

THE PRISON EPISTLES: NURTURE FOR OPPRESSED BELIEVERS

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

C. Encouraging Others By Shouldering Extra Burdens To Help Counter Sin Amid Evil World Systems (Philemon 18-25)

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 government that God had called them to obey, Rom. 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 18-25 reveals Paul exemplifying how shouldering the burdens of others caught up in evil world systems helps to alleviate their relationship stress, and we view the passage for our insight and edification:

II. Encouraging Others By Shouldering Extra Burdens To Help Counter Sin Amid Evil World Systems.

- A. After making his appeal to Philemon to receive back his runaway slave in love, the newly saved Onesimus, versus executing him as was Philemon's right under civil law in the evil institution of slavery (Philemon 8-17), Paul faced the added burden of special wrongs Onesimus had done to Philemon in running away from his master, wrongs that put added tension to the issue of Philemon's willingness to receive Onesimus peacefully:
 1. Not only had Onesimus run from his master, itself often a capital offense (*Ibid.*), since Paul offered to pay for the wrong or financial cost associated with Onesimus' flight reveals that more if not multiple wrongs had been committed by Onesimus against Philemon in addition to the capital offense, Philemon 18.
 2. Onesimus may have stolen money or goods or both, or perhaps his absence as a runaway had led to unusual costs to Philemon due to the absence of Onesimus' services (*Bible Know. Com., N. T.*, p. 773).
- B. Since slavery could easily elicit the worst of behaviors in slave masters, especially if they were wronged by slaves at that time in Rome's history where slave rebellions had caused so much strife and had been put down with great force (Edward McNall Burns, *West. Civ.*, 6th ed., 1963, p. 216), **Paul shouldered extra burdens to help alleviate stress amid the evil world system of slavery (as follows)**, Philemon 18-25:
 1. Paul shouldered the cost of the slave's wrongs to alleviate lures to sin by slave and master, Phm. 18-19a:
 - a. Leaving to Onesimus, likely an unskilled slave unable to earn his own livelihood to provide the money to reimburse his master for stealing from him would likely tempt Onesimus to avoid returning to Philemon. Thus, Paul, who was likely without money as a prisoner of Rome, offered to pay for Onesimus' debt by working at his skill of tentmaking once released from prison, Acts 18:3 with Philemon 18-19a.
 - b. Onesimus likely had stolen or wronged Philemon a high degree so he could make a successful flight from Colossae all the way to Rome and then to stay there for some time (*Ibid.*, *B. K. C., N. T.*, p. 769), so this financial burden would have been of significant cost to the then impoverished Apostle Paul!
 2. Paul also shouldered the burden of the slave owner's temptation to do future wrong, Phm. 19b-25:
 - a. Philemon as a slave owner empowered by the law and a government historically disposed to be harsh on rebellious slaves (*Ibid.*, Burns), stood to yield to the temptation to ignore Paul's plea to receive Onesimus peacefully especially in light of the added wrongs of having financially been hurt by his slave's departure.
 - b. Well, Paul then shouldered the task of influencing Philemon to act in love toward Onesimus: (1) Paul reminded Philemon that he owed himself to Paul since Paul had led him to Christ, Phm. 19b. This fact left Philemon obliged to heed Paul's plea about Onesimus! (2) Paul also encouraged Philemon to receive Onesimus peacefully, adding that he was confident Philemon would do more than he suggested, giving Philemon the opportunity to act lovingly (Phm. 20-21), but he backed up that statement in asking Philemon to prepare to board him since he hoped to visit him soon, Phm. 22. News of Paul's soon arrival would influence Philemon the more to treat Onesimus well, offsetting the temptation to mistreat him.
 - c. Paul closed his epistle, giving greetings from his co-workers as further influence on Philemon who then knew other influential Christian workers were aware of his need to treat Onesimus rightly, Phm. 23-25.

Lesson: *To help alleviate the stress that lured both a slave and his slave owner to sin against one another in the evil institution of slavery, Paul shouldered their burdens, bearing the financial cost incurred by the materially destitute slave as well as taking responsibility to influence the slave owner to receive his slave righteously!*

Application: *May we help alleviate the stress that lures others to sin in evil institutions by similarly shouldering their burdens as did the Apostle Paul, and so fulfill the law of Christ, Galatians 6:2.*