



2023 Weekly Devotions

Week of: May 29th - Jun 4th

Sermon: May 28th



SMYRNA BAPTIST CHURCH
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May 29

1 Timothy 3:2

When we consider the fact that this is the fourth time that Paul has defended himself since being arrested, it is amazing that he has not been found guilty of any crime. He has stood before the Jewish mob, the Sanhedrin, Felix, and now Festus. He will soon stand before King Agrippa. It just goes on and on. A lesson that God may be wanting us to glean from these narratives is that living a life "above reproach" is vitally important as children of God. Paul wrote to Timothy these words, "An overseer, then, must be above reproach." Let's dig into that a bit today to see how this truth impacted Paul's situation.

The simple truth is that if Paul had been an easy target, the religious leaders would have successfully and quickly eradicated their nemesis. If they could have pointed fingers at glaring areas of immorality, questionable decisions and behaviors, or obvious examples of breaking Jewish laws, then exposing him would have been simple and punishment easily defended and swift. The truth, however, is that his life was one lived above reproach. The accusations were groundless, undefendable, and powerless. Paul's character, lifestyle, and reputation preceded the accusations and made them seem foolish in the eyes of most people. How wonderful it must have been for Paul when the people would hear the accusations and their first response be, "That is not true." We all want to live in such a way that attacks against our character are repelled by the truth of our actions.

Church family, we have a very real adversary in the evil one. He would like nothing more than to carry out his desires for your life which is to, "Kill, steal, and destroy" (John 10:10). On top of that, he desires to ruin your testimony rendering you useless as an instrument of righteousness for the glory of God. He is already a deceiver, liar, and accuser of the brethren, so we must do our part in not giving him ammunition to use against us. This is one of the main reasons Paul said that a person, especially who is to lead, must be above reproach.

The fact that all of humanity is guilty of sin and born with a sin nature makes spreading the gospel an uphill battle from the outset. People are prone to prefer the darkness to the light and typically aren't too keen on feeling conviction over sin. This means that our propensity is to look for any excuse not to believe the teachings of Christianity. Folks are quick to dismiss the authority of the Scriptures and its claims with meager or even made-up reasons. The natural leaning of the heart and mind is to reject authority and restrictions of our behavior. It should be our desire to avoid giving others any reason to deny the truths of our faith or the authenticity and accuracy of the Bible. I cannot think of much worse than a person claiming to be a Christian and living like, or even worse than, those who are lost. People see it, they recognize it for what it is, and they are often repelled from our faith rather than drawn to it.

The point for today, as we consider Paul standing before Festus, is that much of his safety and blessings of God were flowing into his life and into his situation due to his innocence. Friends, there is a power to innocence that God uses to advance His kingdom through the lives of His people. When Paul wrote to Timothy those words mentioned above, he knew firsthand how necessary it was to be able to stand against your accusers clean and above reproach. He knew that Satan would riddle his testimony with holes meant to destroy his impact for Christ's kingdom if he lived an ungodly life. The same is true for us. Determine to live your life above reproach so that you are personally blessed, and others are too as they see in you what it looks like to follow Jesus.

May 30

John 15:18; Revelation 12:17

Certainly, you have noticed by now in our society and current cultural climate, that it is Christianity that is the target of hatred, bigotry, and intolerance. Muslims are granted freedoms to build Mosques and have dedicated prayer times in schools. We make room for Jews, Buddhists, Satan worshippers, and any "religion" any group comes up with except for one – Christianity. Have you ever wondered why that is the case? In today's point to ponder, we will talk briefly of some reasons why Christianity is hated at such a deep level.

The first and most obvious reason why our faith is hated so much and why there is no tolerance towards Christ or His people is Satan's hatred of the Godhead. In Revelation 12:17 John wrote, "So the dragon was enraged with the woman, and went off to make war with the rest of her children, who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus." Dear ones, that is our situation perfectly stated. Satan could not destroy Christ, so he set out to destroy His chosen people Israel and His Bride - the church. He is literally making war with us in an attempt to do as much harm to God as he can. He hates God so he hates His children.

Notice that the verse for today said that he makes war with those of us who "keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus." Satan is not the least bit threatened by those who claim to be Christians but are not in reality. Only those who follow Christ in obedience are a threat to him, and only they will feel the effects of his wrath. We could simply state it this way, darkness hates light and false religious systems always fight the Truth. Satan has no need to attack Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, atheism, or any false religion because they are not truth. The reason Christianity is singled out as the enemy and the problem in our society today is because Satan is behind the powers of evil that we see in our world with one goal – to attack Christ and His Truths.

Before I touch briefly on a statement Jesus made from John 15:18, I want to point out one other truth provided to us from Revelation 12 which helps us understand the attack and aggression towards Christianity today. In verse 12 it says, "Woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, knowing that he has only a short time." The accuser of the brethren was thrown from heaven to earth, and he is quite angry. He knows that Jesus was successful in redeeming us, he knows that his days are numbered, and so he is going to go down fighting and destroying as many and as much as he can. Sadly, it seems like he is doing a good job with his days of deception and devastation doesn't it? Hang in there, brothers and sisters, because Jesus won.

So, all of the false systems in our society are fighting against the one Truth that is Christianity. When you read the narratives of Paul's life and the relentless attacks and attempts to kill him, I hope you understand why. Satan hated him because he was working so effectively for Christ and the advancement of His kingdom. Satan despised the glory that Jesus received because of Paul's life and testimony and would never stop trying to silence him. It seems crazy that the Jewish leaders would still be adamantly attempting to kill Paul even after two years of imprisonment at the hands of Felix. Even now, with Festus, the new governor, the hatred was the same. Please note that it was Satan working in them. The same is true for us today dear ones. Satan has many tools in our government as well as in the churches that are intent on destroying all that is good and godly in our world today. Don't lose hope. Read the rest of Revelation and know that Jesus wins so we do too.

May 31

2 Kings 6:15-17; Psalm 119:18; Hebrews 11:1

Strength and courage demonstrated in the people of God inspire us all so much. I have heard it said that faith is never more beautiful than when it shines bright under pressure. When others would run, cower, or give in, we've got people like Paul who stood strong and faithful in the face of adversity, persecution, and the constant threat of death. My point for us to ponder today is simply this: Faith in God makes us courageous.

Beloved, when the words of the pages of sacred Scripture become more than ink on paper, you are advancing in faith. When the words become real, instructive, and truth that you are convinced of, then you are ready to live out Pauline faith. To believe with all of your being that heaven is real, that there is life after death, and that when we take our last breath, we transition straight into glory changes everything. To be able to take Jesus at His word when He said that we would never die, that He will never forsake us, and that His grace will be sufficient for every step of our journey is the foundation for obedience that does not quit in the face of adversity or heartache. What I am writing about today is the faith that the author of Hebrews writes about in Hebrews 11:1.

That well known passage says, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." The word "assurance" is the same word that is translated as "exact representation" in Hebrews 1:3. That is interesting because God is saying that this depth of faith is the same as the real thing; it is as if it is already so! There is a genuine measure of certainty within our faith. So, "the assurance of things" is the basis by which we make our decisions to believe, to trust, to hold on, to remain steadfast, and to be courageous. Paul honestly took Jesus at His Word and lived in light of His promises. We can too. How does one get to this level of faith?

I recall that Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 3:18 that we become like Christ as we behold Him. This means that as we "see" Him in all of His beauty and value, we will love Him more, obey Him more, and be transformed into His image more. The point that I am making here is that as our ability to see Christ grows, so does our faith. It is imperative that we pray the prayer of the psalmist in Psalm 119:18. There it is written, "Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law." That simple prayer is a means by which our faith grows to deeper levels. The Psalmist assumes that as we see the wonders of God's written word, we will be captured by His majesty and love, surrender to His Lordship, and obey His commands. In a real way, seeing is believing.

I am reminded of the story told in 2 Kings 6 where Elisha prays for his servant who is afraid because of the size and strength of the adversary surrounding them (2 Kings 6:15-17). The servant is overwhelmed and afraid because He cannot see the presence of God nor the aid that is available to them because of God. Like so many of us, God is not a part of our present reality by faith. That is why courage fades and fears assail which is just the opposite of the point of this devotion. May we, like Elisha, pray that God would grant us the ability to see Him both in our circumstances and most importantly through the promises of His Word. The Word reveals God to us and communicates His nature which teaches us what to expect from our immutable (unchanging) God. May this develop a faith in us that is grounded in His truth and that strengthens us with courage to face any and everything that comes our way.

June 1

2 Corinthians 11:12-15

I know it is true, but it still saddens me greatly when I realize that the greatest opposition to what we do as Christians trying to advance the gospel comes from “religious” folks. Now, before any of you start throwing off on religion, stop it! Christianity is a religion, and it is good and right. Religion is a particular system of faith and worship devoted to God. There is nothing wrong with religion. It is false religiosity that is the problem. When one is pharisaical or hypocritical, religion gets a bad name. Now, let’s get back to what I want to ponder today.

The greatest opposition against the church comes from religious people. Think for a moment about who opposed Jesus in the Bible. You don’t read about prostitutes, drunks, or criminals standing against Christ and the gospel. Rather, it is always various segments of religious folks. The attacks on our faith tend to come from “insiders.” I am not suggesting that there is never any resistance from lost people. In the political arena, plenty of people exist who oppose our beliefs, but they don’t claim to be Christians – for the most part. I think what would help us better understand the enemy is to realize that he disguises himself as an angel of light. In other words, the approach that Satan often takes is to infiltrate the church by acting like and looking like one of us.

Paul wrote a warning to the Corinthians about this truth. He said, “For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore, it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness...” (2 Cor. 11:13-15). You see dear ones, we should not be surprised when biblical Christianity or godly and Christ-honoring decisions are made in the church and are opposed and rejected by “church members.” There are hoards of people in the churches across the American landscape who are servants of Satan disguised as angels of light. They do it because their father, the devil, leads them to act just as he does.

Satan’s minions show up at business meetings and vote against godly endeavors such as missions and generosity. They recommend foolish and worldly endeavors for the church. They whisper in the hallways and parking lots as they sow seeds of discord, doubt, and deception. They are quick to run to mischievousness and are known as gossips. They manipulate, lie, and divide people as much as they can. They are children of Satan, and they act like it behind closed doors and in dark places. The challenge for the church comes because they know our lingo and they know how they are supposed to act when everyone is watching. To make matters worse, they often do “good” deeds and are known to do so. They have “snowed” many people and make correcting them difficult because not everyone can see the truth.

I find it interesting and encouraging as I read verse 12 of the same chapter mentioned above. There Paul says, “But what I am doing I will continue to do, so that I may cut off opportunity from those who desire an opportunity to be regarded just as we are in the matter about which they are boasting.” Paul is not playing games with these people, and he is not tiptoeing around the fact that wolves in sheep’s clothing are among the people of God. He is determined to protect the sheep by exposing the wolves. Beloved, we must be mature enough to know that this is the reality in which we live. We must know the true marks of Christianity and learn to be patient with people before we give them the key to the front door. Everything that glitters is not gold, and everyone that claims to know Jesus doesn’t. Satan sneaks in as an angel of light and that is why so much opposition to genuine Christianity comes from so called “Christians.” Be wise dear ones.

June 2

2 Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 4:17-19; Hebrews 3:13

Yesterday our point to ponder dealt with the reality that Satan, as the deceiver, disguises himself, as do those who follow him, as one of us. Another impact of his ability to do that and to deceive deeply, is the way he uses sin to blind those who habitually participate in it. We need look no farther than the fourth chapter of Genesis. Consider the impact of sin on Cain's life. For reasons unknown to us, Cain's offerings to God were not from a pure heart and with godly motivation. In contrast to his half-hearted acts of worship of God, his brother Abel loved the Lord with his whole heart. I am not sure if there is any significance to Genesis 4:3-4, but it is recorded that Cain brought an offering from his crops while Abel brought the first fruits of his flocks. What I see there is the possibility that Cain did not bring God the first of his crops as he should have, while Abel did.

The point for today's devotion is that the sin that Cain committed eventually enslaved him, blinded him, and led him to murder his own brother. Church family, wisdom demands that we know if we flirt with sin, we are playing with fire. The blinding effect of sin is no joke, and it can lead a person to callousness and choices that are shocking and often unbelievable. How many times have we been aghast over a decision that someone we knew made that destroyed people around him/her? We have wondered how this could be. It makes no sense; they know better; what are they thinking? On top of that, you can't get through to them, they won't listen to any wise or godly counsel, and eventually they just write you off. We feel flabbergasted and confused.

The simple truth that we often fail to remember is that Satan is a deceiver and sin blinds as it enslaves. Paul wrote, "The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4). This happens to unbelievers, but dear friends, it can happen to you too. You can lose sight of the beauty of Christ and the truth of His Word as sin causes you to become calloused and not caring about the things of God. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "...and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness" (4:19). In the previous verse he said they had become hardened in their hearts toward the things of God. That is not a place that we want to be.

The author of the book of Hebrews said it well in Hebrews 3:13, "But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called today, so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." Brothers and sisters, sin lies and deceives as it uses every form of trickery, flattery, falsehood, and allurements to lead you to disobey God's Word and His ways. Sin tells you that you need not obey and that there is much to gain in going your own rebellious way. Paul wrote to the believers in Rome these words, "For sin shall not be master over you...do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness" (Romans 6:14,16). You may think that you can handle a little sin here and there, but what you may fail to realize is that every time you sin, it is gaining ground in your heart and mind. If it continues, it will become master over you and the blinding effect will take place even while you don't see it. The next thing you know, you are becoming resistant to the Word of God, to the people of God, and to conviction or correction. You will have become enslaved, and the evil one will have the upper hand in your life. Sin enslaves and deceives dear ones. Stay away from it!

June 3

John 7:30, 19:10-11

We often write about the providence of God. So much could be said on this subject that is both wonderful and true. What I want to start with today is the simple truth that a proper and biblical understanding of God's providence is meant to free His people from anxiety. When we consider the fact that God is in complete control of all the circumstances of our lives, we should find great peace, comfort, hope, and confidence to keep going. The point of Jesus telling us in the Sermon on the Mount that the Father feeds the birds and clothes the flowers of the fields is that we would rest knowing He will take care of us too. This is to eliminate worrying about things. We are to honestly believe that God is at work in the smallest of details, including those in our lives. That is a comforting reality when you know the God of the Scriptures.

A gentleman by the name of Clyde Kilby once wrote, *"I shall bet my life on the assumption that this world is not idiotic, neither run by an absentee landlord, but that today, this very day, some stroke is being added to the cosmic canvas that in due course I shall understand with joy as a stroke made by the architect who calls himself Alpha and Omega."* That stirs my heart greatly and causes me to lean into the Father with confidence that He will hold me up, direct my steps, and order my days with purpose, wisdom, and His infinite love. I need not worry. The heavens declare the glory of the Lord (Ps. 19:1) so we should look at each day so that our souls will exult in Christ.

Dear ones, when Christ died on the cross, everything that we need to make it through this world was secured for us (Rom. 8:29-32). Jesus Christ purchased it with His body and blood (Titus 2:14); The Holy Spirit performs it in us (Gal. 3:5; Heb. 13:21) and we know nothing can separate us from the love of the Father (Rom. 8:35-39). These are beautiful truths that are meant to impact us both theologically and experientially.

John Piper wrote, "God purposefully provides for, sustains, and governs the world." Piper went on to say, "God does not just see, He sees to." In other words, providentially He makes sure His perfect plan is going to unfold. He sees to it that we are cared for and covered by grace. My point in this entry today is that we would walk through our days confident and courageous rather than fearful and worried. Our God controls the people who are in positions that affect us too. I want to spend our remaining time today focusing on an example in the life of Christ that clearly demonstrates this and is intended to give us courage and hope.

As Christ was standing before Pilate after His arrest, we read of a moment that reveals the absolute sovereignty and providence of God over all situations and people. Pilate is questioning Jesus and makes this statement, "You do not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You" (John 19:10)? That seems like a reasonable thing for the guy in charge to say. In a worldly sense, he definitely had the governmental authority to make the decision in regard to the fate of Jesus. But look at what Jesus said in response to Pilate. "Jesus answered, 'You would have no authority over me, unless it had been given you from above'" (John 10:11). On the surface it appears that Pilate is in control, but we know that God is the One who is determining what happens in this moment in the life of Christ. It reminds me of the passage from John 7:30 that says, "So they were seeking to seize Him; and no man laid his hand on Him, because His hour had not yet come." Who determined the hour? Well, it was God of course. The same truth exists every minute of every day. It is God who determines what happens to us, how it happens, when and by whose hand. We saw this truth in the life of Paul, and it is equally true for us today.

June 4

Genesis 45:5, 8; Luke 22:53

Ponder today the numerous times that Paul stood in precarious places to say the least. Time and time again he faced moments of uncertainty that surely created stress and anxiety in his heart and mind. Many of the verses that have become precious to us were written by Paul from experiences in which he learned to live out what he would later use to admonish. When Paul told the Philippians not to worry but to pray, surely you realize he had to do that himself often. No doubt that he faced moments when fear rose in his heart, and he had to beat it down with the promises of God's word. That is how we must fight for faith too dear saints. He wasn't immune to the struggles, and neither are we. The key is to learn to fight well with the sword of the Spirit – the Bible. The victory lies not simply in memorized verses, but also in understanding principles of Scripture.

I wrote about this yesterday and I want to continue the subject today from several more passages of Scripture. Please know that my motivation and my hope is that you would find strength in knowing how God operates and providentially orders His world. You are not where you are by accident and your circumstances are part of a great plan. Now, it must be said that many of the "troubles" that we face are brought on by poor choices that run contrary to biblical teaching. However, even that truth does not undermine God's ultimate plan or His ability to get you where He wants you to be. People cannot thwart God's plan for your life. They are certainly pawns in His Hand and become instruments that He uses to shape us, but they cannot keep you from receiving what God has in store for you. Let me show you from Scripture such cases to make my point.

Joseph summed it up nicely in the book of Genesis when he looked back over his life. He said to his brothers, "Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life" (Gen. 45:5). Notice that Joseph still tells them that "they" did it. They are guilty and they made their own choices because of the sin in their own hearts. What we must know as adherents to the Scriptures is that God providentially used their sinful choices to accomplish His perfect plan. He said again a couple of verse later, "Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt." The reason that Joseph can say it was God who sent him there is because it was God who allowed it to providentially happen to preserve life.

My point is simply that even though his brothers sinned, if God had not wanted Joseph in Egypt for this purpose, he would not have ended up there. God used their freewill choices within His sovereign will. God used the circumstances of Joseph's life for greater purposes and he is doing the same thing with our lives. Circumstances are simply another way God guides and guards our lives. The circumstances of Paul's life were all pieces to a grand and beautiful plan of God getting the gospel and churches planted all over the ancient world. The Great Commission is God's plan, and He orchestrates our lives to get the job done.

Now, what about all of the evil and darkness that appears to have the upper hand in our world today? Look with me at Luke 22:53 and remember that seasons and times are also controlled by God. Jesus said, "While I was with you daily in the temple, you did not lay hands on Me; but this hour and the power of darkness are yours." The time was not while He was in the temple, but there was a time coming. The moment of His arrest and crucifixion was a time when God chose to allow Satan a power and authority that he did not previously have. It was God's time for God's purpose and plan, and it still is. Be comforted knowing that He governs the times of humanity with an amazing plan for all of it and all of us.