

"The Adversary" 1 Thess. 2:17-3:5 June 25, 1995

### **Text Comments**

The previous paragraph beginning at v. 13 was a digression, an interruption in the flow of the Apostle's argument. Verse 17 resumes the flow of his main thought and could easily follow v. 12.

In vv. 17-20 he speaks of his great desire to visit the Thessalonians again and in the first five verses of chapter 3 how he sent Timothy to them in the meantime.

Now the Apostle Paul makes two extraordinary statements in this section which we must not pass over without careful attention and consideration.

The first is in v. 18, where he says that his efforts to return to Thessalonica were **thwarted by Satan** and the second in 3:5 to the effect that he worried that Satan might have undone the work that Paul had begun there.

The Apostle knew that he had an adversary, an enemy to contend with in his work; an enemy far more powerful, far more dangerous than the Jews who had opposed him and the gospel in Thessalonica or than the Roman government.

Now for some time in our culture, the belief in the existence of the Devil has been on the wane. Several years ago a survey of the Southern Baptist church indicated that even a substantial portion of Southern Baptists no longer believed that Satan existed. This is a development of many years. Already early in the 20th century H.P. Liddon, the English biblical scholar wrote:

We are told that men no longer believe in Satan; that for our generation the invisible house of bondage, with its fallen monarch, no longer exists! If this be so, a great deal more is or will be presently disbelieved in as well; but a Christian who submits to and accepts the teaching of the New Testament cannot but be struck with this fresh proof of the finished ingenuity of our great spiritual enemy. Like those masters of the art of earthly war who conquer less frequently by an ostentatious display of force on the battle field than by carefully concealed surprises which turn the position of an antagonist, so Satan, it seems, has persuaded a frivolous and shallow generation that he no longer exists but as a discredited phantom of the past, as an extinct terror, as a popular joke! Ah! he has not been at work upon the human heart for nothing during these many thousands of years; he knows how to lull us to sleep to the best advantage, that he may take our thoughts and affections, and, above all, our passions, well into his keeping." [Cited in Morris, pp. 104-105]

And so it is that in a century that has committed more genuinely Satanic crimes against God and man than any century of previous history, man believes less and less in the existence of his Master. The Father of lies, lies even about himself.

Paul, however, **knew** of Satan and knew of his active opposition to all that was holy and good in the world and speaks directly of it in these verses.

And in speaking, he says two things of great importance, from which we may form something of our doctrine of the Evil One and discover what we ought to do about his existence and his antagonism.

### **I. First, Paul says, Satan is a being of great power.**

This is a remarkable statement that Paul makes: "Satan stopped us." This from a man who says that the gospel is the "power of God," that he "can do all things through Christ who strengthens him," that "he is more than a conqueror through Christ who loved him." Here is Paul, the master of the doctrine of divine sovereignty saying that the Devil had stopped him, defeated him in his effort to bring help to the Thessalonian believers.

And then, in 3:5, he speaks of his fear that Satan might have undone the work that Paul had begun among the Thessalonian believers. The same Paul who elsewhere says to the Philippians that he is sure that "he who began a good work in them shall perform it until the day of Jesus Christ."

What does Paul mean: "Satan **stopped** him?" Some think that he is referring to the continuing Jewish opposition in Thessalonica that made it impossible for Paul to return. Others think it is a reference to the ban that the city government had placed on Jason, the severe penalties they had imposed on this prominent new Christian should Paul return. Another possibility is that Paul is referring to troubles in Corinth, where he was as he wrote the letter, troubles which made it necessary for him to remain there and kept him from returning to Thessalonica. J.B. Lightfoot, the great 19th century British scholar, thought it was a reference to Paul's thorn in the flesh -- remember Paul said that his thorn in the flesh had been given him by Satan -- that kept him from returning. If it were an illness or a physical condition of some type, that would make some sense, as do these other suggestions. The fact is, no one knows what Paul means, because he didn't say.

But, whatever the circumstances that prevented Paul's return to Thessalonica and the Christians there, Paul discerned behind them the master hand and cunning strategy of the Evil One.

It is a very interesting question -- I mention this as a digression -- and an important one, whether and how believers can tell a temptation or a trial comes from the evil one, and not from his or her own remaining sinfulness, from the world, or from God himself as a test.

Rabbi Duncan was once asked if the tempting of Satan can be distinguished from the seduction of sin, and in his typically unique and eccentric way, he made his reply by starting up and saying "O yes; I've caught him at it, I've caught him at it." [Moody Stuart, p. 173].

The masters of the practice of godliness through the ages have sought to discern the signs that indicate the Devil's hand and the Devil's work in the circumstances of our lives and I think they have things to tell us, though it is not a subject that the Bible takes up in a direct way. In any case, that is not my subject this morning and we must hurry on.

What is clear, however, is that Paul knew himself to have and to be battling an adversary. And the teaching of Holy Scripture from beginning to end is that **we have that same powerful adversary and must be on guard against him just as Paul did.**

The Bible says a number of things about the Devil's power at work in the world.

- 1) The Scripture declares that power to be very great. He is, the Bible says, the ruler of this world and holds men everywhere in bondage to himself.
- 2) His power is exercised with terrible craft and cunning and subtlety. He sometimes shows himself to be, the Bible says, "an angel of light." He hides his malevolent purposes and his hatred of God and man behind arguments that sound so eminently reasonable and attractive. Those who are his most faithful and effective servants would be aghast to discover that they were doing his work and would be deeply offended at anyone claiming that they were. Jesus told the Pharisees that they were the servants of Satan but they thought themselves the servants of God!
- 3) Further, the Scripture says that Satan's power is inscrutable to us. We do not know exactly how it operates, how one spirit operates on another, how thoughts can be suggested or, indeed, how he can bring to pass events in the world. That makes his power still more dangerous because it is so easy to discount it, to miss it because the Devil's hand is so invisible.

This is, then, the first thing, Paul asserts: the Devil's power is very great. He could and he did frustrate and thwart the purposes of God's apostle himself and he can do many things against us as well!

## **II. Second, Paul says, Satan's power is limited.**

The simple fact of the matter is that Paul got round the Devil's opposition: he did so by sending Timothy when he himself could not go; and he did so with his letter. Later, of course, he himself visited the city again to strengthen the believers.

And, what is more, though I will not confuse you with the grammatical details, the construction of v. 5 in Paul's original suggests not that Satan didn't in fact tempt the believers in Thessalonica and so they were not harmed by him, as the English might suggest, but rather that **he did tempt them** but they still were not harmed by him, -- which is to say, they resisted his temptation.

Now that too is only what the Scripture everywhere says. The Devil's power is exercised in a way that is congruous to the nature of the human soul, and especially of the believer's soul. Most of the time in the case of all men, but always in the case of Christians, he does not, and cannot physically capture or torture the soul, cripple or damage or bind the soul so that it is incapable of action. **No, he attempts to deceive the soul, seduce the soul, and tempt the soul to give its loyalty to him instead of to God.**

That is why the Scripture says that, though Satan in himself, is much more powerful a being than you or I, Christians can resist him and make him depart from us. This is why the fact that Satan may be involved in a temptation or may be making an assault on our loyalty to Christ, **is never,**

**ever** regarded in Scripture as lessening our guilt if we succumb to his temptation or as reducing our responsibility for our obedience to God.

Satan is not almighty like God. He has great power but his power is nothing compared to God's power. He is not omniscient, nor is he omnipresent. And mere men, with the power and wisdom of Christ through faith can best him, can discern his wiles and his schemes, can outwit him, and can face him down in the moment of decision.

Satan may have stopped Paul, but, Paul knew that he could not have done so had God not permitted it and that, therefore, there was a way for Paul to get the best of the Devil and he found it. He that was in Paul, is greater than he that is in the world!

Now, I want to apply these few facts to our living every day as Christians. And, while I want all of you to listen and to consider, I want the young people especially to listen carefully and to ponder what I say. You think -- some of you all the time, others only some of the time -- that at this time of your life you can live for yourself. You want to be a Christian, you plan to take it seriously one day, but, for now, you want live for yourself -- or so you think! But you never can! You are always a servant. It is your nature. If you do not serve God you serve Satan and do what that evil, mean-spirited, and hateful being wants you to do to further his ugly purposes in the world. To the extent you seek to live for yourself you are pleasing the Devil.

I want to ask you young men and women: does this stir your blood? In a kind of strange but also very important way, does this not please you, even thrill you?

You have, as the Apostle Paul had, **an adversary** and a very worthy adversary. There is no satisfaction in knocking over a little old lady walking slowly with the help of a cane. Anyone can do that! The littlest child can do that. But, to face an adversary of great power, strength, and cunning -- to live your life in a fight to the death with an enemy of such remarkable capabilities, an enemy who, by himself, is far greater than you in most respects, -- now **that** life is a story worth telling, that is life legends may be made of and told for generations after.

And that, you see, is what God had made your life to be. God could have given you a life with no adversary, but he didn't. He has -- like all the great creators of epics and legends -- given you a great enemy to face and to conquer in your life. Men write and tell great epics because they have an instinct from God -- however corrupted by sin -- that gives them a sense of what life really is and amounts to! It really is something very large and grand. The only difference between you and Odysseus or Hercules or Jason and his argonauts or King Arthur or Saint George, is that your enemy is much greater and more sinister than theirs, far more powerful, and because absolutely real -- and in no sense the creation of someone's imagination -- your battle with him is infinitely more serious and important.

God has given you a life to live that the telling of it **should** make and **can** make a great epic. He has given you to live a great adventure, to travel a dangerous journey with a mighty enemy seeking your overthrow, your death, your defeat every step of the way.

Do you have some sense of this young people? How stirring, how exciting, how ennobling it all

is. **How great your life is and how full of great challenges for you to meet and master.** If you will live your life in the full realization of this and live your life to do justice to this great contest between yourself and the Evil monster known as Satan, your life -- your seemingly so ordinary life, that life you think so small and so limited -- can be a life songs will be sung about and stories told for ages after.

But that is not all. No, listen further young people. If the Devil, if Satan has this place in your life, as your great adversary, then, how much more is it also true that God had filled your life with other companions that you cannot see.

There are not only Satan and his demons, legions of them, crowding around you at different times; but his holy angels too. He has, the Scripture said, appointed his angels to guard you lest you dash your feet against a stone. The angel of the Lord encamps around those that fear him and he delivers them.

Think of those angels present in your life. There is a new interest in angels abroad in our culture now. Books galore fill the shelves of even secular book stores with pictures of angels and poems about them and sentimental expressions concerning their presence in the world. But all of it reminds me of what C.S. Lewis wrote in the preface to The Screwtape Letters [viii-ix].

"In Scripture the visitation of an angel is always alarming; it has to begin by saying 'Fear not.' The Victorian angel looks as if it were going to say 'There, there.'"

No the **great** angels of God, the armed **hosts** of heaven, the armies of the Lord, they too are with you on this dangerous journey through the territory of the enemy.

And then, not only the angels, but the Lord himself, Christ Jesus by his Holy Spirit. You can't see the Devil, but you can't see the Lord either. And when that veil is drawn back, if only for a moment, and if only partially, what we do see is nothing short of taking our breath away. The throne of God in heaven, the temple shaking from the thunderous roar of the heavenly hosts singing "the sanctus," while, with their wings, covering their faces and their feet before the glory of Almighty God.

This too is your life! God omnipotent above and behind you, sending you on this epic journey on his behalf and promising you the service of his Son and his holy angels on your dangerous and difficult way. And promising to meet you there in person when you reach your destination. Watch out, he tells you as you prepare to depart for that distant land, watch out for the evil one. He will try to stop you, he will try to trick you and seduce you, he will force you to fight him in open combat, but do not give in to him. I have given you a weapon for your battle with him -- the strong name of my Son, Jesus Christ -- use it, wield it, whenever the Enemy appears. If you do, he may bloody you, he may weary you, he may make your way difficult and dark, but he will not be able to stop you. This is the great, noble life of man in the world, battles every day, the enemy faced and defeated by a life of prayer, of constant turning to God and to Christ for power and deliverance and victory.

So you see, your life is not only the stuff epics and legends are made of, a story that shall long be

told, it is also a life of immense worth. For you are not making that trip only for yourself, but for your Lord and Master whom you love. By making it in his way, by besting the Devil in the Lord's name and with his power, by persevering in the strength that Christ alone can give you, by making his holy Word your map and your guide, you give glory to him before the entire watching universe.

Satan doesn't want to ruin you as a Christian, to destroy your faith and your life because he hates **you** so much, or cares to have **you** among his servants. He attacks you to get to his true nemesis, Jesus Christ, whom he hates with all the passion of his being. He thinks of you as a pipsqueak, of no value at all, except for the fact that since Christ loves you, he can get to Christ by getting to you. He cares not if he **destroys** you, if only he might wound the Lord thereby.

Why, the puritan writer and pastor Stephen Charnock suggested that Satan rebelled against God in the first place because he found out that we miserable little men and women -- no wings, no great power, no angelic glory -- were, in the plan and grace of God, to be raised higher at the last than the angels themselves. No doubt he hates you for that, but he especially hates your Lord and Master. And so it is given to you to fight your Master's battles for him and best the Devil on his own ground.

What a life we have to live! What an adventure! What an epic! Young people -- don't let this world, and sight and sense, dull you to what your faith knows is true. Your life is an astonishing thing, a most exciting and wonderful thing -- full of enemies and battles and victories. Full from beginning to end of the glorious opportunity against all odds to conquer a great enemy in your Savior's name and for your Savior's sake, and to enter heaven at last a hero. The Lord wants you to be a hero, and will enable you to be a hero, now and forever. Fill up your life with the stories of your battles fought and won against a great enemy in the strength of your Lord and King. And swap your stories with the other heroes you know who are making the same dangerous journey you are.

And then, when you are old, you can gather your grandchildren around you and tell them the tale --full of excitement and drama as it will be, your combats with that evil fiend -- and so whet in them a hunger to live such a life of high drama for Jesus' sake themselves!