

# “The Trouble that Came to Us in Asia”

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## **Text:**

Acts 20: 17 – 19, I Corinthians 15: 32; 16: I Corinthians 16: 7 – 9, II Corinthians 1: 8 – 11

Act 20:17 - 19 Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. 18 And when they came to him, he said to them: "You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, 19 serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews.

1Cointhians 15:32 If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not? let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we die.

1Corinthians 16:7 - 9 For I will not see you now by the way; but I trust to tarry a while with you, if the Lord permit. 8 But I will tarry at Ephesus until Pentecost. 9 For a great door and effectual is opened unto me, and *there are* many adversaries.

2Cointhians 1:8 - 11 For we would not, brethren, have you ignorant of our trouble which came to us in Asia, that we were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life: 9 But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead: 10 Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that he will yet deliver *us*; 11 Ye also helping together by prayer for us, that for the gift *bestowed* upon us by the means of many persons thanks may be given by many on our behalf.

## Introduction:

Last time we discussed the successes of Paul's third missionary journey. We saw how, not just the great city of Ephesus, but the entire province of Asia was evangelized during the 2 ½ years that Paul and his companions spent in Ephesus. Today I want us to focus on another aspect of that time, on what Paul refers to as "our trouble which came to us in Asia" in II Corinthians 1:8. Luke says little of this trouble other than to mention that after three months, Paul was no longer allowed to teach in the synagogue of the Jews, and in describing in detail the riot caused by the silversmiths near the end of his stay in Ephesus. However, when we read Paul's own descriptions of this time in his address to the Ephesian elders, and in his letters to the Corinthians written during and shortly after his time in Ephesus, we see that trouble is a recurring theme. His successes were not easily won. The gospel did not conquer Asia without opposition.

If you remember back at the beginning of our study of Acts we set out a repeated pattern for the advance of the gospel in the book of Acts in five stages. Summarized they are: (1) prayer, (2) mighty acts of God that give opportunity to witness, (3) witness to the good news of Christ, (4) response positive and negative, (5) opposition. We must never forget that fifth element, and it is to that element that I call your attention through the texts that we have read. Let's begin by briefly summarizing what Paul says in these four passages.

Before looking at the passages I would point out that they give us little detail about the specific troubles. We need to pause and use our imagination to fill in the details to fully appreciate them. They are the kind of statements that we sometimes hear in conversations with other people that if we know the person and what they are referring to we know something of the sorrow that is summarized in a short sentence like: "That was before my accident", or "that happened while my wife was still alive", or "that was before I lost my job"; short statements that can pass almost without notice to the hearer, but represent great pain to the speaker.

First in his address to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20 he reminds them of the trials (plural) that happened to him through the plots of the Jews. We saw last time that he was allowed to teach for three months in the Synagogue, then as it had been in all the other synagogues, he was forbidden to continue his teaching. All that Luke tells us is that he withdrew with those who had become disciples to the School of Tyrannus, but from what he says here, Jewish opposition did not end with their withdrawal. We have no details about what happened after his withdrawal, but Paul speaks of trials that befell him through the plots of the Jews. Given what we know of his experiences in other cities we may assume that he was never completely left in peace; that he had to fight a daily battle to avoid trouble with the Jews.

Next in I Corinthians 15:32 which was written in the last year of Paul's stay in Ephesus in speaking of the futility of life without the resurrection he states, without giving more details, that he had fought with wild beasts in Ephesus. Most likely this is only a metaphor for his battles with his human enemies. It was not uncommon to use the expression in this way, and Paul being a Roman citizen would normally have been exonerated from such a punishment. This is the reason he writes in II Timothy 4: 17 that he had been "delivered out of the mouth of the Lion." Beyond this, those who fought with wild beasts didn't live to tell about it. Whether Paul's battles were with real lions or figurative lions, they were arduous, to the point he says they only made sense in light of eternal hope.

Then in I Corinthians 16 Paul is drawing his time in Asia to a close and beginning to make plans for the time when he would leave Ephesus. He wants to revisit the churches of the 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey in Macedonia and Achaia before returning to Jerusalem, but he is not yet ready to leave Ephesus for he feels that his work is not yet finished so he says to the Corinthians: "There is a great door for effective service opened to me, and there are many adversaries." Someone has well said that this sentence is a good description of Paul's lifelong labors as a Christian missionary. They certainly tie together what we saw of his successes in Asia, and what we are seeing in the present study of his troubles. Beyond this, we might see this statement as a description of most missionary work and advance for reasons we will state momentarily.

Finally, shortly after leaving Asia and arriving in Macedonia Paul writes to Corinth. He begins his letter with a profound prayer of thanksgiving to God for having delivered him from a situation so grave that he says that he “had despaired of life”, that he had the “sentence of death”. Was this literally a death sentence from which he was exonerated? We can only speculate as to the exact nature on this particular trouble that befell him, but he is not exaggerating when he says that he had lost hope of surviving it.

When we put all of these passages together they give us another image of the third missionary journey than we might have if we thought only about its successes. It was a great success, yes, but the success came at a great price. A great door of opportunity was opened, but this did not remove the many adversaries. The victories won in Asia were won at a great cost, and to properly appreciate and learn from them we need to maintain a balance between the two things. This being the case, this would be a good time to think about the troubles that come as we share the good news of Christ, about that fifth point of opposition to the progress of the gospel. Let us reflect together about it from Paul’s perspective. What does he have to say not just about the trouble that befell him in Asia, but about the trouble that befalls all those who seek to live as obedient disciples of Jesus Christ. We will have to be selective as this is a major theme in his preaching and writing, but let’s try to summarize his teaching on this subject. He would tell us at least four things.

## **I. Don’t Be Surprised**

The first thing Paul would have to say to us about these troubles is: “why are you surprised?” For him they were and are inevitable. In Acts 14: 22, for example, when he and Barnabas are revisiting the churches they had planted in Galatia before returning to Antioch, he tells them “to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.” In writing to Timothy after his own death sentence had been handed down he encourages Timothy to remain faithful in spite of the opposition because, he says: “all that

live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution". If we are living as faithful servants of Christ trying to advance his work we should expect opposition.

## II. Know Your Enemy.

The second thing Paul would tell us about "trouble" is to recognize its source. He understood where the real opposition to the gospel came from. It was neither from the Jews nor from the Romans, nor in the case of Ephesus from the silversmiths. For Paul these were only the agents through who the real enemy was working, thus to engage them on their own terms would have been fruitless and even counter-productive. This is the reason that he will later write to the Ephesians who continue to fight the battle that he had begun:

"Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. 11 Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For 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*. 13 Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand" (Ephesians 6: 10 – 13)

And to the Corinthians he writes:

For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. 4 For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. 5 We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, 6 being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete" (II Corinthians 10 :3 -6).

It is a spiritual battle we are engaged in and it must be fought and won with spiritual weapons. Mere human cunning and craft are of no avail. This is a battle that must be waged with the breastplate of righteousness, the gospel of peace,

the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, and prayer.

### **III. Don't Run**

As a soldier who finds himself under fire for the first time, so the Christian who finds himself under attack for the first time has a natural instinct to run, to get away from the enemy to return to a safe place. Paul would say: “Overcome your fear, stay put,” “Stand fast in the Lord and in the power of his might.” The battle is not ours, it is the Lord’s. We must recognize the source of the attack, take up the arms that God has provided us with, and stay in the battle. This is the reason Paul says “There is a great door for effective service opened to me, AND there are many adversaries.” The difference between Paul and some of us is that we change one word in that sentence. Instead of saying “and there are many adversaries”, we say “BUT there are many adversaries”. The existence of adversaries only confirms that we are where we belong, on the battlefield. The kingdom of God has an enemy. The work of Christ will be opposed. If you are in the battle put on your armor, overcome your fear, and stay put. This is the way of victory.

### **IV. Learn Something**

The last thing Paul would say to us about trouble is: “Learn something.” Or, he might put it in question form: “What did this experience teach you?” There is no teacher like experience, and even Paul the great Apostle never ceased learning invaluable lessons from his experiences. For example, in his experience in Asia that made him think that he was not going to survive that we read about in II Corinthians 1 he implies that he learned two very important things. First, he learned a new level of faith. He says in verse 9 – 10: “Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will

deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.” This is not a lesson that you can learn in a Bible class or from a sermon, it could only be learned from experience. He also learned to appreciate more deeply the prayers of others. He says in verse 11: “You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.” It wasn’t that he didn’t believe in the power and necessity of prayer before. He most certainly did, but this experience took him to a new level of appreciation of the prayers of others on his behalf.

Allow me to conclude with one last passage from Paul. It is a well-known passage. Many of you could quote, at least the major idea of it. It is written from prison, most likely when Paul is imprisoned in Caesarea awaiting trial, before he finally appeals to Caesar and is sent to Rome. The church in Phillipi has sent an offering to take care of his expenses and he is writing to thank them. Towards the end of the letter he writes: “Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, *therewith* to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: everywhere and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Philippians 4: 11 – 13). We like the end of the passage. We engrave it on wall plaques and write it on cards to encourage one another. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”, or perhaps more precisely translated: “I am equal to all situations through Christ who strengthens me.” We forget that these are the words of a seasoned veteran. This did not come to Paul automatically, and it does not come to us simply by memorizing the verse and quoting it to ourselves. Paul says “I have learned”. He has learned through specific experiences, like those troubles that befell him in Asia. Through those experiences he has learned something profound, but without the experiences he could not have learned this great truth that Christ is with us and empowers us in good times and bad. Some things can only be learned by experience.

