, and Paul addressed Philemon in the vocative case (*adelphe*, U. B. S. Grk. N. T., 1966, p. 744), calling him, "Brother," an endearing term.

Lesson: Though wisely not countering the evil institution of slavery the government staunchly upheld, Paul led Philemon to rise above the evil of that institution by adopting an attitude of godly graciousness toward others.

Application: To counter the bad effects of evil institutions we face today, may we begin by possessing and fostering among other believers the attitude of gracious godliness that springs from God's spiritual provisions in Christ.