

PAUL'S SUFFERINGS IN ASIA

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The Apostle Paul spent a total of three years in Ephesus and Asia Minor during his third missionary journey (Acts 20:31). The sufferings of Christ did abound in Paul while he was in Ephesus and Asia Minor during those three years (Acts 19:1-20:1). And God inspired Paul to state that Christians should not be “ignorant of our trouble which came to us in Asia” (2 Cor 1:8). It was while Paul was in Ephesus on that third missionary journey that he was inspired by God to write the First Epistle to the Corinthians (see 1 Cor 16:8,19). He spoke of his troubles in that epistle: *“But I will tarry at Ephesus until Pentecost. For a great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries”* (1 Cor 16:8-9). From Ephesus, Paul went to Macedonia (Acts 19:21-22; 20:1-2), which is where he wrote Second Corinthians (2 Cor 2:12-13; 7:5; 8:1-6; 9:2), including the instructions not to be ignorant of those troubles he had just recently suffered in Asia. Paul wrote, *“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: but we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raises the dead: who delivered us from so great a death, and does deliver: in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us; 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”* (2 Cor 1:8-11).

Paul's sentence of death

The church at Ephesus was established shortly after Paul's arrival with the conversion of about 12 men (Acts 19:1-7). But through Paul's two years of daily teaching in the school of Tyrannus, “all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:9-10). Paul did many “special miracles” there (Acts 19:11-17), and Jews were converted to Christ and many Gentiles were converted from idolatry and “curious arts” and 50,000 silver pieces worth of books containing false religion were burned (Acts 19:17-19). The success of Paul's work is summed up in Acts 19:20: *“So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed.”* So many Gentiles were converted that Demetrius the silversmith and idol-maker was worried that there would be no more idol worshipers left and he led an enormous uproar in Ephesus (Acts 19:23-20:1). But all was not smooth and easy for Paul. Early on in Paul's time in Ephesus, after three months of teaching in the Jewish synagogue, many unbelieving Jews *“were hardened, and believed not, but spake evil of that way before the multitude”* (Acts 19:8-9). These Jews laid in wait for Paul and caused him *“many tears and temptations”* (Acts 20:19). But

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(continued)

Paul's sufferings in Asia did not only come at the hands of the Jews. After Paul spread the gospel throughout Asia Minor (Acts 19:10), the Gentiles revolted against the spread of Christianity and caused a great stir in Ephesus against Paul (Acts 19:19:23-20:1). And at some point (whether it was associated with the uproar caused by Demetrius or whether it happened prior to that due to some other reason we do not know for sure), Paul received a death sentence. Paul said that he had "*despaired even of life*" (2 Cor 1:8) and had "*had the sentence of death*" (2 Cor 1:9), but God "*delivered us from so great a death*" (2 Cor 1:10). This is likely the situation that Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 15:32 where he says that he had "*fought with beasts at Ephesus.*" Evidently, Paul had been thrown to the wild animals but God somehow caused him to escape or prevail. This is the particular trouble that we should not be ignorant of.

Suffering and temptation

The reason that Christians need to know about Paul's trouble in Asia is for the lesson which it taught Paul and teaches us. It is for our spiritual benefit. At the conclusion of Paul's third missionary journey, he spoke with the elders of the church at Ephesus, saying, "*Ye know, from the first day that I came into Asia, after what manner I have been with you at all seasons, serving the Lord with all humility of mind, and with many tears, and temptations, which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews*" (Acts 20:17-19). There is an inextricable link between suffering persecution and being tempted by the devil. Enduring sufferings and overcoming temptations go hand-in-hand (Rom 12:21; Heb 10:32; 12:1-4; Jas 1:2; 1 Pet 2:19-20; 1 John 2:13-14; 5:4-5; Rev 21:7). Satan uses our sufferings to tempt us to strike back and return evil for evil (Matt 5:38-48; 27-36; Rom 12:19-21; 1 Thes 5:15; 1 Pet 3:9), and even to quit the faith altogether (Matt 13:20-21; Mark 4:16-17; Luke 8:13; Acts 14:22; 1 Thes 3:1-6). As Paul was sentenced to death in Asia, the devil tempted him to trust in himself rather than in God. Paul concluded, "*But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raises the dead*" (2 Cor 1:9). And as Christ learned obedience by the things that he suffered (Heb 5:8), so Paul also learned to trust in God to deliver him, not just from death, but especially from temptation (2 Cor 1:10; 2 Pet 2:9). The Corinthians also helped Paul with their prayers (2 Cor 1:11), which is another lesson we learn from this. Prayer is part of our armor that God has given us to stand against Satan (Eph 6:10-18). By understanding the sufferings of Christ, such as endured by Paul in Ephesus, we are prepared to overcome temptation and stand against the wiles of the Devil.