

Enemies of the Faith

Ezra 4:1–16; 2 Thessalonians 3:1–5

This is the second sermon on this text. Last week's sermon, entitled "That the Word of the Lord May Run," had three points: (1) the church prays that the Lord would raise up *proclaimers* of his Word; (2) the church prays that the Lord would *establish his people* through the proclamation of his Word; and (3) the church prays that the Lord would help us *respond properly* to the proclamation of his Word. I made reference to Jehoiakim's shameful cutting out sections of the book of Jeremiah, section by section, and throwing them into the fire—an act of high-handed irreverence toward the word of God—but the proud king did not acknowledge his sin or ask forgiveness. If you missed the sermon, or want to go over the material again, the sermon manuscript is available on our website, all-of-grace.org.

Today, we will look at the same text from another angle, focusing more closely on verse 2: "that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men." I have three points: (1) danger, (2) deliverance, (3) delight; first,

1. Danger

Paul writes: ". . . that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men; for not all have faith."

The word "delivered" is from the same word as that in the Lord's Prayer, "*deliver* us from evil." That familiar petition can be translated either "from *evil*" (KJV, ESV) or "from *the evil one*" (NKJV). The Larger Catechism gives this helpful commentary: ". . . acknowledging that the most wise, righteous, and gracious God, for divers holy and just ends, may so order things, that we may be assaulted, foiled, and for a time led captive by temptations; [and] that Satan, the world, and the flesh, are ready powerfully to draw us aside, and ensnare us." In light of this, "we pray, that God would . . . overrule the world and all in it, subdue the flesh, and restrain Satan" (LC 195).

Satan is a powerful enemy and seeks to tempt us, lead us astray and deny Christ. He is *not* all-powerful, and we are called upon to resist him by the power of Christ. Neither is Satan omnipresent (present everywhere at once, an attribute of God alone). The Prince of darkness tempts us through his hoard of foul spirits—demons. He is a powerful foe. How can we resist? John teaches: "Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: *because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world*" (1 John 4:4). The only way we can successfully resist temptation and live holy, God-glorifying lives is through the power of Christ. He alone can enable us to be overcomers. We gain the power to resist temptation by attending to the means of grace, the Word, the sacraments, and prayer, calling upon our mighty Savior to intercede for us, enable us to resist temptation and have victory over our besetting sins, be they worry, lust, self-indulgence, laziness, lack

of faith, impure thoughts, unloving attitudes—whatever. “This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith” (1 John 5:4).

In our 2 Thessalonians text the apostle Paul begs the prayers of the church “that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men; for not all have faith.” His emphasis here is attacks from *other people*—enemies *without*, who have a special, focused hatred for the church, and want to destroy it. They do not adhere to the Christian faith. At the time of the apostle Paul it was the unbelieving Jews, who rejected the Messiah Jesus when he came, and wanted to persecute and destroy the nascent church. Acts 21 gives an example of this: “. . . Jews from Asia, seeing [Paul] in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, ‘Men of Israel, help! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place; and furthermore he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.’ . . . And all the city was disturbed; and the people ran together, seized Paul, and dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut. Now as they were *seeking to kill him . . .*” (Acts 21:27–31). Here was a huge mob intent on murdering the apostle Paul, so they could silence him and destroy his influence. Clearly, they saw Paul’s preaching as a threat. They did not want their people converted to Christ. They wanted to retain their loyal following.

It is much the same today. In many places in the world, hostile governments try to destroy the church. They outlaw the preaching of the gospel, they pass laws making it a crime to convert to Christianity, they turn a blind eye to the murder of Christians. Here in the U.S. Christians have historically been allowed to practice our faith, but it may not be this way forever.

A slide used in Army Reserve training titled “Religious Extremism” listed “evangelical Christianity” at the top of a list of groups that are recognized as terrorist organizations by the U.S. State Department. Pro-life groups were also on the list. In recent years government officials have weaponized law enforcement, imprisoning peaceful pro-life protesters and pressuring social media to deplatform Christians and “debank” Christian organizations (closing their accounts without warning, making it impossible for them to pursue their ministry). Candidates for public office have attacked Christians, with little public outcry. Our own governor has even ridiculed the Lord’s supper, a sin against the Third Commandment, which requires “the holy and reverent use of God’s names, titles, attributes, *ordinances . . .*”¹

Paul exhorts us to pray “for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty” (1 Tim. 2:2). As Christians we want all men, women and children everywhere to receive Christ as

¹ Shorter Catechism 54, <https://opc.org/sc.html>

Savior and Lord and become his willing worshippers and obedient disciples. We want our neighbors to march to Zion with us. We want just government where everyone is treated equally under the law—no special rights for particular interest groups, depending on which party is in power. We want to be left alone, to practice our faith.

Totalitarian governments do not like any challenge to their authority. They do not understand that the best thing they could do in their own interest is to encourage the church to thrive, for when people become Christians, they become obedient to just laws, peaceful, kind, hardworking, generous and loving. They become model citizens, promoting the peace and prosperity of the commonwealth. Worshippers of Christ do not want to undermine legitimate authority. We want to raise our families, evangelize the lost and practice our faith to the glory of God. “We long to see thy churches full that all the chosen race may with one voice and heart and soul sing thy redeeming grace.” Truly, “blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD” (Ps. 33:12).

In our Old Testament text we read that when the *adversaries* of Judah and Benjamin heard that those who had returned from the exile were rebuilding the temple of the LORD God of Israel, they came to the workmen and said to them, “Let us build with you, for we seek your God as you do.” The Hebrews retorted, “You may do nothing with us to build a house for our God; but we alone will build to the LORD God of Israel.” The people of the land tried to discourage the people of Judah. They troubled them while they were building, and they hired counselors against them to frustrate their purpose. They wrote an accusation to King Artaxerxes, falsely charging that if the Jews were allowed to finish building the walls of Jerusalem, they would stop paying their taxes. They charged that the Jews were going to stage an insurrection.

The adversaries tried to demoralize and intimidate the Jews. They lied and bore false witness and defamed the character of God’s people. But it is a truth that the church in every age has enemies. If the church wins the world’s approval, it is doing something wrong. It has borne false witness against the gospel. It has become too much like the world.

The word that is used for enemy in our Old Testament text is *צָר*. It is used here in the plural: “the *adversaries* of Judah and Benjamin.” The reason the world hates the church is because it hates the Savior. The enemies of Christ refuse to come to him, that they might have life. They refuse to bow the knee before the King of kings and Lord of lords. Jesus said, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.”² But God is powerful and promises to protect his people.

² John 15:24 NIV

We read in the book of Numbers, “And if ye go to war in your land against the *enemy* that oppressteth you, then ye shall blow an alarm with the trumpets; and ye shall be remembered before the LORD your God, and ye shall be saved from your enemies” (Num. 10:9).

God sees his people’s enemies as his own. He promises: “If I whet my glittering sword, and mine hand take hold on judgment; I will render vengeance to mine *enemies*, and will reward them that hate me.” The fact that the church has enemies is no reason to change our course. We ought to obey Christ, no matter what. He tells us, “Rejoice, O ye nations, with his people: for he will avenge the blood of his servants, and will render vengeance to his *adversaries*, and will be merciful unto his land, and to his people” (Deut. 32:41, 43).

Christianity at all times is under attack. As individual Christians we look at the way that society is going and feel threatened and vulnerable. We need to remember that our help is in the name of the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. He is on the throne and will protect us. Our first point is *danger*; point 2 is

2. Deliverance

Dear people of God, do not overlook the beautiful promise of verse three: “the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and *guard* you from the evil one.”

Again, the word translated “the evil one” can mean either “keep you from *evil*” (KJV) or “guard you from *the evil one*” (NKJV). The ESV, which has “deliver us from *evil*” in the Lord’s Prayer, has “guard you against *the evil one*” here. The “evil one” is Satan, the adversary, the accuser of the brethren. As I said before, Satan is a powerful foe. His goal is to destroy the church and kill Christians. That could be very discouraging and encourage us to stay out of the fight, keep a low profile and stay out of his way. But the Word of God exhorts us to “fight the good fight of faith,” to “resist” the devil, and he will flee from us.

Dear people of God, “the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and *guard* you from the evil one.” While we may need to practice self-defense, ultimately, our help is in the Lord. He who keeps Israel (his church) neither slumbers nor sleeps.

When Jesus sailed on the Sea of Galilee and a terrifying storm came up, his disciples found him asleep. “There arose a great tempest in the sea, insomuch that the ship was covered with the waves: but he was asleep. And his disciples came to him, and awoke him, saying, Lord, save us: we perish.”³ During his incarnation he was subject to the same earthly infirmities that we all face. He was tired after a heavy day of ministry, so he got into a boat and let the experienced sailors do the piloting. He himself found a comfortable cushion and took a nap.

But now, Christ is exalted. He rose from the dead the third day, as he said. He was seen by witnesses. He ascended to heaven and is seated now at the right hand

³ Matt. 8:24–25

of God, where he intercedes for the saints. In his glorified state he neither slumbers nor sleeps. He ever lives to make intercession for us. Whether we are awake or asleep, *he* is on the job, listening to our prayers, praying for our protection, praying that we will experience victory. Through his intercession, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. He will never leave us, nor forsake us. In him “we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper . . . I will not fear what man shall do unto me” (Heb. 13:6).

Christ is our deliverer. He is the faithful God who will establish us in the faith and guard us from the evil one. If God be for us, who can be against us? As with Peter, when he took his eyes off Christ and began to look at the roiling waves and realized he was sinking and called out, “Lord, help!” so we are invited to invoke his name and cry to him for help. He is never too busy. He will arise and come to our aid.

A few weeks ago, I waited at the service desk of a local car dealership. It was the middle of the afternoon, and when I pulled into the bay, there was only one service manager on duty. He was in the middle of a task and looked up and said he’d be with me in a few minutes. While I waited, he got a phone call from a colleague who had an urgent request. He listened for a moment, then said something like “I am absolutely swamped. I’m all alone and I’ve got customers waiting. I just cannot help you right at the moment. Give me a half-hour, and I’ll get back to you.” The man on the other end of the line sorely needed his friend’s help, but there was no way, humanly speaking, that he could attend to the man’s request at that moment.

Our exalted Lord Jesus Christ is not like that service manager. He is seated at the right hand of the Father. He who created all things from nothing now manages every atom, every molecule, every movement of nature, every living creature and every being in the universe. But he is omnipotent. He has *all* power. At every moment he is working all things after the counsel of his holy will. He is never frazzled, never forgetful, never distracted, never disturbed. He says, “Call unto me, and I will answer thee and show thee great and mighty things.” When he makes a promise like that, he means it. He is our mighty Savior and great deliverer. He *will* come to our aid. He will never disappoint us. He is more willing to help than we are able to pray. At all times he has his saints’ best interest at stake. He who reached out and took Peter’s hand as he was sinking beneath the waves is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through him. He is almighty God, able at all times to accomplish his holy will. And he is a faithful Father who has his children’s best interest at heart. If you put your trust in him, you will never be disappointed. Amen!

The Lord is our deliverer. As a result, we can relax and do the things that please him, not swerving to the right or to the left. Paul writes, “we have confidence in the

Lord concerning you, both that you *do* and *will do* the things we command you.” Let us each dedicate ourselves to obey Christ, keeping his commands, letting our light shine among men. He is Lord of all, and as Lord, he is boss; he is to be obeyed.

Our first two points were *danger* and *deliverance*. Our third point is

3. Delight

Our passage concludes with the words, “Now may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the patience of Christ.”

This is a beautiful prayer. It is a prayer to the Lord concerning our *heart*. The heart is the seat of the affections. To give God our heart is to love him as the Lover of our souls. We love him because he first loved us. The love of which God speaks is a love of the will (*ἀγάπη*). The person who is born again loves God. The one who is *not* born again does not love God. He might say that he does, but if he says that, he is showing that he does not really know God. He is loving a god of his own imagination, not the true God of the Bible. The God of the Bible is absolutely holy and cannot allow sin into his presence. He is angry with the wicked every day. They are his enemies. He promises that at the final day he will cast them into the lake of fire.

Our text says, “may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God.” It is the Lord who directs our hearts, and we are to pray for that. We dare not read these words as if they mean for us to sit back on our haunches and do nothing, but just wait for *him* to do it all. We are to pray, “Search me, O God, and know my heart.” In like manner it is appropriate for us to pray, “Lord, direct my heart into the love of God.” In like manner we ought to pray, “Lord, give me the patience of Christ.” We ought to desire the grace of patience. We are naturally impatient, wanting everything to move along according to *our* timetable, and being grouchy if something interrupts us and gets in our way. The born-again person can be patient, knowing that God’s way is best. “As for God, his way is perfect.” We may not understand now, but we will, one day.

Heartfelt love for God is going to be expressed in worship. The born-again soul is going to long and faint for the courts of the Lord. His greatest joy will be to worship with the saints, savoring God’s presence, contemplating his perfect character, singing his praises. In the words of the old spiritual, “I sing because I’m happy, I sing because I’m free.” If we love God, then we can’t stop singing about him! He has put a new song in our heart, even praise to our God. Singing to the Lord is evidence that we are born again.

I remember a homeless man that we once invited into our home for a meal. Norma set a delicious meal in front of him, along with a tall glass of ice water to refresh him. He was surprised and said firmly, “I *don’t* drink water!” He didn’t have money for food, but spent what little money he had for soda!

Similarly, if our attitude is “I *don't* sing!” then may God help us! The kind of worship that God desires is a heart that *delights* in him. If we don't *delight* in God, then we are simply going through the motions. Our worship is unacceptable.

My dear hearer, if God has brought you out of danger, if he has granted you deliverance, and if he has made you to delight in him with your whole heart, then you are blessed indeed. Yield your whole life to him, and live for him, every moment of every day.

You once were dead in trespasses and sins, but God had mercy on you and brought you to himself. He opened your blind eyes and revealed himself to you as the only Savior. He put a new song in your mouth, even praise to our God. You are truly blessed! Amen.