



# 2023 Weekly Devotions

Week of: March 13<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup>

Sermon: March 12<sup>th</sup>



SMYRNA BAPTIST CHURCH  
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March 13

**Ephesians 6:10-17**

Yesterday's text can easily be only partially understood. I mean that its possible, and even likely, that many people would read of the events of Paul's persecution and imprisonment and only recognize the physical forces at play. It is undeniably true that Paul was physically harmed and imprisoned by tangible people, but it is equally true that their actions did not originate with them. Instead, we believe that the real battle that takes place when the truth of the Gospel is confronted by opposition from the world is a spiritual struggle that only manifests itself in physical ways.

Paul makes my point explicitly in verse 12 of our passage for the day as he says that our war is not against "flesh and blood". The point here is obvious, but it bears mentioning that Paul does not root the source of the struggle with his Jewish opponents or the Roman authorities, instead he sees that they are merely pawns or puppets of a larger, more insidious force.

I recognize that this passage is familiar to most of us and, therefore, we can look past it rather quickly, but this would be a mistake. I wonder how many of us root the source of our problems and the issues of the world in the physical. How many are prone to think that our problem begins and ends with things like: Islam, politicians, dictators, military struggles, economic upheaval due to corrupt practices and the like? I would argue that many people spend an inordinate amount of time talking about these "symptoms" of the real disease and, therefore, the solutions that they propose never address the root cause.

If we believe that our problems are rooted in the physical, then our supposed solutions and defenses will be set up accordingly. If the problem is politicians, then the solution is an election whereby we elect better politicians. If the problem is a dictator, then the pinnacle of the solution is taking care of that dictator and his threats. Now, to be clear, I do believe we should vote and react according to physical threats but that should be subsidiary to the major issue.

Perhaps an illustration would be helpful here. Years ago, Ashley and I had just moved to Virginia and Analeigh was born shortly thereafter. A few weeks after Analeigh was born, my bride woke up in the middle of the night with excruciating pain. We rushed her to the hospital and the doctors set out to try to discern her problem. Through a series of tests (and mishaps!) it was discovered that she was having gallbladder issues. Now, the root problem was not obvious, but the symptom was, and the treatment proposed took both into account. The first thing that happened was the doctor gave her something for her pain but the real plan was for the root problem to be dealt with by removing the cause of her trouble. If the physician didn't look past the symptom to the source of the issue, there would be no relief... at least not for long. While it is right and valid for a physician to prescribe something for pain (working to alleviate the issue for a moment), if the treatment never proceeds past masking the symptom, that doctor is not going to be helpful. Folks, in the same way, if we as Christians don't see past the manifestation of evil to its source, we will never deal with the problem. People need Jesus. Our culture needs Jesus. Our institutions need Jesus and Jesus has given us the assignment of sharing His Gospel to various people and entities. Only Jesus overwhelms the spiritual forces that assail us. Only Jesus transforms hearts leading to

the recession of the sin that so acutely troubles our world. If we only work to mask the problem or take care of the cultural “pain”, we will never fight the battle that needs to be won.

The rest of this passage can be frustrating if we don’t understand the above truth. Was Paul ignorant of the issues of the world? How could he say that the sword we wield isn’t physical but the truth of the Word? How could he argue that the breastplate that protects us isn’t made of metal but of the righteousness of Christ? The only answer is that he saw beyond those that put him into prison to the real enemy who wouldn’t be defeated except with spiritual weapons. How about you?

March 14

### Revelation 12:10

Today's passage unveils one of Satan's chief strategies as he wages war on the Lord and His redeemed children. Revelation 12 details the marvelous moment in history in which Satan is "thrown down" signifying his ultimate and final defeat and destruction by the Lord. Nevertheless, this text also teaches us a bit about what Satan is busy doing between now and the moment of his demise. The devil is given a title in our text as John calls him "the accuser of the brethren".

The context of the passage tells us that this title is earned through Satan's work to accuse us (God's children) of sin in the presence of the Lord our God. Presumably, this accusing takes place in God's presence as well as in and through our own fragile minds. We can safely conclude that Satan's accusations are meant to work to infiltrate and convince us that we are not worthy of God's love and affection.

The great theologian R.C. Sproul summarized this idea nicely when he wrote, "When we sin, Satan comes to accuse us. He tells us that we can in no way be forgiven by God. He tries to make us think that our dirtiness makes us of no use to the kingdom of God." The design of this attack is quite clear as it aims to paralyze our growth and discourage us from pursuing the Lord and basking in His unconditional love and acceptance of us.

The way that these accusations come to us are varied. Sometimes, they are simply made known to us in our own thoughts but at other times we are accused by Satan through lost individuals. On Sunday, we saw an example of this play out in the Apostle Paul's ministry as people who represented the religious establishment riled up the crowds against God's servant through false accusations.

Acts 21 shows us that Paul was not against the law, in fact we learned in the text just prior that he was willing to continue in certain religious acts in order to accommodate those who were raised in Jewish circles. Paul did not see the law as useless or evil, he saw that Christ had come to fulfill the law and offer us a way to live in light of His finished redemption.

My point is simple, what these men and women said about Paul wasn't true and that's the point! Satan is incredibly good at making baseless accusations, so good in fact that the Lord has given him a well-earned nickname! Practically speaking, this means we ought not be surprised when we are publicly maligned, criticized and misrepresented. All of these things are an integral part of the weaponry of our enemy. Just like a soldier in the Middle East is unsurprised when they spot an IED, believers should not be shocked when they walk into an attack of accusations in this fallen world. May we be alert and aware of what Satan will throw in our direction and may we trust that God will use and overwhelm any fiery arrow the enemy may shoot our way.

March 15

**John 5:39-46**

Perhaps the most striking accusation that was thrown at Paul is found in Acts 21:28 as the people cry out that Paul was teaching “against the law”. The term “law” is often used in a generic way to denote the first five books of the Bible and sometimes the entire Old Testament (often the term “law and prophets” is employed to refer to the entire Old Testament). The point is that these accusers are being used by the real enemy (the cosmic forces of darkness led by Satan) to accuse Paul by asserting that he was refuting the Scriptures.

Stated differently, the religious among Paul are arguing that Paul was twisting or refuting the Scriptures in preaching Christ. The problem with this assertion should be obvious, as we know that the Scriptures are about Christ! Paul couldn’t possibly have been twisting the Bible in proclaiming Jesus because Jesus is the very heartbeat and subject of the Bible.

Today’s text records Jesus’ Words of rebuke towards the religious for the precise reason that they have rejected the One whom their Scriptures point to! They claimed to believe in God but they neglected to see that God was standing in their midst and His presence and Person was validated by the very Bible they said they embraced. They were blinded to the truth (by the devil, 2 Corinthians 4) and, consequently, they were guilty of twisting the very thing God gave to reveal Christ molding and fashioning the beautiful revelation of God into a weapon to be employed to reject Christ and His faithful servant.

Satan has an ability to accuse through twisting the Bible that we have been given and man is quite adept at being persuaded to follow his lead. Think about all the ways that the Bible has been twisted today. Some people claim that the Bible denies: the existence of a literal hell, the need for repentance, the teaching of proper sexual ethics, the exclusivity of salvation in Christ, the need for involvement in the local church and the like. We are constantly confronted with individuals, on television, radio, in bookstores and in person who are twisting the Word of God, using it to refuse proper worship and allegiance to the One that the Bible is meant to highlight. They take the clear teaching of the Bible and ignore or refashion it to accommodate the cultural sentiment and, in so doing, they reflect these religious Jews who were more intent on dragging Paul down than on listening and thinking about the truth that he was proclaiming.

The point for today is quite straightforward, Satan is the accuser of the brethren and one of the primary ways he accused true children of God is through leveraging lost people as weapons by employing them in their misuse and misinterpretation of Scripture. We must be leery of this kind of attack, and we must be aware that many who claim the name of “religious” and even some that claim Christ can be pawns in the hands of the enemy.

March 16

**Matthew 4:1-11**

We have seen that Satan is a master at twisting the Scriptures but he also tends to follow a general pattern in his advances. The devil's tendencies are perhaps most succinctly illustrated for us in the famous account of Jesus' temptation (at the hands of Satan) in the wilderness. There is incredible, biblically important, meaning to this temptation. Jesus as the second Adam is triumphing over Satan in the wilderness when Adam succumbed to the Evil One in the garden. Jesus is the better Adam and, by virtue of His perfection, is able to overcome the enemy for all who would unite with Him by faith and submit to His Lordship.

All this being said, what we see in the temptation of Christ are three distinct types of approaches that Satan likes to employ. The first is often referred to as the "lust of the flesh". This is the kind of temptation that appeals to us in our physical senses and needs. In this case, Jesus had not eaten for over a month! He was quite hungry in His humanity (to say the least) and Satan used that innate desire as a window to attempt to capitalize. The issue here is simple, if Jesus were to succumb to this temptation, He would be full but also would abuse His Divine prerogatives in order to make His God-ordained trial easier.

Jesus had been sent to that place in order to endure and His endurance was necessary to His perfection and triumph over the flesh and Satan. Therefore, there was no room to mitigate the difficulties if He would fulfill His mission.

There is an important lesson here for all of us, sometimes the short term "solution" is nothing but a way to short-circuit God's plan. The Lord clearly led Christ to the wilderness to overcome Satan and He has been clear to us regarding how we are to live faithfully. In spite of this fact, our enemy attempts to get us to take shortcuts. He can convince us that we have the power and resources to find our way out of our difficulties and, in so doing, he provides a temptation for us to wander from the Lord's good and perfect purposes in our lives (which includes times of want and trials for our own growth in holiness).

I do believe that there is something exceedingly relevant about this devotion. I hope that all of our writings are helpful and applicable but this one really drives at the heart of one of the chief issues in our "Christian" world today. You see, so much of what is offered in Jesus' name (note Satan's use of the Bible as another example of his twisting Scripture) is nothing but a sham. Many have the audacity to claim to have authority to give us that which God in His Sovereign and good plan has ordained for us not to have and, as such, they offer us nothing but a pathway to destruction. I have met many people who want to take the shortcut. They want the title without the work. They want the fame without the fight. They want all that this world has to offer even at the expense of their long-term joy. These temptations (to avoid the work, to misuse our ability, to provide in unbiblical/unfaithful ways, to seek God only for the stuff He can give us) are nothing but a temptation of the evil one and they must be resisted in faith that God's plan and purpose is far greater than our momentary comfort.

March 17

**Matthew 4:1-11**

How did Jesus prevail? How did He make a way to offer us salvation? The answer is that Jesus prevailed by suffering. A primary reason for the Jews missing their Messiah is grounded in the truth that they were looking for some extravagant, glorified and powerful (in the worldly sense) King to appear. How could the Messiah show up in a manger and grow up in a little, dirty town like Nazareth? God's design was so different than their assumptions and this meant that they simply had no category for Christ when He appeared.

Jesus' lifestyle of relative obscurity was a part of God's redemptive plan. God's design was never for Jesus to go on the road like a circus act. The way to eternal salvation was not to be paved with sideshows. Instead, the Lord's plan was to exalt Christ after He fulfilled His God-given mission of being the suffering servant. It is an absolute fact that the Lord would triumph, but it is equally true that He would do so in a way that nobody saw coming. Isaiah had prophesied about this Jesus but the world was not ready or willing to recognize the prophecies fulfillment. Satan understood the plan of God better than most and that explains his second temptation of Jesus.

The goal of the temptation was for Christ to be honored but in the wrong sense. Satan knew that if Jesus threw Himself down from such an exalted and visibly prominent position that many would witness the spectacle. If this event took place, Christ would indeed be famous and celebrated but He would not be glorified in the way that God had ordained. Essentially, the temptation is for Christ to pursue His 15 minutes of fame at the expense of eternity of deserved and well-earned praise. Tom Schreiner says it this way "Such a spectacular display as jumping from this great height unharmed would have gained Jesus an enthusiastic following, but it would not have followed the Father's messianic and redemptive plan of suffering and proclaiming the Kingdom of heaven."

We could summarize the above statement this way, while the temptation would have delivered something, it was not in keeping with God's design for the Messiah and therefore it would have resulted in an eternally inferior outcome. Many temptations take this form. They offer us an opportunity to make a name for ourselves. They give us the chance to have a title, position or place of prominence but they always come with an immense expense. The cost of giving into such a temptation is the glory of an intimate walk with the Lord and the joy of fulfilling His eternal mission for our lives. Many people give into this kind of temptation. They sell their proverbial birthright for a mere bowl of soup. They punt on eternal joy and commendation for the fleeting praises of men who won't even be alive for much longer. They sacrifice the substance that comes through an obedient and faithful walk with the Lord for the quick ascension to a position or title that means very little in the long run.

Get rich quick schemes and fame and fortune pale in comparison to the glory of the riches of Jesus. There is great wisdom in following the path that God has laid out for us. His road is difficult and narrow. Those who are lost would never choose it and its challenge dissuades many from even starting to try to follow it but the end result dwarfs any trinket the world would offer us. May we commit to God's plan, as counterintuitive as it might be, in the faith that He is mighty and Sovereign and loving towards us and wise beyond compare and may we recognize the presence of the devil when anyone attempts to steer us away from God's best.



March 18

**Matthew 4:1-11**

Careful readers will no doubt observe the parallel between Satan's final temptation of Christ and the temptation that ultimately prevailed in the Garden of Eden. If you remember, the serpent (Satan himself) lured Adam and Eve by stating that they could be like God if they only ate of the forbidden fruit. The crux of the enticement was rooted in their desire to be their own deity and, therefore, no longer in submission to the Father.

The third temptation is similar in that Satan offers Jesus an opportunity to be worshipped in another sinful, quick, and supposedly easy manner. The idea here is quite simple, Satan suggests to Jesus a shortcut to glory that would involve disobedience to the Father but immediate results. Theologians differ on the ground of this promise. My opinion is that Satan could not have delivered on this vow even momentarily and I believe that is backed up quite nicely as we look at the result of Adam and Eve's departure from the truth. Adam and Eve's experience was never what Satan promised and I have no reason to believe that this temptation would result in anything close to the devil's guarantee either.

Regardless, the larger truth is that temptation will often appeal to our pride. We all want to be recognized, honored and, dare I say, some would like to be worshipped. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that our glory is the ultimate goal of life and this is why temptations that are directed towards that weak spot can be so deadly.

The biblical path to joy is not in our own exaltation, it is in humility which results in God's glory and our commendation in His presence. Scripture instructs us that those who attempt their own exaltation will be humbled but those who live humbly will be exalted by the Lord. While this is paradoxical to most, we must realize that God often works in ways that we don't understand, choosing methods that seem backwards to us. The Bible gives us many examples of God's counterintuitive method. We overcome the world through suffering (John 16:33), we win the world not with physical weapons, but the armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-17) and we find the fulfillment and commendation we so desperately desire in our humility not our pride.

It strikes me that this kind of humble and faith-filled thinking is absent not only from the world but also often in our churches. How many of us consider God's path of self-denial when we are disillusioned? Do we live in such a way as to seek immediate credit or glory? Are we susceptible to Satan's advances in this area of our lives? Are we constantly entertaining thoughts of wanting to advance and wanting more credit? Do we see the Kingdom of God like a corporate ladder to be scaled by our own might or as a glorious establishment that we have no business being a part of save the grace of our Mighty and Forgiving God? The end result of Jesus' decision was exaltation. Exaltation that Satan could not hope to offer, much less deliver! His path should inform our decisions. May we live faithfully today, trusting that our God has not forgotten us and has a plan for our own rest and joy in the years and ages to come.

March 19

### **Matthew 4:1-11**

As we wrap up this week's devotions, it would behoove us to consider how Jesus responded to each of the temptations that were tossed His way. Matthew 4 has an amazing instructional value for the believer. After all, we can expect that Satan will come after us in a similar manner which means that we are given such a marvelous grace in the life of Jesus to learn from and emulate. How did Jesus overcome the devil? The answer is that He overcame the temptation of the evil one through the Scriptures.

Notice here that every temptation (which involves a twisting of Scripture) is met with biblical truth. Jesus here quotes each time from the Bible. When Satan tries to probe, Jesus fends him off with the truth. The Bible is shown to be the sword of the Spirit. It is the weapon that Satan cannot counter. It is the truth that unveils and exposes every lie and distortion that our enemy might try to propagate in our midst.

The point then is that the Bible is the means that God has given us to stand strong. It exposes error, reminds us of truth, promises what Satan tries to circumvent and gives us a strong foundation to stand in the midst of life's storms. This means that our study of Scripture is, in part, our preparation for the inevitable battles with the forces of darkness. No one would walk into a war without a weapon but so many believers live in a spiritual struggle with little to no ammunition to counter their real and powerful enemy! This must change if we hope to take ground for the Kingdom in our contested moment in redemptive history.

So, we arrive at a very important conclusion, Bible study is key. Jesus demonstrates this truth for us as recorded in the Scriptures. Luke tells us that our Lord spent years growing, in His humanity. According to the Scriptures, Christ grew in His wisdom and stature (Luke 2:52). In fact, He spent approximately 30 years preparing for His public ministry which began, in earnest, with this temptation. He was ready for the inevitable struggle, how about you? If Jesus needed the Bible to overcome the enemy's advance, don't we?

I believe the answer is obvious, but I also want you to notice one other nugget that I find exceedingly helpful and challenging. Christ's responses are all direct references from Scripture but notice that they all come from one book. Jesus responds to each of Satan's temptations with a quotation from Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy?!?!?! Isn't that one of those boring books that has nothing interesting to say? When I was a kid, growing up in church, we used to constantly hear that reading through the Bible was great... if you could get through Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. This seems to be the prevailing opinion among many believers, yet our Lord shows us the immense value in knowing these books. Years ago, I heard a man preaching on this passage. He pointed out Jesus' responses and where they came from and then he asked us a question I'll never forget. He looked at us with an intense gaze and wondered aloud, "what if your spiritual success today was based on your knowledge of the book of Deuteronomy?"

His point is clear, Jesus leaned on this precious book to prevail and if Christ used it, we should be prepared to do so as well. All of the Scripture is profitable (2 Timothy 3:16-17) and our Lord's example shows us this truth in real time. May we press into the Scriptures knowing that our adversary loves to twist them but he cannot stand when they are rightly divided. May we not neglect the weapon we have been given and may we trust that God uses the truth of the Word to repel the forces of darkness that so desperately desire to harm His children.