

The Sources of Hindrances in the Lord's Work

Now we all know how awkward it is to begin a work with enthusiasm only to be prevented from completing that work by something, even for a short while. Those who are parents of young children will be very familiar with this scenario. We also know that God is working to a plan. His eternal purpose was forged in eternity and is being worked out by the Holy Spirit in these days of the Gospel. For this reason it is curious that God allows his successful work to occasionally be hindered. Why is this?

One thing is crystal clear, the apostles were far more perceptive about the progress of the work than anyone since their time. They could know that certain circumstances were the result of opposition by the enemy, while others were the restraint of the Holy Spirit. At other times, the ongoing flow of a good work was deliberately changed by Paul to do something else. Occasionally he saw a higher priority than continuing the present work, no matter how successful it was.

Surely this is a matter to be investigated and should we not all aspire to have such clarity of vision?

The Hindrance of enemy opposition

Therefore we wanted to come to you -- even I, Paul, time and again -- but Satan hindered us. 1

Thess 2:18

Not all difficult circumstances are the direct result of spiritual warfare, but some are. The word 'hindered' here literally means: 'to cut a trench between one's self and an advancing foe, to prevent his progress'.

The hindrances that Paul speaks of here were mostly likely the persecution he faced which prevented him from seeing his friends. He had already been driven out of Thessalonica once, being unwillingly sent away by night to Berea for his safety (Acts 17:13-14), hence Paul writes in v17, 'But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavoured more eagerly to see your face with great desire'. This hindrance was therefore opposition to the missionary progress of Paul and his colleagues, preventing the accomplishment of his plans.

Sometimes, enemy opposition is personal rather than an attack on the ministry (2 Cor 12:7). In Paul's case this was specifically to prevent him succumbing to pride.

Overwhelmingly, we must emphasise that opposition from the enemy is under the direct sovereignty of God, nothing happens to us without divine permission. This is clearly seen in the cases of the patriarch Job, and Paul's thorn in the flesh. Therefore, we cannot see enemy opposition as anything but a good thing to be received with faith. Everything the enemy does, even when persecuting God's people, always leads to the furtherance of God's eternal plan and the glorifying of God himself. However, when the church suffers under harsh persecution (as it has done many times) those in the heat of it will find it a hard road. We must not complacently demean the suffering of people by concentrating upon theology in a cold-hearted way. It is true that the suffering of the church is always according to God's plan and for a good purpose, but those in the midst of it are hurting and always require our prayers, support and concern.

Differing strategies of the enemy require different reactions according to the wisdom and revelation that God gives. When Satan afflicted Paul with a thorn in the flesh it was

something that Paul had to accept and put up with. It was for his good. However, usually the opposition of the enemy requires resistance not acquiescence, especially if the ministry of the word is affected.

When enemy opposition tempts us personally to sin or give up it is always something that we must confront and withstand;

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. 1 Pt 5:8-9

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Jm 4:7

Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ... Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore. Eph 6:11-14

If there is a concerted effort against the development of the church caused by enemy opposition, it requires the church to pray specifically and effectively. When Peter was removed to jail, the Jerusalem church was all at prayer for his release and were still praying when he appeared at the door (Acts 12:11-16).

So there are times when our personal afflictions may be the direct result of satanic attack but the indirect result of God's discipline and training. In these cases we must accept the situation, trust God and seek grace. The demonic attack should always result in getting more grace to sustain you, as it did with Paul. Personal attacks of the enemy are intended to make us feel weak, but with God's grace it actually makes us strong in the Spirit. In general, however, the attacks of the enemy are temptations to stop our progress in grace, or to stop the work in some way, often by deception. These attacks must be resisted. The only way to resist is to put on Christ and stand against the attack, trusting in all the spiritual weapons that come with the new nature, especially faith in God's word.

Spiritual warfare is not about doing various things and adopting various strategies, as in the Charismatic Movement, but about a prepared mind, a renewed mind. The renewed mind is the mind that is set upon Christ, centred upon heavenly things and being constantly renewed and developed by understanding Scripture.

Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. Col 3:2

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. Rm 12:2

Put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness. Eph 4:22

Put on the new *man* who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him. Col 3:10

Those with a renewed mind, having put on the new nature, will be able to stand against the enemy.

The 'hindrance' of more important work

Now I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that I often planned to come to you (but was hindered until now), that I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles. Rm 1:13

I have made it my aim to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build on another man's foundation ... For this reason I also have been much hindered from coming to you.

Rm 15:20-22

There are times when a certain profitable work needs to stop in order to pursue a work that has a higher priority. Ministers need to separate the good from the best course of action. In this case Paul's work of spreading the Gospel to new areas was of more importance than bringing edification and support to an existing work in Rome. Paul made a conscious choice; he wanted to teach the Roman church but it was more important to finish the work of bringing the Gospel to new areas, and so the Roman work had to wait.

This is a problem that constantly faces Christians and one where many mistakes are made. Faced with two choices, many believers opt for the work that they most like doing or one which has the most obvious (but superficial) benefits. With every opportunity we need to seek God for wisdom so that we do the most important work. This may initially be a work that involves much hard work, suffering and little immediate gain (such as when William Carey went to evangelise India). I know of many Christians who are assiduously working on projects that they enjoy but which are a waste of their time. We must get wisdom and redeem the time.

The hindrance of false teaching

You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? Gal 5:7

The problem with false teaching is that it causes a hindrance to obeying the truth. Error is a dam that stops up the flow of the river and produces a marshland instead. When people follow the truth they run well; they make progress and continue in discipleship and conformity to Christ. If they then adopt false teaching this growth is stopped and all sorts of problems result, depending upon the nature of the false teaching. This is a real hindrance; the Greek word 'hindered' here means to check or to beat back as a ship is beaten back by the wind. False teaching beats a disciple back and ruins his progress.

The only way to overcome this is to repent of accepting the false teaching, avoid the false teacher(s) and strive to gain genuine Biblical understanding by consulting good teachers and good books (which are just the historic record of good teaching given to the church by God in ages past). In the case of the Galatians, Paul is almost tearing his hair out and states that he was in travail (birth pangs) trying to fix the problem caused by false teachers who tried to make the Galatian churches adopt Jewish Root ideas.

As with much false teaching, the result is not just a change to a person's thinking, but a change for the worse in their behaviour as well. Error of doctrine is a serious hindrance to the church.

The 'hindrance' of the controlling influence of the Holy Spirit

Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. Acts 16:6-7

There is some confusion in the commentators about what areas are being mentioned here. Paul's evangelistic work in Galatia was initially limited to the southern area of the province. 'Galatia' was a Celtic name and the Celts had invaded Asia Minor (now Turkey) in the 3rd century BC. They were originally invited by King Nicomedes I, king of Bithynia, to serve as mercenaries until all Bithynia submitted to him. Seeing the rich land of Asia, more Celts migrated from Gaul and Central Europe.

The area occupied by the Celtic Galatians (called the Galatae) was limited by Cappadocia and Lycaonia to the south, Bithynia and Paphlagonia to the north, Pontus to the east and Phrygia to the west, comprising 200 miles from the south-west to the north-east. The Galatae themselves were split into three tribes, viz. the Trocmi, Tectosages, and Tolistobogii. Gradually these tribes were Hellenised (adopted Greek culture) and Livy calls them 'Gallogrecians'.

After supporting his cause against the Seleucids, the Roman general Pompey designated Galatia as a client kingdom, expanding its borders to include areas on the south and east. Later it included portions of Pisidia, Phrygia and Lycaonia and Cilicia (Paul's home region). When the last king of Galatia died in battle Augustus annexed Galatia as a Roman province under a Roman governor in 25 BC and established colonies: Pisidian Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, connected by a Roman road called the Via Sebaste. Thus, as a Roman province Galatia included the original territory but also Phrygia, Pisidia, Isauria and Pisidia. Major cities, such as Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe were now within Galatian borders. Augustus later restored parts of Pamphylia previously lost to Galatia and parts of eastern Lycaonia and Cilicia Tracheia were transferred to the king of Cappadocia. However, in 5 BC Galatia was again enlarged by new annexations – part of Pontus (Pontus Galatica) and part of Paphlagonia.

The population was mixed, containing Galatians (Celts), Phrygians, Paphlagonians, Pisidians, Lycaonians and Isaurians. Thus the province of Galatia was also Phrygian (an old ethnographic name for the region). Asia refers to the pro-consular province of Asia west of Derbe and Lystra, the capital being Ephesus; it was also called Ionia by the Greeks. Here were situated the cities of Smyrna, Thyatira and Philadelphia and the other cities mentioned in Revelation 1-3. Cicero speaks of pro-consular Asia containing the provinces of Phrygia, Mysia, Caria, and Lydia.

This explains the confusion in some commentators as Galatia was continually changing for 100 years. In Paul's time Galatia extended from Pontus on the Black Sea to Pamphylia on the Mediterranean. More changes occurred later under Vespasian, which need not concern us here.



I insert these maps as they are all that I can access. They are not completely accurate but they give you some idea of what I have discussed. The cities are about right but the areas are too vague and not quite correct.

The forbidding of the Spirit no doubt came via prophecy, either a word given to Paul or one of the prophets associated with him. What is interesting is that Paul spends some time successfully preaching the Gospel to Celts and others, and is then forbidden from taking the message further into Asia but is instead directed to Europe. It was God's purpose to

extend the Gospel into Greece with Paul's ministry that was more suited to them than another apostle. Some of the Twelve took the Gospel into Roman Asia and beyond into India and Paul himself later spent much time in Ephesus. This 'hindrance' to Paul's plans resulted in the introduction of the Gospel into Europe. Thus this was not really a hindrance at all but a change of direction inspired by the Spirit.

However, the point in view is that the Spirit sometimes hinders what we consider to be a good work in order to begin a work that is more important. To us it is a sudden hindrance, but to God it is progress in the Gospel.

Conclusion

Hindrances, therefore, come in various forms and it requires wisdom in order to deal with the matter properly. A hindrance may be a satanic attack that is used by God for our benefit, or a satanic attack that must be resisted and withstood. A hindrance may be a change in strategy directed by God's Spirit, halting (for a time) an existing work. A hindrance may also be the wise personal choosing of a better work, which hinders a less important work at that time. However, today, many hindrances are the damaging effect of false teaching, which must be contended against. In all these things, wisdom is called for.

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