

Finishing Well

Lesson #30

Warfare in the Early Church

Aug. 2, 2023

Matt. 16:16-18 And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. ¹⁷ And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. ¹⁸ And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

From the very first mention of the church by Jesus, a warning was given that it would be opposed by Satan. The Book of Acts, as well as two thousand years of church history, gives testimony to the fact that Satan has tried to stop its mission.

Spiritual warfare and the world have been in existence since the fall of man.

Acts is the account of the birth and spread of the church. Satan continued to do all he could to stop and destroy the young church before it grew large and strong. He tries to derail the church from its mission through hypocrisy, false teaching, and persecution.

❖ Acts 5:1-11; I Tim 1:18-20; Rev 2:9-10, 13; 3:9

There are about 150 references to the spirit world in the Gospels.

There are about 178 additional references in the rest of the New Testament.

Spiritual warfare did not end with Christ's ascension to heaven.

According to Scripture, the followers of Jesus and early church fathers endured spiritual warfare with the world. Satan, the prince and power of the air, convinced men that Christianity was evil and that it must be silenced on earth [Acts 7:12].

The early church leaders suffered at the hands of Satan and were brutally killed because of their faith. Through imprisonment, beatings, plots and riots, Christians were persecuted by the Jews and Gentiles. But the opposition became a catalyst for the spread of Christianity. Growth during times of oppression showed that Christianity was not the work of humans, but of God and the Holy Spirit.

Acts provides information on the first 3 decades of the church's existence.

- Material found nowhere else in the NT. Acts emphasizes:
- Jesus of Nazareth was Israel's long-awaited Messiah.
- The gospel is offered to all men and not merely the Jewish people.
- It stresses the work of the Holy Spirit who is mentioned more than 50 times.

Charles Swindoll: When we study the journeys of Paul in the book of Acts, we're not just reading the travel log of a man; we're observing the redemptive plan of God unfolding as He promised. Through the ministry of Saul of Tarsus, God's mission to reclaim His creation from the death grip of evil would move to its next stage.

The plan of this mission was outlined in the Lord's promise at His ascension, where He said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses..."

Stage 1: Acts 2-7 In Jerusalem Estimates = the first 13 years
Stage 2: Acts 8-12 and in all Judea and Samaria Estimates = a period of ~14 years
Stage 3: Acts 13-28 and even to the remotest part of the earth

The Fruit of Paul's 3 Missionary Journeys which upset the world. Acts 17:6

The Gospel went first to the Jews, but they as a nation rejected it. However, a remnant gladly received it. But the continual rejection of the Gospel by the vast majority of the Jews led to the ever-increasing proclamation of the Gospel to the Gentiles.

The Gospel began to spread beyond Jerusalem and Judea out to the world and to all people. The message, empowered by the Holy Spirit, spread to most of the Roman Empire.

The Spiritual War in the Church at Jerusalem

Acts 5:3 Satan is found opposing the people and the purposes of God.

Ananias and his wife Sapphira had given a certain amount of money to the work of the Lord but lied about the amount. When Peter rebuked Ananias for his deception, he attributed the source of the lie to Satan: "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit, and to keep back some of the price of the land?"

Ray Stedman: The thirteenth chapter is a turning point in the book of Acts.

It is what Winston Churchill would have called one of the hinges of history.

It marks the beginning of the third phase of our Lord's great commission.

It is also the beginning of the apostleship of Paul. Up to this time, though he was called to be an apostle when he was first converted on the Damascus Road, he has never acted as an apostle.

Now, some eleven or twelve years after his conversion, he begins to fulfill the ministry to which he was called as an apostle of Jesus Christ.

Swindoll: "In this compost-like blend of East and West, good and bad, morality and depravity, the Gospel germinated, took root, and flourished like a rose in a garbage dump."

How could such a relatively young church at Antioch be so spiritually strong?

Barnabas Seeks Out Saul in Tarsus

Acts 11:25-26 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch."

- This is probably about 45 AD. Paul seems to have been in Tarsus for 10 years since fleeing Jerusalem in 35 AD. Barnabas travels about 150 miles each way to Tarsus to find Paul and invite him to join the ministry team in Antioch.

Acts 13:1 Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

Barnabas and Saul filled with the Spirit fulfilled Jesus' command in Mt 28:19+ to "make disciples" [aorist imperative speaks of urgent need to obey] which literally means to make learners, but not just learners who knew more about Christ, but who obeyed what they learned and thereby grew more like Christ.

- Not "smarter sinners" but "more like the Savior" as Howard Hendricks used to say.

Barnabas and Saul were following through on Jesus' commission:

- Teaching > didasko in present tense = continually!) them [the disciples at Antioch]
- to observe = tereo = describes action of keeping one's eye upon something to watch or guard over so as to obey it > all that I commanded you;

Wiersbe: The teachers at Antioch taught sound (Gk "hugiaino" ~ hygienic) doctrine which resulted in healthy growing saints. Teachers are needed to ground the converts in the doctrines of the faith and produce disciples who in turn reproduce disciples.

- and lo, I am with you always = The Spirit of Jesus
 - ❖ illuminating the teaching, empowering the doing! even to the end of the age.

This church was well-equipped to be edified and grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

God's pattern for Church growth is Christ-likeness, not necessarily numbers.

Acts 2:42 "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching."

The priority of the Church in Jerusalem was the same as the priority of the Church at Antioch, explaining in large part why God's Spirit used both churches mightily for His glory and the spread of His Gospel! God's pattern for "success" has not changed!

II Tim. 4:2 Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine. [Preach= aorist imperative = "Just Do It!"]

Paul and Barnabas had ministered together in Antioch. They were called by the Spirit to take the gospel to the Roman world. Until now, Jerusalem had been the center of ministry, and Peter had been the key apostle. But from this point on, Antioch in Syria would become the new center and Paul the new leader. The gospel was on the move!

Paul's 1st Missionary Journey

Acts 13:6-12 Satan's Servants go head-to-head with Jesus. 1st Opposition

Opportunities Usually Produce Opposition...Expect it!

I Cor.16:9 "a wide door for effective (adapted to success) service has opened (stands wide open) to me, and there are many adversaries."

Acts 13:6 And when they had gone through the isle unto Paphos, [seat of Roman rule on Cyprus; Senatorial province] they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew, whose name was Barjesus:

[Son of Jesus, Son of Joshua, Son of Salvation; also known as Elymas, the sorcerer]

- Unusual to find a Jewish false prophet and sorcerer. Jews shunned demonic activity.
- This event illustrates Jesus' lesson in the parable of the tares. [Matt.13]
- Wherever the Lord sows His true children, the wheat,
- Satan sows a counterfeit, the tare, a child of the devil.

Acts 13:7-8 Which was with the deputy of the country, Sergius Paulus, a prudent man; who called for Barnabas and Saul, and desired to hear the word of God.

⁸ But Elymas the sorcerer withstood them, seeking to turn away the deputy from the faith.

- He is a stumbling block to Sergius Paulus.

Jack Arnold: "The enemy of the Gospel is always an unseen enemy, for Christians struggle against the very powers of darkness.

Elymas was Satan's man. Bar-Jesus was the best specimen hell could produce!"

MacArthur: It was no accident that this man had attached himself to the Roman proconsul. The kingdom of darkness is eager to influence those who rule.

Daniel 10:12-13, 20 Then said he unto me, Fear not, Daniel: for from the first day that thou didst set thine heart to understand, and to chasten thyself before thy God, thy words were heard, and I am come for thy words.

¹³ But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me one and twenty days: but, lo, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me; and I remained there with the kings of Persia.

²⁰ Then said he, Knowest thou wherefore I come unto thee? and now will I return to fight with the prince of Persia: and when I am gone forth, lo, the prince of Grecia shall come.

MacArthur: Much of the evil in this world can be traced ultimately to such baleful influence by "the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places." [Eph. 6:12]

The forces of hell will openly challenge the forces of God.

- They claim to be a prophet from God and
- They utter falsehoods under the name of divine prophecies.

Jack Arnold - Bar-Jesus means "the son of Jesus." In the Hebrew culture, to call yourself the son of someone was to designate yourself his follower. This man was claiming to be a follower of Jesus, but what he taught was absolutely contrary to what Jesus taught.

Acts 20:29-31 For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. ³⁰ Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.

- False prophets are more deadly than physical wolves and other predators, because they can kill not just the body but the soul.

Unknown Commentator: I met a man who had just been born again and had a great hunger for the Word of God, but he supplemented this by listening to Joel Osteen! I tried in vain to reason with him from Scripture, but he became angry with me saying that he liked the "positive" message that Osteen preaches. I told him (1) to find a mature believer to disciple him and (2) go to a church that preaches the Word of God, preferably expositionally.

He was only minimally "receptive" to my pleas and suggestions.

Sadly, I no longer have contact with him. False teachers can "shipwreck" one's faith!

I Tim. 1:18-19 This charge I commit unto thee, son Timothy, according to the prophecies which went before on thee, that thou by them might war a good warfare;

¹⁹ Holding faith, and a good conscience, which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck:

Paul warned Timothy that the only way to succeed was to hold fast to "faith and a good conscience." It is not enough to proclaim the faith with our lips; we must practice the faith in our daily lives. One man said of his hypocritical pastor, "He is such a good preacher, he should never get out of the pulpit, but he is such a poor Christian, he should never get into the pulpit!" Bad doctrine usually starts with bad conduct, and usually with secret sin. Hymenaeus and Alexander deliberately rejected their good consciences in order to defend their ungodly lives. Professed Christians who "make shipwreck" of their faith do so by sinning against their consciences. A man with a good conscience will do the will of God in spite of who is watching or what people may say.

Acts 13:7 Elymas was with the deputy of the country, Sergius Paulus, a prudent man; who called for Barnabas and Saul, and desired to hear the word of God.

Romans 3:10-11 There is none righteous; no not one.

There is none that understands, there is none that seeks after God.

Wiersbe: The whole of man's inner being is controlled by sin:

- his mind none that understands
- his heart none that seeks after God, and
- his will none that does good

Measured by God's perfect righteousness, no human being is sinless.

No sinner seeks after God. Therefore, God must seek the sinner. [Gen. 3:8-10; Luke 19:10]

Ray Steadman: Sergius Paulus is a ranking Roman pagan. Yet he summons the missionaries and desires to hear the word of God! This is clearly, unequivocally doing a supernatural work on the stony, uncircumcised heart of this pagan proconsul!

Ray Steadman: In the book *Experiencing God*, one of Henry Blackaby's main points is to look for where God is acting and determine to join Him!

Satanic Opposition To The Gospel: Not A Possibility But A Certainty

When the pure Word of God is proclaimed, you can "rest" assured that our mortal Enemy who is roaming around will send his demons to oppose, assail, attack, twist, hinder, obstruct, impede, inhibit, retard, pervert, mislead, misrepresent, distort, revile, counterfeit, imitate, simulate, feign, falsify, etc, the Word of God, the Word of Truth, as well as attacking the one who proclaims it making us discouraged, despondent, hopeless, lacking enthusiasm, lacking confidence, pessimistic, disillusioned, despairing, dispirited, fearful, depressed, etc.

Acts 13:8b Seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.

Seeking is in the imperfect tense means:

- Elymas was making repeated attempts to turn Sergius away from the faith.
- Implies giving attention and priority to pursuing after.

This henchman of Satan was intentionally, deliberately seeking to disrupt the work of the Gospel in the heart of Sergius. This is the continual activity of the Devil and his emissaries.

I Pet. 5:8 Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour:

- Be of sober spirit aorist imperative - It is urgent!
- prowls around present tense = continually; like a roaring lion

Polhill: "One should not be all together surprised that a Roman official could be hoodwinked by such a figure. Romans put great stock in powers of divination and even had their own sacred oracles. Charlatans like Bar-Jesus were usually smooth and highly knowledgeable, practicing a sort of pseudo-science. The Jews had a reputation among the Romans for their antiquity and depth of religious knowledge.

Acts 13:9 Then Saul, [also called Paul] filled with the Holy Ghost, set his eyes on him.

Key: The Spirit gave Paul spiritual discernment into the character of Elymas and boldness to confront him without fear of the spiritual forces of darkness that "empowered" Elymas!

Steven Cole When we share the gospel, we engage the enemy of souls in spiritual combat.

Note three tactics of the devil:

- The devil holds people in spiritual blindness.

II Cor. 4:4 In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.

- The devil uses deceit, fraud, and opposition to righteousness to carry out his evil designs.
- The devil uses selfish motivation to keep people in spiritual deception.

We must be prepared to do spiritual battle. To do Spiritual Battle:

- Be filled with the Holy Spirit.
- Confront false prophets or spiritual error when you sense the Spirit's prompting.
- Reach out to those who show an interest in the things of God.
- Present the teaching of God's Word on the Gospel clearly.

Robert Neighbour - The Strengthening Spirit

Eph. 3:16 That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man.

Until we have learned the lesson of our own impotence we are not even en route to the place of victory. This passage is about the strength which enables us to comprehend spiritual knowledge. We will never know the "breadth and length and depth and height" — of the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, until we are strengthened by the Spirit in the inner man.

The Spirit will enable us, for He is the power that worketh in us, and He is able to do "exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think."

1. The Spirit enabled the disciples to speak the Word with boldness.,

Acts 4:31 And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness.

- The man who had trembled before a maid, when he stood in his own strength, is bold as a lion when strengthened by the Spirit.

2. The Spirit enabled Stephen to die a martyr's death, with a face shining as an angels.

Acts 7:55 "But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into Heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, And said, Behold, I see the Heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God."

What a holy boldness Stephen had! He was strengthened by the Spirit. It was this shining testimony that had much to do with the "pricks" that goaded Saul of Tarsus.

3. The Spirit enabled Saul to rebuke Elymas the sorcerer. It was the same Spirit Who enabled Paul in all of his missionary journeys, to testify concerning his Lord; it was the Spirit Who gave him help to continue unto the end of his strenuous life of service.

Key: There is no place, whether in service, in our daily Christian work, or in our knowledge of Him, that the Spirit will not supply the needed help.

Acts 13:10 And said, O full of all subtilty and all mischief, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord?

Charles Simeon: "Let those then who will not embrace the Gospel, beware how they labor to pervert the faith of others: if they must perish, they had better perish alone, than under the guilt of destroying the souls of others."

Luke 17:1-2 Then said He unto the disciples, It is impossible but that offences [things that cause people to stumble] will come: but woe unto him, through whom they come!

² It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones.

- Offenses = skan'-dal-on > scandal > to set a trap or a trip-line;

place an obstacle or stumbling block on the path

"Little Ones" in context: Jesus was referring not only to children but also to young believers who were learning how to follow the Lord. [Matt. 18:1-6; Luke 10:21]

Luke 15:1-2 Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him.

The Pharisees and the scribes grumbled saying, This man receives sinners and eats with them.

Offenses, stumbling blocks, can be caused by:

- People who entice and draw a Christian away from faith by living outside the lines.

- Something or someone who keeps another from a relationship with God.
- Progressive Religionist who reinvents their Bible, their god, their mission and what is important in life. They lead others away from knowing the Lord personally.
 - ❖ Characterized by legalism and forced obedience.

II Tim. 3:5 having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away.

- Stumbling blocks also arise when the path is a little more ambiguous. The mature Christian life allows some freedoms that seem contrary to an obedient, disciplined faith. The Corinthians were concerned about eating meat sacrificed to idols.

I Cor 8:9 But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

Our liberty is not worth another's walk with God. If something God allows would lead another to sin, we need to avoid it. We are given great freedom as Christians, but the greatest is the freedom to consider others' welfare over our own.

I Cor. 10:31-33 Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God. Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God: Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved.

Jesus Gives a Severe Warning: Don't "Trip Up" the Faith of Anyone of These New Believers...

Luke 17:1b but woe to him through whom they do come!

- Woe= oujai= a chief exclamation of grief, dread and of absolute terror.
 Damnation be upon you.

Hebrews 10:24-25 And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

Romans 14:12-13 So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.

Therefore, let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way.

Truth: There are many today like Elymas, Barjesus.

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|---|-------------------------|
| ➤ Gal. 1:11-12 | They deny authority. |
| ➤ Matt. 18:6-7; II Pet. 3:16; Phil. 3:18-19 | Turn others from truth. |
| ➤ II Thess. 1:7-9 | Their fate is certain. |
| ➤ Col. 2:8-10 | Don't be deceived. |

Saul rebuked Barjesus

Acts 13:9-10

Saul confronts threat

Acts 8:20-23

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|--------------------------------|------------------------------|
| ➤ Calls him "son of the devil" | Enemy of all righteousness |
| ➤ Full of deceit and villainy | Makes straight paths crooked |

Consider: Am I willing to confront those who oppose the Gospel?

Titus 1:13 This witness is true.

Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith;

Robert Morgan tells the story that relates to Acts 13:10 - Missionary Isaac D. Colburn of Burma told of a group of Burmese Christians who gathered for an outdoor baptism. Many curious locals showed up to watch, and among them were two men, father and son, who detested the gospel. As the Burmese pastor opened the poolside service, the father and son interrupted the proceedings with blasphemous words, curses, and obscene gestures. Just as the pastor was about to plunge his first disciple into the water, the two antagonists stripped and plunged naked into the water, where they conducted their own mock baptism, jeering and uttering profanities alongside the name of the Trinity.

Also present that day was a native evangelist named Sau Wah, who, before his conversion, had fiercely opposed the gospel. Now he rose and called to the men in the water,

"O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord?"

These words seemed to strike the two blasphemers like electrical bolts. They raced out of the water, but before going many yards they both fell to the ground. The father was found dead. The son recovered consciousness and was carried to the village, but within a few months he, too, died.

God is a God of love, but He's also a God of judgment. The Bible contains many warnings to the unrighteous, telling us that it's a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

He is to be feared, honored, revered, and obeyed.

A Spirit Filled Man Confronts A Deceit Filled Man

Acts 13:11 And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon thee, and thou shalt be blind, not seeing the sun for a season. And immediately there fell on him a mist and a darkness; and he went about seeking some to lead him by the hand.

Acts 13:12 Then the deputy, when he saw what was done, believed, being astonished at the doctrine of the Lord.

Being amazed at the teaching of the Lord - Being amazed is in the present tense indicating Sergius Paulus continued to be amazed, in a virtual state of amazement!

This description emphasizes: it was the Gospel not the miracle that Sergius believed.

The blindness of one became light for another!

In these early days of the spread of the Gospel, God often used miracles to confirm the authenticity of His messengers and His message. The miracles themselves were not intended to save, because one can be saved only by the Word of God, not by the miraculous works of God. What Sergius witnessed was a confrontation of light and darkness, of two invisible kingdoms clashing, with the kingdom of light defeating the kingdom of darkness.

Kent Hughes: "Sir William Ramsay reports that inscriptions bearing Sergius Paulus' name have been found on Cyprus confirming that he was a Christian and that his entire family became Christians."

Moody Bible Commentary: The blinding of Elymas and the conversion of Sergius Paulus demonstrated the beginnings of the change that would happen in the early church. Israel would more and more reject the gospel, while Gentiles would be increasingly receptive. Paul noted in Romans 11:25 For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in.

Paul's experience at Paphos foreshadowed what he would experience throughout his life in ministry to Jews and Gentiles. His gospel message would largely be rejected by Jews but accepted by Gentiles. Did it mean that God's plan of redemption for the Jewish people had failed? The answer is an emphatic, "No!" Rather, Paul explained, Jewish unbelief opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.

Tony Merida: In adversity we have the opportunity to advertise the power of the gospel. When some people see Christians standing firm in the face of demonic opposition, it affects them! We show the world the worth of Christ when we follow Jesus in the face of conflict. You're not alone when you face opposition for making the gospel known! The Lord of heaven and earth is with you and for you [Matt. 28:16-20]. It's important you don't assume you're in the wrong place when you face opposition. In fact, it may indicate that you're exactly where you should be! In this case the Spirit led the missionaries into a war zone, much like the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Let this conversion story encourage you as you seek to make the gospel known to unbelievers. Some people will repent and turn to Christ when a bold witness makes the Gospel clear to them. God is at work in the world, bringing all sorts of people to faith in Christ through the witness of faithful missionaries! Your Sergius Paulus is waiting!"