

Sermon: Spiritual Warfare

1 Thes 2:17-3:5

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Introduction

Have you experienced problems, challenges, disappointments in your life and work this week? If not, you were probably at the beach in Ain Sokhna. You probably did not do much...

We must not be surprised by obstacles on our way. The more we want to achieve, the more boulders to carry. The last 15 years I managed a company with 50 personnel, and my experience was that each day, I had to wade through the muddy waters of problems to solve. People, projects, money. And this is normal.

I confess my impatience however. Often, when a co-worker would come to me, saying: "we have a problem", I got irritated. Not nice of me ofcourse. As far as I am concerned, problems are those challenges that we cannot solve. Life is full of challenges, choices to make, situations to solve; this is normal.

The only place with no challenges and where life is really quiet is the graveyard. If we live life to the full, if we have responsible jobs, families, dreams, the real question is not how to avoid major hurdles. The real issue is, what do we do with them. How do we handle them? What do we learn from them?

1 Spiritual Battle

St Paul desired to have fellowship with the church in Thessalonica, because the church was in trouble. Last week we spoke a bit about this issue, and this week we begin with it again. Not because I have some morbid desire for problems or for talking about them, but simply because they are part of life, and also of the Christian life.

The apostle, led by the Holy Spirit and speaking the Word of God, is totally clear about the matter. While he was still in Thessalonica with the young believers, he had already warned them. 'We kept telling you that we would be persecuted.' He even says: 'We were destined for them.'

Destined. No way to escape from it, says Paul. Just as our Lord Jesus Christ predicted that the servants of the Master would be

treated as badly as the Master was treated. For those who follow Christ, there is no way out, no escape.

I think a major reasons why so many Christians find it hard to accept that our present life is not just happy and healthy, is because we so often loose track of the fact that God will fulfil all his promises, yes, but in the life to come, not in our present life.

And our present culture, with its focus on instant gratification of all our desires – especially in the realm of health, sexuality, and material items, makes it very hard to escape from this attitude. We think we are in one way or another entitled to a very comfortable life. An easy life, as we want it, with all the gadgets we can dream of.

That may be an attractive dream, but the Gospel paints a very different picture of life. In this short present life on earth, we are involved in a fight.

We are involved in a spiritual battle, and this life, our life, is the battlefield. Realising this helps us see our heavy burdens in a different light. The battle can be hard; but remember - there is no crown without a fight; there is no fight without wounds. Listen to these words of St John Chrysostom (349-407) (from his *Homilies on the Statues* 1.30)

For surely, no one choosing to fight, expects to carry off the crown without wounds! And you therefore who have decided to wage full combat with the devil, don't think to pursue such a life without danger, expecting luxury instead! God has not pledged to you his recompense and promise for this life. These splendid things await you in the future life.

Yes, there we have him, the devil. Paul also brings him up in his letter to the Thessalonians. Whether we like it or not, as Christians we are automatically involved in a spiritual fight, and spiritual forces do play a role. The bible does not say too much about these forces, and I think we must not honour them with too much attention. They are a reality, however.

Our apostle was deeply desirous to see the church in Thessalonica again, to help them. He was not able to come, he writes, 'because Satan blocked our way'. The great force of evil is at work against building the church of God, and against Christians individually.

2 What are the stakes in the Spiritual battle?

The Christian life is a fight. What are the stakes in this fight? It is a fight to live a life that is good, and to end our life well. With faith, hope, love, justice, holiness, truth. And it is a fight against evil, wickedness, untruth, hatred, dictatorship, unbelief, ugliness, poverty, pollution, exploitation of people and of the earth.

God's desire is to create a new community around his Son, our Lord Jesus. The evil one will do everything in order to avoid that the Church is build up in the faith. Sometimes he does this by tough times of persecution. We must however be careful. He often looks like an angel of light, using soft words of flattery...

St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) (in *On the Lords Prayer*), said about this:

When tempting us, he acts very cunningly. Like a skilful general laying siege to a fortress, the demon looks for the weak points of the person he wants to overcome, and goes for his weakest flank. He tempts man to those sins which he is most inclined to: for example, anger, pride and the other spiritual sins.

If the evil one cannot destroy the church with persecution, he will try to do it with sweet talk.

One major area where we see a battle raging in the Christian church is in the realm of doctrine. John Calvin's (1509-1564) (in his *Commentary on 1 Thes 2:18*), wrote:

Satan is continually striving by every means to hinder or obstruct the upbuilding of the Church. We should take more care to maintain sound doctrine, of which that foe so eagerly strives to deprive us.

Calvin stresses sound doctrine as the most important area where the evil one tries to defeat us; I believe he is right. Without the right *ideas* about God and his will and his Word, how can we know him and live for him?

St Paul *also* spoke of the area of faith as the crucial one. He was worried that the tempter had been able to defeat the Thessalonian church in exactly that area. For this reason Paul had sent Timothy to Thessalonica: **Read 1 Thes 3:5**

Faith is both the act of believing God, and also the content of what we believe. Personal trust in God – devotion – and right doctrine need one another and they both need to be strengthened, all the time, if we want to live to the delight of God and win the battle of life.

Some popular Christian writings portray this spiritual battle as if this is a sort of Star Wars – the good God against the evil one, and only if we help God, goodness will be victorious. This, I must say, is a form of heresy.

We do not live in a universe with two gods, one good and one evil, as if there are two almighty's. Though this whole issue is hard for me, for us, to comprehend, we must underline that evil in the universe is weak compared to God, it cannot stand against God, it is a defeated enemy, it is on the retreat.

The term 'Satan blocked our way' that Paul used, underlines this defeat of evil. It is actually a military term. The word 'blocking' was used by the Greek and Roman armies for making slits in the road to hold up the horses and carriages of pursuing armies. Satan is on the defeat, we are on the winning team, but by making slits in the road he can make our life hard and difficult. But we should not allow him to stop us.

Also important to mention: this battle is not fought in a sort of stellar world, but in our normal, daily life. Paul's letter to the Ephesians is interesting in this respect. In Ephesians 6 he speaks much about this issue of spiritual battle. He discusses it in the context of personal relationships. In the workspace, in marriage, between parents and children.

Our life in those daily relationship is exactly where this battle rages. Our Christian duty is to lead truly Christian lives in our work, in our marriage, in how we raise our kids. The enemy of our soul wants to damage those relationships. Nothing hurts us and our faith and our life for God more, than when we go astray in those daily relationships.

Here is an ironic thing: It is not as if the problems that evil can create for us, are not in one way or another related to God's plans with our life. Evil tries to damage our faith, our jobs, our marriages, our kids, but in his efforts to do so, God uses him.

St Josemaria Escriva (1902-1975), founder of Open Dei, writes in his book *Friends of God*:

When we abandon ourselves into Gods hands, he frequently permits us to taste sorrow, loneliness, opposition, slander, defamation, ridicule, coming both from within [the church] and from [outside]. This is because he wants to mould us to his own image and likeness, [...] that is the way Jesus fashions the souls of those he loves, while at the same time never failing to give them inner calm and joy.

3 How to respond

Our problems are meant to make us better people. God allows them for making us better, stronger followers of our Lord. So let us not complain too much about our challenges in life –let us rather face them with faith and wisely.

What was Paul's response to the tribulations and problems of the church that he founded?

In the first place, he had previously called himself a father of the congregation in Thessalonica. And as a good father, he deeply desired to be with them in their time of need.

Paul sounds emotional and personal in the words we read. His voice seems to tremble. Some of his critics were suggesting that his sudden departure from Thessalonica proved his lack of sincere concern for the Thessalonians who were in trouble. But Paul was 'torn away', that is the word he uses, from those he loved and he wanted to be with them.

In your times of problems – whether at work, or at home, in raising kids, with neighbours, with government, do not hide yourself from people. In those times, we need one another. We need to encourage each other as the one family of God.

There is nothing shameful in admitting to your problems and discussing them with someone can be such a relief. And also the beginning of a solution. Why not let me know what prayers we can pray for you?

Secondly, Paul refers to the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. In times of trouble and testing it is important that we take the long view of things, the whole picture. Today's problems are certainly lighter if we focus on eternity to come. And it is important to stress that our eternity does depend on how faithfully we deal with our challenges today.

Thirdly, good doctrine and strong personal faith today are great weapons in the battle that you may fight tomorrow. As we saw, the main objective of the evil one is to damage your faith, to rock your relationship with God. So work on your faith, on your knowledge of God, while the days are good.

Conclusion

In order to maintain our faith and our faithful life in all circumstances, it is important to continually work on strengthening this faith. Problems can actually give you stamina, just like lifting weights in the gym creates muscles. The exercise is awful, the muscles are great.

To know God and his Word helps us to better understand what happens to us – and to better deal with it. To know God and his Word helps you to stand firm in your work, with your family, in all circumstances; it helps us, in all situations, to do what is good.

Do not let your circumstances draw you down, but allow them to make you a stronger, a more muscular person in regard to faith. Those challenges cannot be avoided anyway; our life is a battlefield. A battlefield for maintaining faith in God and for living faithful lives in our work, in our family, in all of our circumstances.

If we allow our circumstances to make us more faithful, stronger, and if we maintain this faith until the end, we have won the battle; how proud we will be of the wound of life, if the battle is won and we are crowned with glory.

+In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen