Targets for Trouble

December 3 — *Acts 21:37-23:35*

Today In Your Reading…

We witnessed the hostile environment that Paul faced while in Jerusalem. He was warned several times by friends and prophets not to go there. Their concerns were justified and their predictions were true. The Temple crowd beat him and abused him, the Roman guards arrested him and nearly flogged him, the Sadducees and Pharisees argued over him and almost tore him limb from limb, and, finally, forty Jewish zealots vowed to kill him.

What was it about Jerusalem that it harbored such hatred for Christ, for His followers, for Paul, and for the Gospel? These were God's chosen people who disdained His representatives and despised the only way of salvation. The answer could only be that the enemy, Satan himself, had managed to gain control of these people and, therefore, expel anything that was contrary to his goals.

Jerusalem is a microcosm of the world at large. Satan, the "god of this world" has a great deal of influence on the views and ideals of the majority of people living here. The world system that he has developed represents his lies and goals. Anything, then, that does not align itself with his evil plans is utterly despised, discredited, and destroyed. Therefore, **as God's representatives on earth, Christians are a primary target for persecution**. We should not be surprised by the anger, animosity, or abuse that we receive from the people of this world.

Persecution is not a sign that we are doing something wrong. It is a sign that we are doing something right. The enemy is trying to scare us and silence us. Paul wrote later to Timothy, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (*2 Timothy 3:12*). Jesus told us to expect persecution. Since they hated Him, they will hate us; and, since they persecuted Him, they will persecute us (*John 15:18, 19*). If we condoned the views and ideals of the world, the people of this world would welcome us; but, since we are not of this world and do not embrace this world system, the world hates us.

Daily Reflection

Have you ever faced persecution for believing or speaking up for the Gospel of Christ? What have you learned from this experience?

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Jesus said that those who are persecuted for His name sake will be blessed (*Luke 6:22*). As much as we dislike it and as strange as it sounds, we must recognize that **there is value in persecution**. How could we possibly benefit from being persecuted?

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Paul rejoiced when he "shared in the suffering of Christ" (*Philippians 1:7*). Why would that be?

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On Trial

December 4 — *Acts 24:1-26:32*

Today In Your Reading...

Paul was still in jail in Caesarea, which was headquarters for the Roman governors. He had been transferred there after the leading Jews tried to kill him in Jerusalem. He had been in jail so long that he had been tried by two different governors — Felix and Festus. Neither of these men found Paul to be guilty of any crime. In fact, they would have released him had he not appealed to have his case tried before Caesar. Now, Paul would get an all-expenses-paid one-way ticket to the capital of the empire. Thus, Paul would get to see Rome after all (*23:11*).

As I read about the trials that Paul experienced, I was reminded of the importance of being able to make a defense for our faith. In this bitter and biased world, it seems that the followers of Christ are always on trial somewhere, giving reasons for the hope that they have in Him, just as Paul did (*24:10; 26:1*).

Did you notice that Paul's accusers resorted to name-calling and scare tactics? They had already threatened to kill him a couple of times and, during a trial, they said, "We have found him to be a troublemaker" (*24:5*). After listening to Paul's story, Festus even shouted, "Paul, you are insane!" (*26:24*). **The world cannot effectively argue against what it does not understand.** The facts do not support their claims. Therefore, they must resort to intimidation and name-calling. They silence us with fear.

On the other hand, if we watch how Paul defended his faith, we will notice that he was a good ambassador for the Lord. He was diplomatic in his approach, he appealed to the facts, and he demonstrated good character. He said, "I always try to maintain a clear conscience before God and everyone else" (*24:16*). Because of the way that he interacted with the nay-sayers, Paul earned an audience with those who would listen.

Daily Reflection

In one of his letters, Peter wrote, "**If you are asked about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it**; but, you must *do this in a gentle and respectful way*. Keep your conscience clear. Then, if people speak evil against you, they will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live because you belong to Christ" (*1 Peter 3:15, 16*).

You should always be ready to explain the hope that you have, your faith in Jesus Christ. Do you feel prepared to do that? Why or why not?

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What do you think it means to explain your beliefs in a gentle and respectful way?

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What do you think it means to keep a clear conscience before God and men?

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Take courage. Truth is on your side. But, do not be boastful, condescending, or hateful. **Be prepared to receive harsh treatment from the nay-sayers, but do not return their fire.**

Strength in the Storm

December 5 — *Acts 27:1-44*

Today In Your Reading…

After Paul made an appeal for Caesar to hear his case (*25:11*), the guards made preparation to transport him to Rome. Since they did not have the luxury of flight, as we do, the trip would be by ship and would last several weeks. All 276 passengers on board endured one of the most difficult experiences of their lives.

Though our passage was full of nautical phrases and was difficult to understand, it was not difficult to comprehend that the trip was dangerous. "We had several days of rough sailing; and after great difficulty we finally neared Cnidus. But, the wind was against us… We struggled along the coast with great difficulty… We had lost a lot of time. The weather was becoming dangerous for long voyages by then, because it was so late in the fall" (*27:7-9*).

What immediately became apparent on this trip was **Paul's impact on the passengers**, particularly when the situation became perilous. When things were going smoothly, Paul had the attention of his commanding officer (who treated him kindly, *27:3*), but when things grew tense and people's lives were in danger, Paul had the attention of everyone. **It was as if the storms gave Paul an opportunity to minister to every person on board.** The circumstances shed light on his character and faith. His words and inner strength encouraged everyone.

"Take courage," he said. "None of you will lose your lives, even though the ship will go down. Last night, an angel of the God whom I serve stood beside me… [and told me that] God in His goodness has granted safety to everyone. So take courage! For I believe God. It will be just as He said" (*v.22-26*). Everyone was encouraged. By the end of the whole ordeal, **Paul had become valuable to both the commander and the crew** (*v.43*).

Daily Reflection

Have you ever found yourself in the midst of a group of strangers because of some abnormal circumstance (weather event, stalled elevator, black out, wreck, etc.)? How did you react? Was it different than the reaction of others? Did you interact with people? Why or why not?

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What is it about Christians, that we can bring calm and encouragement in situations like these, when most people tend to panic?

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While most people view situations like these as terrible and inconvenient, **Paul viewed the storm as another opportunity to express the difference that Christ can make in one's life.** God simply arranged for him to have the chance to impact strangers for good.

If you believe in a God of providence, that He arranges situations for a purpose, how must you perceive these times when you find yourself in the midst of a "storm"?

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Preaching from Prison

December 6 — *Acts 28:1-31; Ephesians 1:1-2:22*

Today In Your Reading…

After having to stay three months on the island of Malta, Paul and the others arrived safely in Rome. Though he was technically a prisoner awaiting a trial before Caesar, "Paul was permitted to have his own private lodging, though he was guarded by a soldier" (*Acts 28:16*). He would live there for the next two years.

For most of us, being a prisoner of Rome would mean the end of all things normal to us, but Paul didn't let it stop him. His ministry continued despite his circumstances. In fact, "He welcomed all who visited him, proclaiming the Kingdom of God with all boldness and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ…" (*v.30, 31*). He even invited Jews from the city to come and listen to the Gospel. "A large number of people came. He told them about the Kingdom of God and taught them about Jesus from the Scriptures…" (*v.23*).

In his spare time, Paul wrote letters to churches he had started. For example, today we read from his letter to the Ephesians. His letters are rich with spiritual truths and encouragement, priceless pieces from prison. "Long ago, even before He made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in His eyes. His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into His own family by bringing us to Himself through Jesus Christ; and this gave Him great pleasure" (*Ephesians 1:4, 5*).

Paul also wrote these wonderful words, "God saved you by His special favor when you believed; and you can't take credit for this. It is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God's masterpiece. He has made us new in Christ Jesus, so that we can do the good things He planned for us long ago" (*2:8-10*). **Prison did not keep Paul from ministering to others for the Lord.**

Daily Reflection

Most of us, including me, if we landed in prison would consider that to be the end of the line. We would be more concerned about our well-being than the well-being of others. Our attitude would be "Woe is me." But, Paul viewed prison as an opportunity to meet people he couldn't have otherwise, just **another avenue to influence others for the sake of Christ**. Later, in his letter to the Philippians, Paul reported that even the Roman guards were getting saved (*1:13*). How is it that he could view such a negative situation in a positive light?

Have you ever watched God use a "negative" situation to produce positive results? Explain.

We regularly ask for opportunities to share Christ with others but when the Lord provides them, we are seldom prepared to use them. What can you do to solve this problem?

A Light in the Night

December 7 — *Ephesians 3:1-5:14*

Today In Your Reading…

We transitioned into the second half of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In the first three chapters, Paul reminded his readers what Christ had done for them. Now, Paul challenged them to live in light of what He had done. He set the stage by writing, "Therefore, I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God" (*4:1*). Simply put, **our lives should be a clear reflection of the work of Christ**.

First, regarding our old self, we should "**no longer walk as the ungodly do**, for they are hopelessly confused. Their closed minds are full of darkness. They are far away from God because they have shut their minds and hardened their hearts against Him. They don't care about right and wrong, and they have given themselves over to immoral ways" (*4:17-19*).

After describing the unworthy walk of those without Christ, Paul charged believers to live in the opposite way. "This isn't the way you were taught," he wrote. "Throw off your old evil nature and your former way of life, which is rotten through and through, full of lust and deception. Instead, there must be a spiritual renewal of your thoughts and attitudes. You must display a new nature because you are a new person, created in God's likeness — righteous, holy, and true" (*4:20-24*). To summarize, **our lives in Christ should reflect a genuine change from the old self to the new**.

Finally, Paul wrote, "Though your hearts were once full of darkness, **now you are full of light from the Lord, and your behavior should show it!** For this light within you produces only what is good and right and true. Find what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the deeds of evil and darkness… Where your light shines, it will expose their deeds" (*5:10-14*).

Daily Reflection

It is our wholesome lifestyle that sets us apart from the world. **We stand out as bright spots** in our darkened work places, neighborhoods, campuses, organizations, and teams. When we shine that light, it causes others to notice and it provides opportunities for us to speak of the truth (*Matthew 5:14-16*).

The problem is that many of us are not "bright" enough. **We look too much like the darkened world**, and when the world sees us doing and saying the things that they do, then they notice nothing different. Why, then, would they want to be Christian? The most treacherous tool against Christianity is Christians who claim Jesus with their lips but deny Him with their lifestyle.

Are you a bright spot in your darkened world? Do your words and actions stand out in contrast to those around you? If not, why not? If so, describe how.

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You are not living in stark contrast to draw attention to yourself, but rather to draw attention to the Lord and what He has done in your life? How should you respond when someone notices a difference and asks you about it?

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Armed for Battle

December 8 — *Ephesians 5:15-6:24; Colossians 1:1-23*

Today In Your Reading…

We finished Paul's letter to the Ephesians and opened his letter to the Colossians. While much of what we read in *Colossians* was introductory, we did encounter one of the most profound passages in all the Bible, detailing the doctrines of Christ (*1:15-22*). For example, Paul wrote, "Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before God made anything at all and is supreme over all creation… For God in all His fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and by Him God reconciled everything to Himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of His blood on the cross. This includes you…" These truths are incredible and would take weeks to unpack. The mysteries of Christ are marvelous to consider!

However, the Lord reminded me today of the source of our earthly troubles. We live in an evil world that is under evil management; and **the frustrations that we face in the physical realm are often caused by forces in the spiritual realm**. We cannot battle spiritual problems with physical solutions. Instead, **we must face spiritual foes with spiritual weapons**. Enemies with spiritual power cannot be thwarted by human strength or wisdom. We must utilize a power greater than ourselves.

Paul said it this way, "*Be strong with the Lord's mighty power*. Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against the strategies and tricks of the Devil. For we are not fighting against people made of flesh and blood but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world…" (*Ephesians 6:10-12*).

We are all familiar with the armor of God, but consider today what each piece of armor represents and why it is important. We must be girded with **truth**, because the enemy will fill our head with lies. We must robe ourselves with the **righteousness** of Christ, because Satan will accuse us of all our unrighteous deeds. We must be anchored in **peace**, because he will invent many distractions and discouragements.

We must guard ourselves with **faith** in God, for the Devil will cause us to doubt God's existence, His goodness, His plan, and His provision. We must cling to our **salvation**, our freedom from sin and death, because Satan will tempt us in every way possible, doing whatever necessary to keep us inactive or ineffective. We must hold fast the **words of God**, which the enemy fears and respects. Finally, we must always be alert in **prayer**, straining out the myriad of voices around us and striving to listen to the voice and wisdom of God.

Daily Reflection

What are some of the ways that we try to battle spiritual opponents with physical weapons? Why are these methods ineffective?

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Putting on the armor of God is easier said than done. What does this look like in reality? What is the process? What daily steps should you take?

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Mind Renewal

December 9 — *Colossians 1:24-4:18*

Today In Your Reading…

We finished Paul's letter to the Colossians. His focus was primarily on how to live the new life we have in Christ. He illustrated his challenge with the Old Testament ritual of circumcision. "When you came to Christ," he wrote, "you were 'circumcised,' but not by a physical procedure. It was a spiritual procedure, the cutting away of your sinful nature… You were dead because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive in Christ. He forgave all your sins" (*2:11, 13*).

The control-center of our lives is our spirit. Our spirit directly influences our mind, and our mind controls our will, our words, our emotions, and even our body. Therefore, we could say that the spirit of a man is the master of the man. Whatever or whomever controls the spirit of a man, controls the man. Praise God that He chose to "rescue us from the one who rules in the kingdom of darkness and has brought us into the kingdom of His dear Son" (*1:13, 14*). The Holy Spirit has taken residence within us. He now influences our lives as we surrender to Him.

Though our spiritual nature has been regenerated, our flesh has not. Our mind, will, emotions, and body are still rebellious to God. None of these things will be made perfect until we are in heaven. So then, there is a constant struggle between the Holy Spirit and our unholy, sinful flesh. They both vie for control of what we think, what we do, and what we say. We will endure this struggle for the rest of our lives.

Though our spirit (heart) has been changed, it takes a lifetime to sanctify (purify) our mind. Since birth, our mind has been under the influence of sin, and though we are saved from the penalty of sin, we still deal with the presence of sin, which is demonstrated in our self-centered, worldly thinking. Thus, Paul exhorted us "not to conform to the world but to be transformed by the *renewing of our minds*" (*Romans 12:2, NASB*). As John MacArthur said, "God is in the business of **mind renewal**."

Daily Reflection

While Satan must concede your spirit to God, **he battles fiercely for your mind**, to keep you from living life the way that God expects. Thus, God's Word exhorts you to "love the Lord with all of your *mind*" (*Mark 12:30*), to "take every *thought* captive to the obedience of Christ" (*2 Corinthians 10:5*), and to think on those things which are "true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, and of good repute (*Philippians 4:8*). Even in today's passage, Paul wrote, "**Let heaven fill your thoughts.** Do not think only about things down here on earth" (*3:2*).

It is clear that after salvation, the primary battle for believers is in the mind. That's why Paul warned us to put on the helmet of salvation, to protect our mind from the schemes of the Devil. What do you think is the best way to renew your mind? What would God say?

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Paul wrote, "**Let the words of Christ**, in all their richness, **live in your hearts and make you wise**" (*3:16*). If you do not renew your mind through regular meditation on the Scriptures, then your mind is unprotected and vulnerable to the lies, deceptions, and warped philosophies of this world. Scripture is the mind of Christ. To think like Him, you must think like the Word of God.