

## **“Satan Hindered Us”**

David Flatt

*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, because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us. For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy (1 Thess. 2:17-20).*

1 Thessalonians chapters one through three serve as an extended introduction to the letter. Most of what Paul writes concerns the Thessalonians recent obedience to the Gospel, a subsequent persecution, and the goings-on of Paul’s separation from them.

Paul’s separation from the Thessalonians was not by choice. He was forced to leave Thessalonica against his will. An all too familiar Jewish led persecution reared its ugly head.

### **Jewish Persecution of Jewish Believers in Jesus**

Before discussing the previous cited passage, let us explore the reasons behind the Jewish persecution. In Thessalonica, why did the Jews persecute fellow Jews who obeyed the Gospel? Why did the Jews persecute the Gentiles who obeyed the Gospel? Why did they direct the full-force of their efforts towards Paul? More broadly, why did the Jews respond violently to fellow Jews who obeyed the Gospel?

The persecution in Thessalonica was not an isolated incident. Remember, the first persecution experience by Jewish believers in Jesus was at the hands of fellow Jews. In Jerusalem, the Jews murdered Stephen, a fellow Jew (Acts 7). They expelled Jewish believers in Jesus from the city (Acts 8). The Sanhedrin Council employed Paul, a Jew, to persecute Jewish believers in Jesus.

Such a violent reaction by Jews towards fellow Jewish believers in Jesus is a bit puzzling. Why not just agree to disagree about Jesus being the Messiah? Why not just split and form a new sect. After all, the Jews had a history of forming various sects around competing ideas of the Messiah and the Messiah’s kingdom.

Well, there is a key reason to explain why Jews reacting violently against Jewish believers in Jesus. Their reaction can be attributed to their understanding of the coming kingdom and zeal. The Jews expected God to keep His covenant and reestablish their kingdom. If they were unfaithful to the covenant, they would be punished and coming kingdom would be delayed. This is what their history had taught them.

For example, Israel’s unfaithfulness in the past resulted in a seventy year exile in Babylonian captivity. However, their kingdom was not fully restored at the end of the seventy years. The second Temple was built; however, the glory of God never returned to the Temple. The glory of God would return in the flesh and blood form of the Messiah. Nevertheless, the Jews felt anyone who went against their Messianic expectations threatened the coming kingdom. Therefore, they felt justified in violently crushing any such threats.

As far as the use of violent zeal is concerned, the Jews could look back in their history and see where violent zeal had been used to purify their nation. Being zealous as a Jew meant being willing to use violence to purify the nation. Consider two exalted zealots from the Jews’ history: Elijah and Phinehas.

Perhaps the best known act of violent zeal came at the contest at Mt. Carmel. After proving Jehovah was God with fire from Heaven, Elijah executed 450 prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:40). He may have also executed an additional 400 prophets of Ashera who were present. Regardless, this was a clear act of purification through zealous violence.

Likewise, Phinehas speared and killed an Israelite man and a Moabite woman while they were fornicating (Num. 25:1-9). Israel had begun to worship idols and intermarry with pagans. God caused a plague to punish Israel. Phinehas' execution of these two put a stop to the plague. God commended Phinehas' deed (Num. 25:10-13). Generations later, Phinehas was memorialized by David in a Psalm. Phinehas was considered righteous (Psa. 106:28-31).

Elijah and Phinehas were revered by Israel. They were symbols of zeal. Zeal was not zeal unless it involved violence. Remember, the evidence Paul cited for being a zealous Jew? He persecuted the church (Acts 8:1-3; Phil. 3:6). While He never approved the use of violence, Jesus acknowledged the violence of the Jewish sect of the "Zealots" (Matt. 11:12).

Zeal for God and the coming kingdom was the motivating force behind the Jews violently persecuting Jewish believers in Jesus. Sadly, the zealous Jews were wrong in their understanding of the Messiah and the Messiah's kingdom. Paul would later write of Israel's zeal being a zeal without knowledge. After all, if anyone knew about having a zeal for God without knowledge, it was Paul.

*Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Rom. 10:1-4).*

### **Satan Hindered Paul**

As difficult as the present situation was for Paul and the Thessalonians, Paul had the right perspective. He was not surprised he was being persecuted for advancing the Gospel. Paul recognized the source of the persecution: Satan.

Paul blames Satan for hindering him from being able to return to Thessalonica. He indicates he tried to return twice, but was prevented. He does not say when this happened; however, we can surmise he was hindered at Berea and possibly at Athens. In the next chapter, he essentially writes that he gave up on trying to get to Thessalonica when he was forced to go to Athens (1 Thess. 3:1-3).

### **The Spirit v. Satan**

Interestingly enough, we see two opposing entities involved in Paul's work: the Spirit and Satan. The Spirit had guided him to Macedonia and Satan had hindered him from returning to Thessalonica (Acts 16:6-11). In spite of Satan's efforts, Paul was preaching and the Thessalonians were thriving.

While the Spirit works differently today than what He was specifically doing for Paul, we would be wise to consider how the Spirit and Satan are involved in our lives. The Spirit is able to guide us by God's word if we are willing to obey. At the same time, however, Satan is working to hinder us.

Satan wants to slow and stop our efforts to teach our children and neighbors. Satan wants to discourage us to the point of crushing our faith. When our faith is tested, he wants us to blame God. Like Paul, we must acknowledge that Satan is to blame for hardships, not God (Jas. 1:13-14).

### **Paul's Hope & Ours**

Hope is an often misunderstood concept. Hope is not wishful thinking. Hope is based in that which is real. Our hope is based in the reality of the Messiah's resurrection from the dead. Christians can confidently expect to receive new life presently and eternal life in the future because Jesus was raised from the dead (1 Cor. 15).

Likewise, joy is an often misunderstood concept. Being joyful does not mean never having a bad day, or being unaffected by bad things happening. Christians are to be particularly sensitive to suffering and injustice. Rather, joy is a reassuring calm which comes from the knowledge of our salvation.

Surprisingly enough, Paul was hopeful and joyful in this difficult time in his life. His source of hope, joy, and glory was in the flourishing faith and love of the Thessalonians. Yes, they were being unjustly persecuted. Being a Christian in Thessalonica was not easy, nor would it ever become easy. Yet, Paul was hopeful about the future.

The Thessalonians were proof of the power of the Gospel to transform. Hope and joy come through the new life offered by the resurrected Lord and working to advance His kingdom on earth as it is in Heaven.

### **Conclusion**

Without question, the Spirit and Satan are opposing entities in our lives. The Spirit is leading to an eternal inheritance (Rom. 8:11-17). Satan is leading to an eternal death. Who will we choose to follow?

While choosing to follow the Spirit is the most logical choice to make, we can expect hardships along the way. Like Jesus, Paul was known to teach about how godly people would be persecuted on their way to the kingdom (Matt. 5:10-12; Acts 14:21-22). Yet, Paul shows us how we can experience hope, joy, and glory if we follow the Spirit and resist Satan. **DF**