

# “BUT SATAN HINDERED US?”

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## *A Biblical and Theological Reflection on 1 Thessalonians 2:18*

In 1 Thessalonians 2:18 Paul writes:

*“Wherefore we would have come unto you, even I Paul, once and again; but Satan hindered us.”<sup>1</sup>*

The statement is brief, but it opens a window into the apostle’s theology of spiritual warfare, ministry obstruction, and divine sovereignty. Paul does not attribute his delay to inconvenience, logistics, or mere political tension. He names the adversary. “Satan hindered us.”

To understand this verse properly, we must examine three realities: the meaning of the word hindered, the identity and activity of Satan in Paul’s theology, and the relationship between satanic opposition and divine sovereignty.

### The Meaning of “Hindered”

The Greek verb translated “hindered” is *enkoptō*, a term used in military contexts for cutting up a road or digging trenches to impede progress.<sup>2</sup> The imagery is vivid. It suggests deliberate obstruction, not accidental delay. A pathway that once appeared open is suddenly broken apart.

Paul’s language indicates repeated effort: “once and again.” His desire to return to Thessalonica was not casual. He attempted multiple times. Each effort met resistance.

This is important. The apostle was not indifferent. Nor was he passive. He was actively prevented. Such language also demonstrates that Paul did not interpret every closed door as divine redirection. Some doors are closed because they are opposed.

### Historical Context: Acts 17

The historical background of this hindrance likely lies in the events recorded in Acts 17.<sup>3</sup> When Paul and Silas preached in Thessalonica, some believed. Others responded with hostility. The unbelieving Jews, “moved with envy,” gathered a mob, set the city in an uproar, and accused the missionaries of proclaiming another king.<sup>4</sup> Jason was forced to post security, and Paul departed under pressure.

It is possible that legal restrictions were imposed. Political tensions may have made a return dangerous or impossible. The civic authorities had already been stirred. Whatever the specific

mechanism, Paul perceived more than civil resistance. He saw spiritual agency operating through human opposition.

This aligns with Paul's broader theology. In Ephesians 6:12 he reminds believers that "we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers."<sup>5</sup> Human hostility is often the visible expression of invisible conflict.

### Satan in Pauline Theology

Paul's reference to Satan here is neither rare nor symbolic. He speaks of Satan as a personal adversary throughout his letters.

- Satan blinds the minds of unbelievers (2 Cor. 4:4).<sup>6</sup>
- Satan disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14).<sup>7</sup>
- Satan tempts believers (1 Cor. 7:5).<sup>8</sup>
- Satan may even afflict physically (2 Cor. 12:7).<sup>9</sup>

In 1 Thessalonians itself, Paul expresses concern that "*the tempter*" might have undermined the faith of new converts (1 Thess. 3:5).<sup>10</sup>

This is not mythological language. It is theological realism. Paul understood ministry to occur in contested territory. The advance of the gospel provokes opposition because it confronts spiritual darkness.

At the same time, Paul never presents Satan as sovereign. He is adversarial, but he is not ultimate.

### Satanic Opposition Under Divine Sovereignty

A balanced reading of 1 Thessalonians 2:18 requires theological maturity. Paul attributes real hindrance to Satan. Yet he never implies that Satan thwarted God's purposes.

Consider the outcome. Paul could not return immediately. Instead, he wrote a letter. That letter became inspired Scripture. What Satan sought to obstruct locally, God used globally.

This pattern is consistent with the broader biblical witness.

- In Job 1–2, Satan acts only within divine permission.<sup>11</sup>
- In Luke 22:31, Jesus tells Peter, "Satan hath desired to have you," implying request and limitation.<sup>12</sup>

Satan is active, but he is never autonomous.

From a dispensational perspective, this verse fits within the present age in which the church advances the gospel in the midst of spiritual opposition. The mystery form of the kingdom unfolds

not without resistance, but through it.<sup>13</sup> The adversary opposes the gospel, yet he cannot overturn the divine program.

Paul's statement therefore affirms both spiritual warfare and divine sovereignty.

### Pastoral Implications for Thessalonica

Why does Paul tell the Thessalonians this?

Because they may have wondered whether he had abandoned them. The delay could have been interpreted as indifference. Paul assures them otherwise. "*I wanted to come again and again.*" His absence was not neglect. It was obstruction.

This would have strengthened their resolve. Their suffering was not random. The opposition they faced was part of a larger spiritual conflict. The same adversary opposing Paul was opposing them.

Moreover, this perspective reframes persecution. It is not merely social friction. It is spiritual resistance to the gospel.

### Contemporary Application

This verse offers enduring lessons for the church today.

1. First, spiritual warfare is real. Gospel ministry does not advance unopposed. Opposition may arise through cultural pressure, political hostility, or personal discouragement. The source, however, may be deeper than the surface.
2. Second, not every closed door is providential redirection. Sometimes it is resistance. Discernment is required.
3. Third, hindrance does not equal defeat. God may allow obstruction in one direction while accomplishing something greater in another.
4. Paul desired to return physically. God preserved his pastoral heart in written form for generations.

Satan hindered the journey.

He did not hinder the gospel.

### Conclusion

"But Satan hindered us" is not a dramatic flourish. It is theological clarity. Paul recognized real spiritual opposition in ministry. He also recognized that such opposition operates under divine sovereignty.

The church advances in contested territory. Yet the God who calls His people remains faithful. The adversary may obstruct temporarily, but he cannot overturn eternal purposes.

In the end, Satan's hindrance became the occasion for inspired Scripture; and for the strengthening of believers far beyond Thessalonica.

#### Footnotes

1. 1 Thessalonians 2:18 (KJV).
2. Robert L. Thomas, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), 103.
3. Acts 17:1–10 (KJV).
4. Acts 17:5–7 (KJV).
5. Ephesians 6:12 (KJV).
6. 2 Corinthians 4:4 (KJV).
7. 2 Corinthians 11:14 (KJV).
8. 1 Corinthians 7:5 (KJV).
9. 2 Corinthians 12:7 (KJV).
10. 1 Thessalonians 3:5 (KJV).
11. Job 1:12; 2:6 (KJV).
12. Luke 22:31 (KJV).
13. John F. Walvoord, *The Thessalonian Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 46–48.

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- Marshall, I. Howard. *1 and 2 Thessalonians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983.
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