

May 19, 2019

Every Day Spiritual Life 1 Thessalonians 2:17 – 3:5

Our sermon text this morning is First Thessalonians chapter 2, from verse 17 through and on into chapter 3, verse 5. First Thessalonians 2, verse 17, through to First Thessalonians chapter 3, verse 5. Before the reading of that portion, we will pray and ask for God's blessings. I would ask you now to bow your heads and join me in prayer.

Our Father in heaven, as we seek now to learn from your word, I pray, Father, that you would help us. Please help me as I speak. Please help us all as we hear. May we be given ears that hear, eyes that see, and hearts that understand and obey. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

First Thessalonians chapter 2, starting the reading at verse 17 and reading on through to chapter 3, verse 5. Hear the word of God: ¹⁷But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, ¹⁸because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us. ¹⁹For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? ²⁰For you are our glory and joy.

¹Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, ²and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, ³that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. ⁴For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. ⁵For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain." Amen. May God bless His word to us.

Scripture in many places describes the struggle, or the spiritual battle, that is going on as God's kingdom advances upon this earth, and speaks of principalities and powers, and wickedness in high places. And if you're anything like me and like so many Christians, I'm sure there's kind of a fascination with this battle. There's kind of a desire almost to look into the spiritual realm and see what's going on.

I think we almost can't help but think to ourselves, "I'd like to see what an angel looks like, you know, with his fiery sword drawn and looking to fight." But the funny thing is, obviously, in Scripture wherever anyone did actually see an angel, they feared greatly, because the first thing that an angel has to say to a person, a holy angel has to say to a person is, "Fear not! Fear not, don't be afraid."

You know, if one of God's heavenly, holy angels were to manifest here today, we'd all be rather frightened, if Scripture is any guide. Probably partly, one, because it's so unusual; two, because they are not sinful and we are. Those angels which have not fallen are not sinful, and we are.

Even in this world, from person to person, when you're in the company of someone whom you know is a person of somewhat accomplished holiness, somewhat marked sanctification, you tend to have a certain respect—I won't use the word awe, but a certain respect for that person.

In my Christian life, I have known a few Christian people that actually changed the mood of a room as they walk into it. Just their very presence restrains bad language. People who are, you might use the word “profane,” often behave themselves in the presence of these people. It's just something that influences them. And we often think that we would like to see some of these spiritual forces, and perhaps we would like to see something of this spiritual battle.

Well in our text this morning, what we actually have is Paul telling us, this spiritual battle looks incredibly ordinary. When Paul describes the spiritual battle, he's describing somebody who loves someone but can't get to visit them. He's describing people who have faith and are very young Christians, growing in their faith, and he's worried that they may be led astray to the point where they turn their back upon the faith and become apostate. Paul is describing the spiritual as something very ordinary.

Look in our text at First Thessalonians chapter 3 and verse 2, and I know it reads a little differently for those of you who read the New King James, but the ESV is actually quite literal here: “And we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ.”

“Timothy, our brother and God's coworker.” What's that mean? Timothy, the one who is working with and for God, Timothy the one who is being used to accomplish the plans of God—what does it look like to have these spiritual forces interacting with you, and coming to you, and being involved in the running of your church and your family and your worship? It looks like someone sent forth from the apostles to speak to you the word of God according to the instruction of the apostles. It looks pretty ordinary.

Timothy was a young man. In Paul's letters to Timothy, First and Second Timothy, we get the impression not only was he a young man, but he might actually have been a timid young man, a man who was not the biggest-man-in-the room kind of man. You know, some guys walk into the room, and everybody's, “Woo-hoo! The big guy's walked in!” Apparently, Timothy's not that kind of guy.

Paul has to tell Timothy, “Don't be afraid, and don't let them hold you in contempt because you're a young man. Do the things that you were sent out to do. You were sent out to evangelize, and to preach, and to appoint elders, and to make sure the churches are being run well, and being run according to the word of God. Do what you were sent out to do.”

Yet this young man Timothy, he turns up, and the spiritual battle is going on, and Timothy brings to them the word of the gospel, and he's establishing and exhorting the Thessalonians in their faith.

So in Paul's world view—the apostles' Holy Spirit breathed-out world view, in Paul's word view which is coming to him from God—the spiritual things that we wonder about are happening all around us. They're happening throughout our towns and societies. That battle or that warfare goes on, but what we see is very ordinary and we don't usually make the connection. It's probably wise, in a way, that we don't make the connection.

You've probably all met the Christian who's sort of gone a little bit too far off with the fairies, and in that person's life, absolutely nothing happens but that it was an angel that did, or it was a demon that did it, that somehow or other everything that happens is in some way or another some kind of unusual supernatural manifestation. All you did was drive to town, park the car, get out of your car, walk in, buy a carton of milk, walk back to your car, drive back home again, and somehow or other you're claiming this was visitation of angels, and on and on and on. There are those people. They make too many connections that are not necessarily to be made.

But we as Christians have got to be prepared to make some connections to the things that are going on around us. We as Christians have got to be prepared to at least say that things that we don't necessarily understand are happening, that this great warfare of darkness and light is going on all around us, in our nations and in the nations of the earth. We as Christians have got to be prepared to say that Scripture tells us these things are happening.

And as is often the case with the word of God, you've got a path, and a ditch to the right and a ditch to the left. On one side, you have the people who go, as I said, they're off with the fairies. Everything's an angel, everything's a demon, everything's a spiritual experience. And on the other side, you've got the people who choose to totally and utterly ignore spiritual reality. "Bah! Rubbish! Don't want to know about it."

You know, I read many commentaries as I prepare a sermon, and those commentaries come from a broad range of scholarship—from evangelical through to the most liberal and unbelieving of scholarship—and I found that in those commentaries indeed were many commentators who were very uncomfortable with the fact that Paul here would even dare to mention a being called Satan. "I, Paul, again and again—*but Satan...*"

They're very uncomfortable that he would even mention a being called Satan, and imply that there is such a thing as a spiritual realm that is working around us, within us, over us—speak of it how you wish to speak of it—and very uncomfortable that at the end of our passage he would speak of a tempter who is tempting you. They've gone too far off the other side, haven't they? They've gone to the point where they're completely denying supernatural things. They're completely denying the spiritual realm and the reality.

Somewhere in the middle, somewhere down the straight line, there's wisdom. There is a spiritual supernatural realm. But we as God's people are not to be overly obsessed with such things. We're not to be seeking experiences that God does not necessarily send us. We as God's people are to be a people of God's word. We study the teaching of the apostles.

God does do supernatural things in people's lives. I don't honestly deny that. Most of you know that I'm not Pentecostal, and if I had to describe myself, I would say I'm Cessationist. But that doesn't mean that I don't believe that God answers prayer. He does answer prayer. Sometimes people are definitely certainly healed, according to the will of God. Sometimes people have definitely certainly done foolish things in their lives that have opened themselves up to demon possession, and they need the gospel and they need prayer to bring them into the kingdom of God. These things can be true. They indeed are true and do happen.

So as we work our way through our text, what we're really looking at here is how our Christian lives look very normal and ordinary, yet in and over these things is: one, the will of God. God is always working, God is always doing things, God is always accomplishing things; and two, the work of that rebellious and wicked servant, the Devil himself, as he seeks to stand against and to hinder the progress of the gospel in the world.

So let's have a look, starting at First Thessalonians chapter 2, verse 17: "But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face." Interesting word there, that in my Bible is translated as "torn." It implies "orphaned"—"Since the family was separated." That word that is "orphaned" in the Greek works either way. When we use the word orphan, we literally think of a child who has lost his parents. Well, in the Greek, you can use the same word to describe a parent who has lost his child. Paul is saying, "We were orphaned from you, brothers." The family was torn apart for a short time in person, but not in heart.

You know, this word of "love," when you read about the Apostle Paul and his love for the churches and the Christians that he knows, you're hearing the words of a man who lost everything for the gospel. When Paul speaks of himself as being dead to the world, well even today, if a Jewish family has a member of that family convert to Christianity, many Jewish families will go the whole mile and they will have a funeral for that person who is living. They will consider that person to be dead because they've become a Christian. They consider them to be a traitor to Jewish life.

I actually heard the testimony once of a fellow who was born into a Jewish family. He earned his living as a homosexual stripper. That was fine. But one day he wandered into a church and he came under the conviction of the word of God, and he repented and he became a Christian. And his family went berserk. He was suddenly a traitor. He was suddenly someone who had turned aside and turned against his family, at least in their own mind. And they actually had a funeral for the guy. That's kind of the thing that Paul suffered.

Paul, as a Pharisee, did the things that Pharisees do. Paul was recognized as a Pharisee. Remember Paul speaks in places, for example in the book of Philippians, of how far he had advanced among his own people. To be a Pharisee, you had a wife. You had a connected family relationship. You had a wife. You were not a full-blooded Pharisee if you did not have a wife.

Paul was also a tentmaker. You were not a full-blooded Pharisee unless you had a trade. You had to have a trade in which you worked with your hands, and you had to have a wife. That's the way the Pharisee sect worked.

Notice that in his letters, Paul never speaks of his wife. He speaks of being dead. He speaks of being separated from ones that he loves. He speaks of considering his whole past life to be excrement, finished, gone. He may well have lost all his family connections, especially after a few years. That may not have happened to him at first, but as he became more decidedly a Christian, and as the Christian sect, as the Jews called it, became less Jewish and more Christian, less fitting into synagogue life, more starting up church life, he may well have lost all of his family connections.

What replaces the family connections? The church, God's people, the converts, the people that he's sacrificing himself for, the people that he's traveling hundreds of miles for, the people that he's going through hardship and privation for, the people who are the fruit of his ministry. This is Paul, who was flogged for the gospel. You know, if we had a church camp and went down to the beach, and off come the shirt and off you go for a swim, we'd all just stop dead and look at Paul's back and go, "What happened to you? Did someone run over you with a slasher?" Because he was flogged and flogged and flogged again.

Paul's affections, his family affection and connection, is the church. And so he uses these words like "orphaned" and "brothers." "I was separated in person, but not in heart. And I endeavored to see you eagerly with great desire, to see you face to face." He loved these people. They were his life. He had no other plan. He had no other plan, he had no other hope. We'll see that comes out even more in the things that he says.

What was his plan? What was his hope? That he would plant growing, living churches all over the world, and that they would grow in faith and grace and Christlikeness. He didn't have a plan to own a country estate. He didn't have a plan to be a wealthy and influential man. His plan was to see the church grow and be strengthened. And that was all he had. So he loves these people. He wants to see them, eagerly, with great desire, face to face.

And now we'll move on to verse 18: "Because we wanted to come to you." Notice he says "we"—that's Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy—"wanted to come to you." And then he puts the emphasis on his own heart, or his own feelings: "—I, Paul, again and again—" A little bit of discussion there. What does he mean by "again and again"? Some think he literally means at least twice, and some think that it means more than twice—over and over and over and onward, three, four, five times.

What was the hindering? We don't know. It's a bit like in the book of Second Corinthians, where Paul talks about having a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan. What's the thorn in the flesh? We don't know. Is it sickness? Is it disease? Is it a false teacher who annoys him? Is it

people accusing him? We don't know. But Paul could not get to them, and he wanted to, and he wished to, again and again.

Look at what he says: "But Satan hindered us. He hindered us. We couldn't get there." The word "hindered" outside of the Bible, in ancient Greek, it's the kind of thing that an army would do as it tears up a road to slow down the approach of an advancing army. You know, they might dig ditches, they might put spikes in those ditches. They're trying to stop the advance of an army. That's the word that Paul has used there, and he says, "Satan hindered us." How do we handle that?

Okay, first of all, we need to have our Christian worldview firmly in place. Could Satan have hindered Paul for no other reason than Satan wanted to hinder Paul? What does Scripture tell us, my friends? If we go back to the book of Job, could Satan attack Job for no other reason than Satan wanted to attack Job? Or did he actually have to have God permit Job to undergo those testings? And the answer is, God had to permit Satan to put Job through those testings.

So, coming here into our New Testament, Paul speaks of being hindered by Satan. He's not saying that Satan runs around willy-nilly, doing as he pleases to Christians. That's not what he's getting at. Paul himself has a Christian worldview. Remember, as far as Paul is concerned, Christ rules over all. Christ reigns over all. Christ has ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. If Satan can hinder the apostles, if Satan can hinder Paul in his ministry, Paul understands that this is because God permits it.

In the passage I've already mentioned, in Second Corinthians, where Paul speaks of the fact that there's a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan buffeting him, he then goes on to say, "And God told me that this is happening to keep me humble. 'My grace is sufficient for you. My strength is made perfect in weakness.'"

Paul is saying, "As an apostle, I had had so many visions, I had received so many revelations, that I would have become a proud and foolish man, but God was using these buffetings of Satan to keep me humble." And so here we have Satan hindering the ministry, and God is obviously allowing Satan to hinder the ministry.

Always remember, it's Paul who wrote Romans chapter 8, verse 28: "All things work together for good for those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose." All things. We'll talk a little more about this when we come to the end of our passage where the tempter is mentioned, but I just want you to remember, "all things" means all things. Good is coming from Satan being allowed to hinder Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. All things—all things, even being hindered by Satan—work together for good for those who love God, for those who are called according to His purpose. We'll talk a little more about how that would be as we read on.

Let's move on and into verse 19: "For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? ²⁰ For you are our glory and joy." Once again, we've got

this interesting thought here. “What is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?” What does he mean? What is he saying here? I mean, Paul has in another place said that none should boast, for all are sinners and have fallen short of the glory of God, and are saved by grace, that none should boast. And yet here Paul says, But we’ve got a hope, a joy, and “a crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?”

You hear what he’s saying—his whole life is tied up in the building of churches. He’s not saying that he has righteousness to boast of in the presence of the Lord. And he is definitely expecting the coming of the Lord, our Lord Jesus, at His coming—the word is *parousía*. It’s the visit of a king. It’s the coming of royalty to your town. That’s what the word literally means. And Paul expects that the Lord Jesus is coming, and He’s coming to inspect things that were done. He’s coming to judge things, and Paul says that his hope or joy or crown of boasting is the Thessalonians.

Now I don’t think he meant only the Thessalonians, but he is writing to the Thessalonians. Paul could probably say the same thing of the Corinthians, of the Ephesians, of the Galatians, and any other place and church where he ministered—of the Romans. Anywhere that he established churches where Jesus is worshiped as the Son of God, they are his hope of boasting.

What’s he saying? Well remember in the parables of our Lord, those who were given money to invest—the Parable of the Talents, it’s often called—what did the Lord expect when He returned? What was His expectation? He expected that each would have put that money to work for the benefit of his master.

And the one who got five talents came along and said, “Lord, I’ve invested, and now I’ve got ten. And here’s your ten.” “Well done, faithful servant. You shall be over ten cities.” The one who got two, the lord came, and the one who got two said, “Lord, I’ve invested your two, it made another two. Here’s the four.” “Well done. Be over four cities.” And then there was the one who said, “Lord, you gave me one. I knew you were a hard man, so I hid it under the ground. Here’s the one you gave me.” And the lord said, “You’re a wicked and lazy servant. You’re a rebellious servant. You knew that I was expecting return on my investment, and you did not return. You’re cast into the outer darkness.”

Paul is saying that his return on the investment is the church of the Thessalonians. His return on investment is the people who are growing because of his preaching, his exhortation, his ministry, his prayers. His return on investment is that the Lord had blessed his work, and that there were people to show for this work.

So what’s Paul’s hope before the Lord Jesus? You know, we often imagine the idea of Satan in this moment of judgment, Satan being the accuser. But Satan’s already been silenced. The accuser’s already been put in his place. It’s the Lord Himself who is the judge. What’s Paul’s hope? “Lord, you used me to grow churches. You used me to lead people to Christ. You used me to bring you glory through the worship of the saints.” That’s his hope. That’s his only hope.

His hope is not in his own righteousness. He's not actually saying, "I'm righteous and I've earned salvation." He's saying, "I have been used by you, and that is my glory."

How can a Christian hope for a reward if it's the Lord who does everything? Well, we still work and we still obey. Yes, we're Christians because the Lord made us Christians. Yes, we're obedient because the Lord has given us the gift of the Holy Spirit. We've been used because the Lord chose to use us. Even so, He rewards as He sees fit, and we as Christians are to obey and to serve our God.

Moving on to verse 20, Paul says: "For you are our glory and joy." Chapter 3, verse 1: "Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone,² and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith."

Hear the language once again: We could bear it no longer. "We could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone." Of all of those who wrote in the Scriptures, of all of those who wrote epistles in the New Testament, Paul is the most—let's use an anachronistic term—Calvinistic of the apostles. Paul is the one that says all things come from the hand of God, that all things are predestined by God, that all Christians are predestined by God. In the book of Ephesians in chapter 2 at verse 10, Paul even suggests that even the good works that Christians do are predestined.

In Ephesians chapter 1, Paul speaks of God's electing grace and people being predestined to salvation, etc., etc. And an accusation that's often made against the doctrine of predestination is that it makes people puppets, unemotional participants in the things that God is doing. It basically makes people's lives meaningless.

Well, Paul is the one who wrote so much of predestination, and yet look at the emotion that he's pouring out there. "Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone." "When we could bear it no longer. We'd had enough of this. We'd had enough of not hearing from you. We'd had enough of being separated from you. We'd had enough of not being able to check into the life of your church and to see how things were going."

"Therefore when we could bear it no longer," on into verse 2, "we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith." Timothy, God's coworker. It's easy to get uncomfortable with that idea. Timothy, God's coworker? Our brother and God's coworker? It's not the only place Paul uses the phrase.

Turn to First Corinthians chapter 3. Here Paul speaks of the fact that he and Apollos, they're nobodies. Let's read from verse 5: "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to

his labor. ⁹For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building." Who? Apollos and Paul are God's fellow workers.

But notice what Paul is saying. He's not saying that being a fellow worker with God makes a person co-equal with God. Back at verse 7 of First Corinthians 3, he says, "Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth"—"gives the growth." He and Apollos are God's fellow workers, or co-workers, just as Paul says of Timothy in First Thessalonians chapter 3, "God's co-worker." Yet he also says at the same time that they are not anything—"neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." In Philippians chapter 2, Paul speaks of the fact that it is God who works in you to work and to will for His good pleasure.

My friends, Christians doing the will of God can be called co-workers with God, but the apostle is obviously not saying that someone who is a co-worker is in any way equal with God, or in any way righteous on their own basis. They are obedient. God is using them. God is indeed accomplishing things through them, and because they are acting in obedience, they can be called co-workers. But that doesn't mean that they're perfect, it doesn't mean that they're God, or gods, or divine. They're servants. They're not anything. It's God who blesses their ministry.

"Our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ," just looking at the final part there of verse 2 of First Thessalonians chapter 3, "to establish and exhort you in your faith." To establish and exhort you. You see why Paul wanted to see them face to face—if we go back up to chapter 2, verse 17 of First Thessalonians chapter 2, "with great desire to see you face to face"—is that he wanted something to be done. He wanted to establish and exhort them in their faith—establish and exhort.

Why do churches meet? Why do Christians need one another? To establish and exhort us in our faith. We need God to speak to us, and God speaks to us through other Christians. You get the word of God from the people of God. You get God's written word from the Scripture. You get the Scripture applied by your fellow Christians. Iron sharpens iron, is the proverb. Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another. The people of God sharpen the people of God. Paul wanted to see them face to face because he knows that churches need to be established through exhortation in the faith.

Moving on into verse 3 of First Thessalonians chapter 3: "that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this." Afflictions. We'll read on in verse 4 as well: "For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know." Afflicted for the faith. You know, this is just so different to what is taught in so many places and called the "gospel." You're taught you'll be victorious, day after day after day; you'll get all that you want; all you have to do is say the right prayer of faith. That's not what Paul is saying. "We kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know."

Turn for example to Second Timothy chapter 3. We'll start reading at verse 10. Paul speaking to Timothy: "10 You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, 11 my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. 12 Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

The apostles did not promise a life of untold blessing, a life of walking through this world on rose-petal strewn paths, where nothing ever goes wrong and everything goes right, and the world is always on our side, and everything's always going to go right. That's not what Paul speaks of. Paul speaks of suffering persecution because you desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus. You desire not to be like the world; therefore, the world desires to persecute you.

Paul's word to the Thessalonians is that these afflictions do not actually negate the gospel, but these afflictions actually confirm the gospel. These afflictions are not surprising. It's not a failure of the gospel that the world hates the preaching the word, it's actually a confirmation of the gospel that the world hates the preaching of the word. We're to be afflicted in this world. We're not to expect the world to be on our side.

The Scripture tells us that the world is our enemy in many ways. "Do not love the world or the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." Or, all that is of the world: the lust of the flesh, the pride of the eyes, all of these things are not of the Father, but of the world. And so, "just as it has come to pass, and as you know."

Verse 5 of First Thessalonians chapter 3: "For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain." I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.

Once again, I point out to you, this is the same Apostle Paul who speaks of the assurance of salvation—Whom He justified, He glorified. This is the same Apostle Paul who speaks of the fact that Christians cannot lose their salvation. But Paul was human. Don't imagine Paul is this perfect person who never ever got it wrong, never ever made a mistake, was above and beyond normal human emotions, was above and beyond the fear that things could possibly go wrong. He feared that somehow the tempter had tempted them, and that his labor would be in vain.

Okay, let's close now, and as we close, I'll just give us some thoughts here, some things to think about. Paul speaks here of what the spiritual warfare looks like. As I've said, it looks very much like normal people doing normal things in a world that is rebellious against the goodness of God.

How would the hindering of Satan be made to work for good? Remember, "All things work together for good," from Romans chapter 8 verse 28, "for those who love God, for those who are called according to His purpose." How would it have been made to work for good?

Okay, why have we got the letters of First and Second Thessalonians in our Bibles? Why have we got this portion of Scripture? Because Paul couldn't go and see them and speak to them face to face, so he put his words on paper. So one of the results of Satan's hindering is that we've got a portion of the Scripture that we call First and Second Thessalonians. Paul couldn't go and see them, so he wrote to them. And God's word has been passed down to us in written form. That's a good thing that came of Satan's hindering.

What's another good thing that comes of Satan's hindering? Timothy got sent out on his own. Paul wanted to go, Paul wanted to be the one who went to them and exhorted them and establish them in their faith, but he couldn't. But for whatever reason and this hindering of Satan that would not allow Paul to go, he was able to get Timothy over there.

Paul's going to die one day. Timothy is a man younger than Paul. Paul is training up his so-to-speak replacement. Not that I'm saying Timothy became an apostle, but I'm saying that Timothy became a leader of the church and a preacher of the gospel. So this hindering of Satan caused Paul to send Timothy out to a church where Timothy ministered the gospel as a man of God, as a pastor. This hindering of Satan actually opened a door of opportunity for Timothy to grow in grace and to grow in obedience and to grow in faithfulness. This helps Timothy to grow in his Christian maturity.

How else could the hindering of Satan have been used by God for good? Well, looking at verse 5, Paul says that he was fearful and worrying. "I feared. I couldn't bear it any longer. I sent to learn about your faith for fear." The Apostle Paul was learning something. Guess what? If God wants to make a church grow, God doesn't have to rely on any single person. The fact that Paul could not get there did not mean that the Thessalonian church was collapsing into a pile of dust and rubbish. It did not mean that the people were dispersing, and it did not mean that their faith was dying. Paul is being made to learn that though he is an apostle, and though God is using him to establish churches and to write the Scripture, yet he himself is just a servant in God's vineyard, and God can accomplish His works with or without him.

So Paul is himself being told, "Paul, all things are in my hand. Paul, all things are happening according to my will. Paul, this church in Thessalonica, it will grow whether you get there or not. I am the Lord. I grow my own churches my own way." None of us are important. If Paul was not so important that he had to get to the Thessalonians, what right has any Christian in the world today to imagine that they are so important that God's kingdom cannot be grown apart from them? The answer is, We have no right to imagine such things—none whatsoever. No one is so important that God can't do it without them. No one, not even the apostles were that important, though God chose to work through them.

What other things might have been accomplished? Well think about the Thessalonians themselves. They had thought that Paul was the way you learnt. They had thought that you had to hear from Paul. Well, they've heard from Timothy. Timothy exhorted them and established

them in the faith. What are they learning? As Christians, what are we to learn? Just as no single person ought to think that they themselves are so important that the church can't survive without them, we as Christians should never elevate a person to such a high degree, to put them on such a high pedestal that we imagine that that person is essential, that if he dies the ministry dies, if he goes, the church dies. That's not the way God works. God uses people. God doesn't use just one person in one particular way. God uses people. There's an enormous temptation to look to heroes. I mean, you see them online.

Just a little story. Up in Queanbeyan, I came out of the shopping center up there, and there's a lady on the street side and she's handing out tracts. She's a Christian lady, she's handing out tracts. And I sort of always want to encourage people who want to do things like that. I think it's good. Christians in Australia need to be doing things like that. So I let her give me a tract, and I said, "Thank you. As it happens, I'm a reformed Baptist minister." "Oh great," she said, you know, blah, blah, blah. And she's an African lady. But anyway, she said to me, "Are you ready for the return of Jesus?" I said, "That's the way I live. Of course I'm ready for the return of Jesus." "Ahh," she said, "but are you John chapter 14, verse 1, ready for the return of Jesus?" And I realize what she's getting at. So I looked at the back of the tract and the front of the tract, and on this tract was an extract from a sermon by John MacArthur. Nothing against John MacArthur, but he's dispensationalist in his eschatology, and he's expecting a rapture of the saints. And in John MacArthur's mind, John chapter 14, verse 1, is a prediction of the rapture of the saints—you know, at the beginning of the seven-year tribulation, which leads on to the thousand-year kingdom.

And I looked at the tract—"Ah, yeah, I see. Look, Dr. MacArthur is great, but I don't think he's right there. I don't agree with his reading of John chapter 14, verse 1." And the horror in her eyes, the look on her face. "You disagree with MacArthur?" You could just see it. "You disagree with MacArthur?" He's a man. I'm allowed to disagree with MacArthur. And MacArthur's allowed to disagree with men. And I'm pretty sure, from what I understand and know of John MacArthur—I've read a lot of his books, I've listened to a lot of his material—he doesn't want disciples that worship John MacArthur. He doesn't want people who say, "MacArthur said it; therefore, it must be true." That's not his aim in ministry. His aim is to have people who are like the Bereans, who were more noble than the others. They tested everything according to the Scriptures.

That might mean sometimes you disagree with someone who in other ways you respect greatly. I greatly respect Dr. MacArthur, but disagree with his eschatology. No one man on this earth, no one minister of the word of God is perfect or so important that they cannot be replaced, and no one of us as Christians ought ever to accept the words of a man as though that man were himself Christ. Christ uses faithful preachers. Jesus speaks through faithful preachers. There is no doubt about it. But that doesn't make the faithful preacher a person who themselves ought to be put side by side with Christ.

Christ reigns at the right hand of the Father. All the people who walk this earth are His servants. All the people who walk this earth are at His foot, as it were. We're down at ground level and He is enthroned over us. Don't let hero worship blind you to the faults of the people who are teaching you. Don't ever put a man on equal footing with our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we learn this from our text here today because God permitted Satan to hinder the ministry of Paul. And there's another example of how all things can be made to work together for good. Let's close in prayer.

Father in heaven, we thank you and we praise you for your word and we thank you and praise you that you reveal things to us from the Scriptures. We praise you, Father, that you have told us all that we need to know concerning the spiritual realm that we live in, concerning those things which our human eyes cannot see, but which to you are as plain as day and as clear as the nose upon our face.

Our Father in heaven, we thank you and we praise you that we can entrust all of these things to you. We ask, Father, that we would be given wisdom and discernment through the work of your Holy Spirit, that we would not be fools, that we would not go to the extremes of foolishness, but that we would be wise and that we would do according to your will. We ask all of these things in Jesus' name. Amen.