

The Devil's in the Detours

1 Thessalonians 2:17-20

***Why go to Gaza when Samaria's
So rich a field for sowing sacred seed:
Because God's House is oft disguised as Luz,
When victory's a bruised and broken reed,
The Wind would call us to some untrod way
With breeze blown whispers in a prophet's cave,
A magi's midnight dream or vision as we pray.
Still, walking with the Wind is for the brave,
For there are times He lets the enemy
Cut off our highest hopes and dearest dreams
To force us from the Windless way that we
Would walk. Though stark and stony, long and lone,
Such detours lead us to our Father's throne.***

Paul was not where he wanted to be. He was not doing what he really wanted to be doing, either. At night, he laid awake staring into the darkness and worrying about beloved believers far away in Thessalonica.

For all appearances, it was not the apostle's idea to leave when the Jews stirred up market thugs to riot against him. But new believers at Thessalonica loved the great missionary as much as he loved them. And they were worried.

They knew it was merely a matter of time. Already angry Jews were stirring ugly opposition. And their pagan neighbors were eagerly joining in.

Before long the apostle's enemies would catch him. Then where would they be? They knew of no one else who could teach them about the riches of their new Redeemer.

So in the dark of night, they slipped out of the city gate. And they took Paul with them.

The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, Acts 17:10

Berea was only forty-five miles from Thessalonica. Still, it took a couple days of hard hiking to make the trip.

But it was not long before angry synagogue Jews heard that Paul was proclaiming Jesus as Messiah in Berea. So they followed him and stirred up opposition to the apostle there, too.

Therefore, Berean saints took Paul to the nearest seaport. Then they boarded a coastal vessel and sailed south to Athens.

...those who escorted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they left. Acts 17:15

They left Paul alone in Athens. And that was neither where he wanted nor planned to be.

When Timothy finally caught up with him, the missionary sat down and dictated a letter to the saints in Thessalonica.

And in it, he explained how he felt about this detour in his life.

Satan's Purpose

Our eternal God has an all-seeing eye. The prophet Isaiah put it best when he quoted the Lord God.

I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, Isaiah 46:9-10

God was not surprised when Adam sinned. He knew what our first father would do long before He molded him out of dust.

He also knew who the tempter would be. And He knew the power and authority that was the tempter's prize for luring the first man and woman into sin.

Indeed, eternal ages before this world ever existed, the Lord foresaw both sin and salvation. And even then, He planned to send His Son pay the penalty of blood and death for the sins of mankind.

That is, why in his heavenly revelation, the apostle John refers to Jesus as *the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world*. That means God always knew what He planned to do. And He knew why.

...since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, Hebrews 2:14

So it is on that bloody Friday, the pure and perfect Prince of Heaven hung His battered, bloody head and died. And that very moment, the dark and deadly spirit that spoke through a serpent at Eden to tempt Eve was forever defeated.

Yes, our high and holy God always planned to redeem sinful human beings through the shed blood of His one and only Son. And Satan was well aware that was the Sovereign Lord's plan.

That is why the devil continually urged and incited the Jews to ignore the proclamations God's prophets brought to them. That is also why he filled them with hatred for those prophets: hatred that mounted to murder again and again.

When God's Son came, He broke the Law's curse by living a perfect life. Then He suffered and died as God's sacrificial lamb.

And the devil knew he was defeated. But the anger and hatred that boiled over into brutality in the Jews was but a mite: a molecule of the adversary's hatred for God.

So Satan did not give up opposing God's plan. Yes, he knew he was and is irreversibly defeated. But he also knew the full and final sentence has not yet been carried out.

In his heavenly vision, John heard a powerful voice proclaim the truth about Satan.

Woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, knowing that he has only a short time. Revelation 12:12

When the Savior died and rose up from His grave, the devil was defeated. But knowing that did not fill our adversary with remorse.

Quite the opposite, knowing his time to roam free and rule as the dark lord of this sinful world is fast running out, his rage and hatred is massively multiplied. And as his time grows shorter and shorter, that murderous rage intensifies all the more.

Still, Satan knows he cannot recapture those the Savior redeems. In fact, he knows he cannot keep even one of his slaves from being set free by placing personal faith in God's crucified Son.

So our adversary knows there is only one thing he can do. At all costs, he must try to keep his sin-bound slaves from responding to the glorious good news that they can be forever free and

forgiven just by trusting in Jesus as their Savior and King.

One way he does that is by dulling and deadening people's minds to keep from understanding the Gospel.

...the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, 2 Corinthians 4:4

But in Satan's mind, that is a second line of defense. It is much easier and more effective to simply keep people from hearing the Gospel message. Then they cannot believe and be saved.

How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? Romans 10:14

That was the tempter's plan when he incited such intense opposition that Paul was forced out of both Thessalonica and Berea. He was desperate to keep the apostle quiet.

But while the prince of darkness plots and plans, the Lord of Light works in wondrous ways. Both then and now.

The Savior's Plan

The apostle Paul was preoccupied with worry and concern about the simple, sincere saints he left behind at Thessalonica and Berea. More than anything, he wanted to be with them.

So more than once, he tried to make the trip back to be with those believers. But it was not to be.

But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short while—in person, not in spirit—were all the more eager with great desire to see your face. For we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, more than once—and yet Satan hindered us. Verses 17-18

Satan started by making it impossible for Paul to stay at Thessalonica. Then when the apostle tried to return, the devil cut him off to keep him from returning.

Many months earlier, Paul visited the churches in Asia Minor he had started on his first missionary journey. Then he traveled up mountain roads north and west.

He was ready for new fields to sow the seed of salvation. But where? That was the question. ***They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them; Acts 16:6-7***

Again and again, the apostle tried to go to provinces he had not yet visited: places where the Gospel had never been heard. But the Savior's Spirit repeatedly refused to allow him to do so.

However, this time it was not the Holy Spirit that blocked his path. Instead, our eternal adversary cut him off and kept him from returning to beloved believers he was forced to leave behind.

However, in a way, the Savior was still the one who did not allow Paul to return to Thessalonica. After all, the lord of darkness is a defeated foe.

So he cannot do anything other than what God allows. And the Lord who loved Paul allowed Satan to hinder and halt his plans to return to those infant churches.

Our Savior knew how His servant grieved and longed to be with those saints. Nevertheless, He allowed the adversary to keep the apostle from making the trip.

So Paul was left alone in the ancient city of Athens. Yes, he did preach the Gospel there. But he had limited success. And his heart was not in it. So he moved on.

After these things he left Athens and went to Corinth. Acts 18:1

The great missionary made the fifty mile trip down the Roman highway west to the city Corinth. And when he walked through Corinth's city gates, he had to realize his work was cut out for him.

Full of paganism and prostitution, homosexuality and hedonism, Corinth was known all over the Roman Empire as sin city. In fact, if a person descended deep into debauchery, Romans smiled and said he had *corinthianized*.

Even as the great missionary settled down in Corinth, the Savior's servant still wished he was back in Thessalonica. But that was Paul plan, not God's.

The Lord had a better plan for His missionary. To begin with, at Corinth Paul met a man named Aquila and his wife, Priscilla.

They were also tent makers. And they became two of the apostle's dearest and most faithful friends. From that time on, they stayed at the apostle's side, serving and supporting him.

But that was only the beginning. For the first time, Paul was not forced out by stonings, beatings or riots.

In fact, the great missionary was able to spend a year and a half at Corinth. And in that time, he saw salvation come to more people than ever before.

So it is that Paul planned, but the Lord directed the apostle's path by allowing the enemy to hinder him.

The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps. Proverbs 16:9

That is one reason why we must be careful not to consider some unexpected crisis is a calamity. After all, nothing can happen to a Savior's servant that our loving Lord does not allow.

God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. Romans 8:28

A Servant's Proof

Paul thought and wrote, he preached and served with one thing always in mind. One day, his beloved Savior and King will return.

And the apostle always used the same Greek word to describe the Redeemer's return: *parousia*. The original meaning of that word is a *personal presence*.

That, in Paul's mind, was what Jesus' return is all about. It is being ushered into His personal presence. In the New Testament, that word is translated *coming*.

For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? Verse 19

We do not have to wonder what event that word refers to, either. Later in this first letter to believers at Thessalonica, Paul used the same word.

...we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 1 Thessalonians 4:15

That verse nails down precisely what that *coming* is. It does not refer to the day when our Savior will split the skies with the armies of Heaven and come to rule as King over all the earth.

No, when Paul writes of Christ's coming, he is talking about the day when our Savior will empty graveyards by suddenly raising up every redeemed believer. At the same time, every Christian who has not yet died will be caught away to be forever with the Lord Jesus.

It is sad to say. But there are professing Christians today who brag and boast about their wealth. Others are proud of their success or their renown and popularity.

But Paul had but one source of exultation. He was full of praise that Christ called and commissioned him to be His apostle.

Paul also thought something else was worth being joyful and jubilant about. He rejoiced that he had helped people find the freedom and forgiveness, the light and life of knowing Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Those saints were his great joy during his time on earth. And he continually rejoiced that the Redeemer had used him to save them.

For you are our glory and joy. Verse 20

The thought that men and women who were once slaves of darkness, despair and death had found the joy of Jesus was all the apostle felt was worth glorying about.

The apostle knew that, even after he died, those new Christians were all that mattered. They were, he wrote, his hope.

Their conversion and salvation was why he looked forward to Christ's coming. From time to time, the adversary undoubtedly tried to make the great missionary wonder if all his sacrifice and suffering was worth enduring.

But Paul always knew the multitude of men and women who were saved by trusting in Jesus was irrefutable proof that he was a faithful servant of God. And that he was doing his Savior's will.

They were also proof that he would be rewarded in heaven. That is why Paul called Christians at Thessalonica his *crown*.

In ancient times, when a king or conqueror visited a city, he was given a wreath of glorying. And Paul had a hope that was steadfast and sure. The Jews and pagans he brought to the Lord Jesus would be his victor's wreath in Heaven.

Do not get the wrong idea. Paul was not puffed up and proud that he had proclaimed the Gospel at such a high cost.

No, he looked forward to being honored in Heaven and hearing every what every believer wants to hear the Savior say. *Well done, good and faithful servant.*

In his absence, Paul's bitter enemies accused him of having selfish, sinful motives. And they tried to persuade new Christians that the man who told them about Jesus was only interested in money.

They also accused him of seeking personal honor and glory. But none of that was true of the apostle Paul.

And we must beware that those charges are not true of us as we serve our Savior. We cannot serve both money and the Master. Neither can we seek both our own glory and His.

Christ is not only concerned about what we do. He is also intensely interested in the reason why we do what we do.

And no other motive is worthy of a man or woman of God than to seek to honor, glory and magnify the name of our Savior.

And there is no better way to do that than by sharing His Gospel.