

When the Church Is a Threat to the State

Psalm 2, Acts 17:5–9

The devil's name is Destroyer.¹ He stands in opposition to Christ. Our Lord said, "The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to *destroy*: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly."² The Good Shepherd gives his sheep spiritual life now—abundant life! He awakens us to our need for him. He brings us into fellowship with his people and transforms us into his worshipers. But that's not all: his born-again sheep receive the gift of eternal life—life that begins immediately in the here-and-now, continues into eternity future and will never end. Christ says, "I give unto them *eternal* life."³ His sheep will never perish but live in joyful fellowship with him forever! It doesn't get any better than that! The contrast couldn't be greater: the thief comes to steal and to kill and to *destroy*; Christ comes to give his people *life*. Christ is the *giver* of life; the devil is the *destroyer* of life. The devil doesn't *build* anything; his goal is to *destroy* Christ's kingdom. Let's see how these dynamics play out in our text today. I have three points; first,

1. Gospel Success

In our text last week Paul and Silas had begun to preach the gospel of Christ in Thessalonica, and God had blessed their preaching with phenomenal success. Thessalonica was a new, previously unreached mission field; there were no existing Christians in the city. Paul and Silas had to start almost from scratch—*almost*! As we saw last week, there was a Jewish synagogue in Thessalonica. Synagogues were places where observant Jews who were located far from the temple in Jerusalem would gather to read the Law and the prophets and to pray. There would also be devout Gentiles (called "Greeks" in v. 4) in attendance. These were adult men who were moved by the truth of the Old Testament and believed in Israel's God, but who out of fear of a painful surgical procedure had not submitted to the rite of circumcision and officially become part of the covenant people. As we saw last week, Paul and Silas spent three Sabbath days in the synagogue in Thessalonica, preaching and teaching. They had an amazing ministry in less than a month's time, before being chased out of town. As we saw in verse 4, "some" of the Jews were persuaded, but a "great multitude" of the devout Gentiles came to Christ and "joined" (προσκληρόω, *be attached to, throw in their lot with*)—that is, were baptized by Paul and Silas and formally received into the new church plant. This "great multitude" of Gentiles included "not a few of the leading women," that

¹ Ἀπολλύων (Rev. 9:11)

² John 10:10

³ John 10:28

is, prominent women, “women of high standing in the city who were the wives of the principal citizens.”⁴

Other Gentile converts were converted pagans whose former worldview centered around Roman gods and goddesses such as Jupiter, Mars and Bacchus. These were men and women who had no knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, no access to the word of God. They were lost; their god was their belly; they lived for pleasure; they were without hope. They needed the gospel! They are like a lot of people we encounter every day. That might have been the background of some of us assembled here today as well. Without the Holy Spirit changing our hearts we want nothing to do with God. But when Paul and Silas preached, the Holy Spirit opened hearts and brought in a great harvest of souls. This was a whirlwind of change: just three weeks before there had been no church, no believers in Christ; now, three weeks later, an organized church of baptized Christians had been established: the first church of Thessalonica! Here was a fertile field for the gospel, here were people whose lives were transformed by the Holy Spirit’s work. Now, they had a hope, a future, and a reason for living. As Paul would later express it, “For to me to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21). No matter what kind of background, no matter how great a person’s past sins, the one who is in Christ is “a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). We in our day may not experience such a sudden harvest of souls, but the Holy Spirit of God is still in the business of transforming sinners into saints—praise his holy name! But where God is at work, Satan launches his assaults. Our primary enemies are not fellow human beings but demonic powers. “We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.”⁵ Is God blessing our church? Is he adding to the church daily such as should be saved? Then get ready for the devil’s attacks! That brings us to point two,

2. Satanic opposition

We read that “the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people” (v. 5). Here is a mob incited by Satan, the destroyer, seeking to demolish the newborn church before it gets firmly planted. Here, the devil tries to repeat his previous attack which he had carried out at the birth of Christ, when the second Person of the Holy Trinity was coming into the world, where we read that “the

⁴ *Expositors Bible Commentary*, PocketBible

⁵ Eph. 6:12–13

dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born” (Rev. 12:4). Satan is not establishing a kingdom on its own merits, trying to offer a superior product that will attract discerning buyers—no! His goal at all times is to destroy the kingdom of Christ. So it is in our own day: the forces of wickedness are trying to destroy Christian culture.

Consider this awful tweet posted yesterday: “The radical Christians are found in the rural areas. Their towns are defenseless, they have almost no cops and their firemen are volunteers. They have to borrow cops and firemen from neighboring jurisdictions miles away in order to handle anything big. And they think they’re safe out there. Forget burning cities; cities are on *our* side! It’s time for rural areas to feel the heat. You show up 100 deep in every rural town in a 50 mile radius intent on revolution and you’ll crash their system and make them pay. And if you all think I’m kidding, I’m dead serious. *This was caused by backward ... rural conservatives operating out of a Christianized worldview (even if they’re not Christian, they’re heavily influenced by it)*; they were the ones who voted for Trump in ’16; those disillusioned redneck/white trash/blue collar ... types who flipped massively for the GOP. Punish them! Punish their towns! They say, ‘BLM burned the cities to the ground.’ I say, ‘Let them see firsthand what it’s like when a community is truly burned to the ground!’ They want a civil war? They should have been careful what they asked and voted for.”⁶

The author of this hate-filled, name-calling rant doesn’t hide his hatred for Christians and the Christian worldview; he calls for burning rural communities to the ground—in other words, *mayhem* and *murder* targeting Christians. It is the spirit of the Prince of darkness that motivates such vile speech. Such a spirit was exposed—outed—by him who is Love Incarnate in John’s gospel: “Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a *murderer* from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it” (John 8:44). Christ is “the truth”⁷; Satan is a murderer and a *liar*. He knows his destiny is “everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels,”⁸ and he wants to take as many people to hell with him as he can. He will take you, if you don’t turn to Christ.

Yes, tragically, we are living at a time when churches and Christian institutions such as crisis pregnancy centers are being vandalized and burned down. But Satan’s garden-variety tactic is to sew discord within the church of Jesus Christ.

⁶ <https://twitter.com/libsoftiktok/status/1540528857186549760> accessed 7-2-22 (spelling and punctuation corrected)

⁷ John 14:6

⁸ Matt. 25:41

Solomon wrote about this in the book of Proverbs: “These six things doth the Lord hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: a proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, an heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, a false witness that speaketh lies, *and he that soweth discord among brethren*” (Prov. 6:16–19). Truly, may all our hearts be ruled at all times by the Prince of Peace! God hates the spirit of discord! May his blessed Holy Spirit enable us all to be peacemakers, standing for the truth with humility.

The courageous Supreme Court justices who overruled *Roe v. Wade* are not being permitted to live in peace at the present time. The Dobbs ruling was correct; there was never a right to kill an innocent unborn child in the U.S. Constitution. Those who say that the Supreme Court decision whisked away the constitutional right to abortion are outright lying. (Remember, Satan is “the father of lies.”) In overruling *Roe v. Wade* the Supreme Court returned the matter of abortion to the states.

U.S. Supreme Court Marshal Gail Curley has penned letters to Maryland authorities, including Gov. Larry Hogan, imploring them to “enforce laws that prohibit picketing outside of the homes of Supreme Court Justices who live” in the state. The marshal cites state and county laws that make picketing outside of the justices’ homes illegal. She references the Maryland Criminal Code Law, which states that “[a] person may not intentionally assemble with another in a manner that disrupts a person’s right to tranquility in the person’s home.”⁹ Picketing outside a Supreme Court justice’s home is also contrary to Federal law. But state and Federal authorities, refusing to do their duty to keep the peace, are permitting and even abetting lawless and criminal behavior. We need to pray for the safety of our Supreme Court justices and their families, and pray “that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.”

Here in our Acts text we have an instance of official malfeasance in inciting a riot. Take particular note of the terms used by Luke the historian. As noted by one author, “Their plan was to bring Paul and Silas before ‘the assembly of citizens’ (τὸν δῆμον) and ‘the politarchs’ (τοὺς πολιάρχας) on a charge of disturbing the Pax Romana by preaching a *religio illicita* and by advocating another king in opposition to Caesar. But when they could not find the missionaries at Jason’s house—evidently because Jason and some others who believed their message had hidden them away—they dragged Jason and some other Christian brothers before the politarchs.”¹⁰ The politarchs were civic magistrates. A number of politarchs (five or six in Thessalonica) formed the city council in Macedonian

⁹ <https://www.breitbart.com/law-and-order/2022/07/02/supreme-court-marshall-implores-maryland-governor-stop-protests-justices-homes/> accessed July 2, 2022

¹⁰ *Expositors Bible Commentary* (PocketBible)

cities.¹¹ The δῆμος was the popular assembly for the transaction of public business.¹² The politarchs—regularly appointed public officials—wanted to arrest humble ministers of the gospel simply for speaking the truth. So, as in the case of picketers disturbing the peace outside Supreme Court justices’ private residences with official backing and even instigation, this mob bent on destroying the nascent Thessalonian church was going about its lawbreaking with official backing. Here was a corrupt civil government trying to obstruct and destroy a peaceful assembly of Christians that only wanted to worship the true God through the only Mediator Jesus Christ and tell their fellow-citizens the Good News. As our Old Testament text puts it, “The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord” (Ps. 2:2). But as the Bible puts it, to persecute Christians is to persecute Christ himself. Jesus expressed it this way: “Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). As with the crucifixion of our Lord (here we quote the metrical Psalm that we will sing in just a few moments), “For see how dogs encircle me! On every side there stands a brotherhood of cruelty; they pierce my feet and hands. My bones are plain for me to count; men see me and they stare. My clothes among them they divide, and gamble for their share.”¹³ The Psalmist is not talking about domesticated house pets. When he says, “see how dogs encircle me!” he’s speaking of wild dogs—pit bulls, if you will, who have been trained to attack. When he says, “On every side there stands a brotherhood of cruelty,” he is referring to official state-sponsored criminal activity directed, first, against the Lord of glory, when the Jewish leaders and the Roman occupiers crucified our innocent Savior, and secondarily, against the preachers of the gospel going throughout the ancient world to call sinners to Christ—a peaceful activity.

Here, then, are Gospel success and Satanic opposition; finally,

3. Clashing kingdoms

In our text we encounter the name Jason. His name suddenly appears in the text with no introduction. Who was he? Apparently a recent convert, a baptized member of the church. According to the lexicographer Strong, his name means *he who will heal*. (Christ is the ultimate healer, who heals both body and soul.) Jason had known the Lord less than three weeks, but already he was prepared to suffer for Christ’s sake. Here was a man who believed in Christ so strongly that he didn’t try to save his own skin by disclosing the whereabouts of Paul and Silas. How

¹¹ Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich *Lexicon*, πολιτάρχης (Logos Bible Software)

¹² Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich *Lexicon*, δῆμος (Logos Bible Software)

¹³ *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* 22A, “My God, My God, O Why Have You Forsaken Me?”

frightened and powerless he must have felt when his house was assaulted. A man's home is supposed to be his castle. How would you feel if suddenly, in the middle of the night, your front door was broken down, and a flashbang grenade were tossed into your living room, and you ran out to find armed SWAT-team members pointing automatic weapons at you? Now they might not have had flashbang grenades and automatic weapons at the time of Jason, but I'm sure he and his family were terrified at an official show of power. They were thoroughly overpowered, I'm sure.

What was the charge against these peaceful men? "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too." What a wonderful commendation of the power of the gospel! Shall we not pray that the gospel would turn *our* world upside-down as well? But what was the real offense? We find the answer in verse 7, "these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus." Another king! Yes, Jesus is Lord! The offense was in declaring that Jesus Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords. Everyone—even Caesar—is morally obligated to acknowledge the truth that Jesus is Lord.

And so Jason was persecuted. Christ is in covenant with his people. Christ identifies with his people. The person who persecutes Christians persecutes *Christ*. Jesus taught that at the last day "the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'"¹⁴ In context this applies to the *good* that the saints do—works of service and mercy, diaconal work, visiting the widows and orphans in their affliction, giving a cup of cold water in Christ's name, and so forth. But surely the reverse is true: the *evil* that the wicked do to the church is counted as an offense against Christ himself!

God has given ultimate authority to the Christ, the mediatorial King, *and to no one else*. "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18). Neither the family, the church nor the state has ultimate authority. Anyone—no matter who it may be: king, president, chairman, prime minister, emperor, dictator, whether on the left or on the right—anyone who claims ultimate authority is an imposter, trying to usurp the place of Christ.

Biblically, the church and the state both have *limited* authority which is clearly defined. The church has the power of the keys, admitting penitent sinners into Christ's kingdom and excluding impenitent sinners. The state bears the power of the sword; its basic responsibility is to protect life and property. It has no authority to take innocent life.

The church is *not* a threat to the state if the state stays within its lawful limits. The Federal government under the U.S. Constitution had strictly limited powers.

¹⁴ Matt. 25:40

The Tenth Amendment of the Bill of Rights states that “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution ... are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.” All Federal officials have taken a solemn oath of office to uphold the Constitution. If the Federal government wants to acquire a power not delegated to it by the Constitution, then it should go through the difficult process of amending the Constitution. To *ignore* the Constitution and exercise a power never granted to it by the states is to act lawlessly. And a lawless government is an illegitimate government. Plainly, the U.S. government at this point in history is illegitimate and lacking moral authority. The people need to rise up and demand that their government relinquish all powers not granted to it by the Constitution. We need to reject lawlessness and return to Constitutional government. If the Constitution needs to be amended, let us amend it. But let us not pretend that we have Constitutional government when we do not.

In the meantime let us remember that God is on the throne. The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against his Messiah—but He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh, he shall speak unto them in his wrath, and vex them in his sore displeasure: “Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion.” Yes, Jesus is the Mediatorial King. God has set him upon his holy hill. At his ascension, as his disciples watched closely, Christ ascended up to heaven and took his seat at the right hand of the Father. There he sits until all his enemies are made a footstool for his feet. At the final day every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, and that his rule throughout history has been entirely legitimate. Amen.