



I had never even heard of a wash before coming to Arizona. The idea that there'd be a sudden river running over a portion of an otherwise dry roadway just wasn't on my radar. But I had to give it some serious consideration this past year when shopping for a house. Could I tolerate having the only access road to our home being behind a wash? It wasn't just the thought of not being able to cross the road for a few hours or a day or so that bothered me. It was the thought of being on the wrong side of the wash at the wrong time. What if I needed to take one of my children to urgent care but the road was blocked by water? Or what if I wanted to head home but ended up having to wait because I was blocked from my family until the water subsided? And then there's my calling as a pastor. How could I ever be content to be stuck at home when there might be something pressing at church or urgent for someone in the congregation? As much as we liked to entertain the idea of living in some of the houses across a wash, my wife and I couldn't live with the thought of having to deal with a wash blocking our way between church and home. It just wouldn't work for us, for our family, or for my role as pastor. Consider the things that block and prevent you from doing what you want to do. The biggest obstacles aren't roadblocks. The biggest obstacles are the spiritual roadblocks. How are we supposed to overcome the barriers and obstacles we face as we try to share God's Word? Today we'll look at a time when three early missionaries were blocked by Satan from reaching a baby church. And see how God clears the way to share the faith.

Ancient Thessalonica had an easy road to travel. This is because it was where important Roman roads intersected. If you had walked it, you would have seen many Greeks and their statues to their gods. You would have seen a handful of Jews who met regularly at their synagogue. Many things traveled on this important trade route through a port city. But a big change occurred. Around 50 AD some men on a mission set foot in Thessalonica. They walked straight to the Jewish synagogue on the Sabbath day. One of their leaders, named Paul, was invited to expound on Scripture. Opening up the Scriptures he began to read God's Word and tell people good news. It was the gospel about Jesus of Nazareth. Paul and his companions Silas, and Timothy were on a missionary journey. They had traveled by sea and land and down the roads to Thessalonica and with them came hope from God. By their sharing God's Word, some Jews, a large number of God-fearing Greeks, and not a few prominent women from the city came to faith in Jesus. A baby church started sprouting life in ancient Thessalonica.

But as it turned out, Paul, Silas, Timothy, and this baby church were about to face a major obstacle. After they had spent just three weeks in Thessalonica some unbelieving Jews started a riot in the city. Unable to locate Paul they grabbed the man who was hosting Paul and Silas and cried out to the city officials, "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here." The Christians at Thessalonica had no choice. For his own safety they sent Paul and his companions away by night. Satan had used unbelievers to stir up trouble and to separate God's people from the gospel.

Paul wanted to be with them, but he couldn't. The road back was blocked. He writes earlier in his letter, "Brothers, when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan stopped us. (1 Th 2:17-18). He doesn't say exactly how, but Satan placed an obstacle to prevent Paul from returning. But you can imagine how this made him feel! He was anxious for the Thessalonians Christians. It was heavy on his heart. "Night and day, we pray most earnestly that we may see you again." Paul traveled on, to the next city, then the next, then finally he arrived in Corinth. There he started to grow restless. What would happen to the baby Christians in Thessalonica?

He was anxious because he knew they were an infant congregation without a shepherd. He prayed that he might return to "supply what is lacking in your faith." He knew they would be up against the obstacles and attacks of Satan. Satan's plan of attack has always been very simple: Attack those whom God has called into his kingdom by placing obstacles between them and the Word. At times that simply means separating believers from the Word and those who share it. He knows that unless our faith is fed we easily grow weary in our faith and lose our hope.

We shouldn't think for a moment that Satan was only active in trying to stop Paul from sharing the gospel. He's working to stop every pastor, teacher, and Christian from sharing the gospel with those they love. There is no place you can avoid his attacks and attempts to block the gospel. He's active in trying to stop it here. Even when a parent is trying to share the gospel with his or her child in their own home, Satan is at work to stop it.

Our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world sometimes experience great obstacles. One of our missionaries who worked in Indonesia explained how he was not permitted to initiate religious conversations. He told the story of what happened as students at another Christian seminary were forced out of their dwelling by a fire and speared as they came out. This missionary and his companions were praying to be spared from the violence. They escaped, but not without a setback. A crowd gathered, went to their church, and pounded it to the ground with sledge hammers. They left it a rubble. Eventually he had to leave for his safety. These are real set-backs to the sharing of the gospel! Even those preparing to go out, our own seminary students, face different obstacles, family and financial pressures, spiritual struggles and trials.

I have been at Rock of Ages for just over one year now. Yet in that short time I've heard the frustrations of many obstacles people face in sharing the gospel with their family and friends. Parents are hindered in sharing it with their children. Grandparents hindered in sharing it with their grandchildren. Some parents hinder their children. I'm sure I will run across many of these same obstacles. I'm sure there will be times when things get in the way of me meeting with people. There will be times when things get in the way of you meeting with brothers and sisters for worship. You will try bringing a friend to church or Bible Study, only to find something blocking your efforts. The culprit is identified in 1 Thessalonians. The enemy of God's kingdom and the one who hates the spread of the gospel is Satan. He knows if he can separate people from God's Word, he can lead them away from God and drag them to despair, death, and hell.

We share in Paul's anxious yearning to be able to reach others. We might be tempted to give up. When Satan places obstacles before us, we might conclude that the gospel will fail due to Satan's efforts. We are tempted to think, "It's impossible. That person will never come to faith or remain in faith." Seminary students give up training. Seminary professors and missionaries get discouraged. Christian parents and grandparents lose hope and lose heart. The obstacle begins to overcome and crush the hopes of pastors and Christians of every age.

But Such an attitude displays our own lack of faith. It is to deny that God has won the victory. It is to admit in defeat of God's kingdom. Is that how God leaves the seminary student, the pastor, the Christian parent? Is that how he leaves us?

How did it play out for Paul and the Thessalonians? Timothy was sent to check on them. And this letter of first Thessalonians, possibly the earliest letter we have from Paul, is his response to Timothy's report. It was a good report! Despite the obstacles and opposition, they still held to the faith. Paul is overjoyed. "How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?"

Why wouldn't Paul give up? He had been beaten and imprisoned in Philippi before he arrived in Thessalonica. The Thessalonians forced him to leave by mob action. The Athenian's mostly laughed at his message of the resurrection. He had to have felt some degree of defeat against such obstacles! But he remained confident God would provide for his people. He will clear the way for his gospel! It never depended on Paul, and it never depends on us! Taking our eyes off our obstacles and off ourselves we can join Paul in looking to God to clear the way. He prays, "Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you."

That's what God does, he clears the way for his good news! Consider the greatest obstacle that stood in the way of God and his people. Without hope we stood lost in sin and separated from him forever. But God removed that obstacle and destroyed all barriers between us and our peace. He brought life and hope to a dead world. Satan tried to deter and prevent Jesus from completing his task. He threw every possible barrier in the way. But Jesus would not be deterred. He had a bridge to build between God and man. And he did --with his own hands hung on the cross. On the cross Jesus suffered a separation that was for more agonizing than any obstacle Satan can place between us and God. We tremble at the thought of being cut off from loved ones and separated. But Jesus was separated from the love of the Father. He did this as he suffered in the place of every sinner. He faced this for us! But not even death could stop him. He lives. Now all who trust in him will never be separated from the love of God which is freely given to us. And we are holy in the presence of God because of Jesus. This is the gospel which Paul shared with the Thessalonians and which all believers share! God makes us blameless and holy in his presence! Nothing can now separate us from his love. He's cleared the way!

And he's still working on our side as we share this good news! Despite the obstacles Paul prayed for growth in faith for the baby Christians. He asked God to remove the obstacles, to make their love grow, and to strengthen their hearts. "*Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts...*"

Not only would God make their faith strong, but he would make it fruitful! Paul loved those people he had only known for three weeks with the love that only the gospel can work! He knew the same gospel would cause them to love each other and those around them. For Paul it was all about getting the gospel into the hearts of God's people, to strengthen them in faith until Christ returns. "*May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.*" He does this for pastors, teachers, Christian parents and friends, missionaries, and the seminary student training to head out onto the road with the gospel.

Paul is overjoyed because he knew that the same God who created faith, maintained it despite all obstacles. "*Brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. For now, we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord.*" (1 Thes 3:7-8) Paul prays this continues until Christ's return. I pray this continues here at Rock of Ages for all of you and myself no matter what obstacles may come in our path. My prayer is that we look to Jesus when facing any spiritual obstacle that prevents us from spreading his kingdom. Jesus will clear the way. He will make our love increase and overflow for each other, and for others -others in our community and around the world. And finally, despite Satan's best efforts, Jesus wins. All who look to him cannot fail. He will strengthen our hearts.

This is what we pray together: *Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as mine does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. Amen.*