

Opposition to a Vibrant Church
November 1, 1998
I Thess. 2:17-20, 3:1-5

Intro:

Review the whirlwind of travel, attack, evangelization that they had been through in past weeks
Leave Thess b/c of civil unrest, and injunction against Jason and the brothers (Ac. 17:10)
Ministry in Berea cut short by the Jews from Thess. (Ac. 17:15)
Hard, mostly unresponsive results in Athens.
Paul sends Silas and Timothy off - alone.

Who would not be tempted to question whether the Kingdom is really advancing? Who would not wonder if the gospel was going forward?

I. Spiritual Opposition is PERSONAL:

A. Observations from the text:

Opposition to Paul's Ministry while in Thess.:

The Jews became jealous and stirred up the crowd into a riot. This forced Paul, Silas, and Timothy to exit pre-maturely. (Torn away) - Orphaned. strong word vs. 17. Paul feels the separation keenly.

Opposition to Paul when he tried to return:

Satan stopped **us**. literally "cut in". Image of runner in full stride but then "cut off" and cause to exit the race. How did this happen? Circumstances, the edict, other people? Do not know. Probably good b/c it applies more fully. Paul had the discernment to recognize that it was Satan himself that hindered.

Opposition while they waiting:

Note the personal agonizing Paul goes through. 3:1, 5 "we could stand it no longer" "I could stand it no longer" There is a personal internal wrestling that Paul is enduring. They are also currently being persecuted (perhaps a ref. to the opposition at Berea, and/or the opposition at Corinth). So Paul is continuing to face external pressure and he recognizes that Satan is ultimately behind it.

Opposition to the young believers at Thess.:

Paul mentions his concern that the Tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless (in vain).

B. Theological reflection:

Satan will always oppose the advance of the gospel. He does this by attacking those who are proclaiming it and then targeting those who have received it. We should not be surprised. We should expect it. If there is no opposition we might need to ask if we're really engaging effectively in the work of the gospel.

Expect internal agonizing. Neither Paul, nor those who serve the gospel today, do so with a continual sense of victory and confidence. The doubts, questions, struggle, loneliness, etc. is how we will often feel. If you are going through that it does not mean you are not doing what you should be doing. Quite likely, you are right on track.

Young believers will be tempted. Satan is never creative. He recycles the same old stuff. Repeats the pattern he used in the garden of Eden. Creates doubt as to the reliability of God's word/commands, lies, compels one to act w/o thinking of long range consequences.

C. Response:

Know the truth. Commit to obey and follow through. Resist the devil and he will flee.

Transition: Note what Paul does. The door he expected to pass through (make a return trip to Thess. to strengthen the believers) was slammed shut. That option was closed. But he doesn't give up - doesn't surrender to passivity. He adopts a new strategy.

II. Spiritual Opposition DEMANDS THAT NEW STRATEGIES BE DEVELOPED to accomplish the ministry.

A. Observation:

Does the fact that Paul cannot personally visit Thess. stop him from fulfilling his pastoral calling for them? No! He just has to develop a new strategy. Instead of a personal visit, he sends a personal representative. Timothy is sent, and as we learned last week from 3:6-10, he had a useful ministry of encouragement among the Thessalonians. Then, as a follow up, Paul writes a letter to continue to instruct, encourage, and guide them along in their spiritual maturation.

Think of all that happens. Timothy grows as a minister - this is vital development for him on the way to becoming an effective pastor. Paul continues to serve - first witnessing in Athens, and then in Corinth. The ministry of evangelization and church planting will continue to reach into new areas. For the Thessalonians, while they would have loved to see Paul again, no doubt God provided what they needed through Timothy. They realized that their faith was not dependent upon only one human source.

God is the one orchestrating the whole process. He knows what is best for the Thessalonians, for the apostolic team, for the ongoing advance of the gospel, and ultimately FOR US (who now benefit by reading Paul's correspondence).

B. Illustration:

Many countries in the world that are "closed" to traditional missionaries. EFCM calls these "Creative Access Countries". Are they closed doors from God's perspective? Of course not! The fact of spiritual opposition forces mission leaders to develop new strategies that will fulfill God's purpose of spreading the gospel. In fact, these new strategies will often prove more effective in reaching the goal.

C. Application:

Spiritual opposition should never leave us discouraged or debilitated. Given our human frailty, we will go through times of that, but we shouldn't stay there. Rather, Spiritual Opposition should turn us back to God and cause us to seek to develop new (Spirit directed) strategies to accomplish the work the Lord has called us to do.

III. Spiritual Opposition REVEALS what is truly in our heart.

Spiritual Opposition is also God's means to refine our heart and reveal what is truly there. It is like metal that passes through the fire of purification. The end product is more brilliant than if it had not been tested.

A. Expressions of Encouragement:

Note especially what Paul says of the Thessalonians in 2:19-20. He calls them "our hope, our joy, our crown in which we will glory . . . indeed, you are our glory and joy." Imagine if someone who you highly respected said that of you? Would you not be filled with a sense of honor and significance? As a minister of the gospel, Paul lived for others. The goal of his life was not personal advancement - he did not

measure his accomplishments by a worldly standard. Rather the goal was to see others fulfilling their calling in Christ. It is a reflection of the heart of Jesus himself. **WE WILL BE JESUS'S JOY AND GLORY ON THAT FINAL DAY.** As we give ourselves to others in service, whether it be family members, friends, or our brothers and sisters in Christ - we begin to develop the heart of Jesus. Adopt his values. Now none of this would have been expressed for us had Paul not been forced to deal with Spiritual Opposition. The pressure revealed what was in his heart - and made it public.

B. Expressions of Prayer:

Note also that Paul does not throw up his hands in futility. Rather he bends the knee, and folds his hands in prayer. Spiritual Opposition should be a great stimulus to pray. I will remind you that this section ends with Paul telling them that "night and day we pray most earnestly. . ." and then gives us a model prayer in vs. 11-13. Prayer is the proper response to spiritual opposition. Prayer is the weapon God has given us to defeat the enemy and overcome the opposition. Through prayer, we learn to depend on God and realize that the battle is the Lord's.

Conclusion