

Dangers Without and Within

Week 47: November 19-25 — 1 Peter 4, 5; 2 Peter; 1 John 1, 2

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Helpful Resources

The Dangers of Gnosticism (p.67)

Making Sense of It All

- The Big Picture

We cannot read the letters of the New Testament without observing two constant themes — persecution and false teaching. At first, those themes seem unrelated, but they are quite connected. How so? They are both weapons of our spiritual enemy. Satan, who hates God, His people, His Word, and His gospel, wants nothing more than to destroy the Church from without and from within. Persecution is his attempt to destroy Christians outside their churches, and false teaching is a way to destroy them inside their churches.

But the Lord Jesus said to His followers, “I will build My Church, and the gates of Hades (death) will not overpower it” (*Matt. 16:18*). In other words, though Satan will use everything in his arsenal to destroy anyone and anything that represents Christ on earth, he will not be successful. However, if he cannot destroy the Church, he will at least discourage and derail it. To discourage Christians, the enemy has dispatched his evil worldly forces to confront them, combat them, and even kill them. To derail Christians, Satan has unleashed every form of false teaching he can devise. If he cannot halt the Church, at least he can hinder it.

Thus, the New Testament writers — Luke, Paul, Peter, John, James, Jude, and the author of *Hebrews* — addressed their words to Christians in the trenches, facing the enemy’s forces. Their words were intended to encourage growth and inspire perseverance. In this review, we will reconsider the strategy of Peter and John to equip believers to battle the enemy.

- Dangers Without

While we tend to connect the Romans to Christian persecution, most of the violence against the early Church (33-63 AD) came from the Jews (i.e., Pharisees, Sadducees, Sanhedrin, Saul, the Judaizers). Organized Roman persecution did not surface until the reign of Nero (64 AD). After he blamed the fire of Rome on Christians, Roman persecution was constant until Constantine (313 AD). Thus, the enemy’s fire was always hot against Christianity, which caused many followers of Christ to doubt and be discouraged.

Persecution was not the only danger outside the church. Christians were also tempted by the world’s wares and ways. Satan’s evil world system attracts our sinful lusts (i.e., greed, pride, immorality) and leads us away from devotion to Christ.

To encourage Christians, both Peter and John reminded them that God is sovereign, and He can use persecution for His good purposes (*1 Pet. 4, 5*). Furthermore, Satan is a defeated foe. While he may have some success, he cannot and will not be victorious. Besides, pursuing the world’s wares and ways is a waste of time, and a love for the world is contradictory to one’s relationship with the Lord (*1 Jn. 2:15-17; 1 Pet. 4:1-19*).

- Dangers Within

Just as there are dangers outside the church, there are dangers inside the church. The primary danger is that of false teachers or heretical doctrine. For example, Judaism and Gnosticism were both threats to the success of the early church (read the article entitled, "The Dangers of Gnosticism" for more details). With false teaching, the enemy sows confusion and doubt regarding the truths of the gospel (*2 Pet. 2:1-22*).

Along with false teaching, the enemy uses pretenders (or even compromised believers) to infiltrate and corrupt churches with worldliness, sin, and division.

To equip Christians to combat these forces, Peter and John did their best to press their readers to know their faith and to grow in Christ. Here are some of their reminders.

1. **Everything We Need** (*2 Pet. 1:3-12*): Christ has given us everything we need for life and godliness. Nothing else can be done. Nothing else needs to be added. We simply need to take advantage of what He's made available to us (i.e., His Spirit, the Word, prayer).
2. **The Same Faith** (*2 Pet. 1:16-19; 3:1, 2; 1 Jn. 1:1-4*): The Disciples and Apostles handed down eyewitness accounts of their experiences with Christ. Therefore, we have the same faith (gospel) as Christ shared with them. Let us believe it with confidence.
3. **Inspiration of the Spirit** (*2 Pet. 1:20, 21*): Everything we have been given in Scripture has been inspired by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we can have confidence that the Bible (which includes the gospel) is the Word of God, not the words of men.
4. **The Lord Will Return** (*2 Pet. 3:3-13*): There will always be mockers who cause doubt of Jesus' return. But Peter reminded us that all of God's promises have come true. The Lord's patience is meant for us to continue to share the gospel while there is still time.
5. **Know the Truth** (*1 Jn. 1:5-10; 2:25-28*): The best way to combat false teaching is to know the truth. We must continue to improve our knowledge of Scripture and the gospel so that we are not prone to believe lies.
6. **Grow in Christ** (*2 Pet. 2:14; 3:13-18; 1 Jn. 2:1-24*): Those who are most vulnerable to the enemy's schemes are the unstable, untrained, and undisciplined. Therefore, the more we grow in Christ and become like Him, the less susceptible we are to his traps.

The Bottom Line

There are dangers inside and outside the church, but the Lord has equipped us to combat both.

Questions to Consider

1. How does persecution hinder and help the spread of the gospel?
2. The world leads us away from devotion to Christ. How so?
3. Why is it foolish to pursue the wares and ways of the world?
4. What are some examples of false teaching in our churches today?
5. What are some signs that you or others are falling prey to false teaching?
6. How do you prepare yourself to catch and combat false teaching?
7. Other than false teaching, what are other dangers within the church?
8. Have you ever doubted that the Lord will return? Why or why not?
9. Why can't you ever let down your guard in the presence of the enemy?