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THE COBRA EFFECT 1 Thessalonians 2:13-18

INTRODUCTION

Everyone in our society by now is familiar with Murphy's Law and its corollaries. If anything can go wrong, it will, in the worst possible way at the worst possible time. That shows up in a variety of forms. The likelihood that the bread you drop will land with the jam side down is directly proportional to the cost of the carpet. There's the law of mechanical repair, which is, as soon as your hands become coated with grease your nose will begin to itch and you will have to go to the bathroom.

When the British ruled colonial India they grew concerned about the large number of deadly cobra snakes in the city of Delhi. They came up with a plan to reduce that number by offering a bounty for every dead cobra that people brought to them. Some enterprising Indians saw an opportunity. They began breeding the snakes, then killing them and turning them in to collect the reward. When the British realized what was happening they ended the program. No more reward for dead cobras. So the cobra breeders just released their snakes into the wild. The result was a large increase in the number of cobras.

In 2003 a photographer posted pictures of Barbara Streisand's home on the Internet. Streisand immediately sued him and won her lawsuit. However, prior to the lawsuit only 6 people had visited the website to see the home, and 2 of them were Streisand's lawyers. After the lawsuit 420,000 people visited the site.

We hear that and nod our heads. Yeah, that's how it feels like life goes. So Often no matter what you do something causes it to not turn out the way you wanted. In fact, it almost seems at times that there is a dogged perversity to life, almost like it is rigged against us somehow. Why is that? Some of that is merely perception, but some is real. There is a cause for some of this perversity. When we understand the cause it will enable us to be far more effective in dealing with it. We will be reminded of this cause in 1 Thessalonians 2:13-18.

THE THESSALONIANS RESPONDED DESPITE DIFFICULTY

In this section of this letter Paul continued giving thanks for the Thessalonian Christians. Two things stand out in their response. The first is that they received the news of the gospel "not as a human word but as it is, the true word of God."

It is remarkable to consider that when Paul and his friends told these people about the good news of Jesus it was the first time they had ever heard anything quite like this. This talk of one God and of a man actually being that God in human form, dying, then defeating death by coming back to life to prove who he really was, had to have been bizarre to them. Yet they somehow decided this was the truth. It was actually the message of the one true God, not just a new fantastic tale cooked up by some hucksters who were trying to get a following and make a few drachma.

This is significant for us because one of the most common things you will hear is that the Bible is just the writings of some fallible men, and it records the ideas of humans no different than us. As such it has no more weight than any of the books you can pick up at Barnes and Noble. Paul said his message was fundamentally different. It was in fact the very truth of God. He was thrilled that the Thessalonians, despite having many reasons not to believe anything Paul said, accepted it for what it was, the word of God. As the word of God it was both reliable and authoritative. That's a huge difference. Because it is truth from God we must come to grips with the significance of its reliability and its authority.

I've told you the story that years ago Laurie and I were supposed to fly home from vacation on a red eye flight, but that it became clear when we were well past the scheduled departure time that there was a good chance we weren't going anywhere. It was almost two hours after the scheduled time that the flight finally was canceled. That was at midnight. In those hours there was a lot of confusion, uncertainty and anxiety among the 200 or so passengers. What was going to happen? What were they going to do with us? When could we get a flight home? There were lots of rumors floating around. One person told us the airline had canceled the same flight a week earlier and the passengers had to spend the night in the airport. There were lots of other ideas people had. Finally an airline representative got on the PA system and asked for our attention. She explained that the flight had indeed been canceled due to mechanical problems, and that because of that the airline would arrange for hotel rooms for us that night. They would coordinate with us to book flights for us the next day, and buses would soon arrive to take us to our hotels.

At that point there was no more confusion, no more uncertainty. We knew what was going to happen, and that removed the anxiety from the situation. It took someone with authority to make a definitive statement to provide what we needed. All of us on earth are in a situation kind of like that. There is lots of uncertainty about what this thing is all about and what's going to happen, lots of confusion and different ideas floating around, and an infinite amount of anxiety. We need

someone with authority to speak. Paul said that was exactly what was happening with the good news of Jesus. We know now what the truth is, and that is what puts our hearts at ease. There is no more confusion, no uncertainty, no more anxiety.

But let's not forget that since Paul's message is reliable and comes from authority, it therefore has authority over us. We don't choose which parts of it we might like and which parts we don't. It has authority because it is the truth of the Almighty, the Ruler of all life. Paul rejoiced because the Thessalonians accepted that.

The Thessalonians did that even though it meant they faced great opposition as a result. We know from Acts 17 that some of the Jewish people in the synagogue became enraged over the gospel and its message that grace through Jesus Christ was now what qualifies people for the kingdom of God, not the Jewish Law. They stirred up opposition that resulted in Paul having to leave town to avoid enflaming the situation and causing the new Christians to be treated even more terribly by their neighbors, friends and in some cases even family.

Paul points out that being mistreated by their own community made the Thessalonians a lot like the first Christians, who were all Jewish. They also experienced abuse from their own people. Some people criticize Paul and accuse him of anti-Semitism because of the statements in verse 15 that the Jewish people, "killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone." There have been instances of Christians persecuting Jews and calling them Christ killers.

Let's be clear that Paul would have condemned prejudice against Jewish people. He loved his fellow Jews. In Romans 9:3 he wrote, "I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel." He, obviously, was Jewish himself. His Lord Jesus was Jewish. All of the first Christians were Jewish. He made great efforts to raise money to help the impoverished Jewish believers in Jesus in Jerusalem.

Paul was not being anti-Semitic, he was simply pointing out the truth. It was opposition by the leaders of Israel that put Jesus on the cross. And the majority of the Jewish people still were rejecting their own Messiah. It was opposition by Jewish people in Thessalonica that started the problem and tried to keep the good news of the kingdom of God from spreading. By this opposition they became "enemies of all people" because they kept the good news from them. Nevertheless, Paul did not despise Jewish people. He would have opposed anyone who mistreated Jewish people. He was Jewish, and he loved his fellow Jews. He would

have been utterly condemning of any Christian who tried to attack Jewish people, because Paul believed the Jews are still God's people. There is no place in God's kingdom for mistreating God's chosen people.

PAUL WAS BLOCKED FROM RETURNING TO THEM

The riot that Paul's ministry led to threw the city into turmoil. Acts 17:10 tells us, "As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea." The two church planters had to be smuggled out of town for their protection and for the safety of the local believers. So Paul went to Berea, where there was yet another riot, then to Athens and finally to Corinth. There he was deeply concerned for the brand new believers in Thessalonica who were under fire. Paul said being separated from them was so hard, so painful it was like being orphaned. That's how bad it felt. He wanted to see them. He tried to see them, "again and again" he says, but at every turn "Satan blocked our way."

How did that happen? Scholars debate what Paul referred to there. I believe meant that opposition by some people they made it impossible for Paul to return. If he tried to do so it would only put his life in danger and bring harm to the local church. Paul is telling us that Satan was actually able to use people and circumstances in this world to attempt to oppose God. This is something we see in other places in the Bible as well.

When Peter told Jesus he shouldn't be so negative and talk about being killed, Jesus said, "Get behind me, Satan." Satan was trying to use Peter to distract Jesus from his mission. That didn't mean Peter was satanic, it just warns us that Satan can use people, sometimes even when they are good people with good intentions. John 13:27 tells us the night Jesus was arrested, "as soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said, 'What you are about to do, do quickly.'" Once again we see that Satan was able to use people to oppose God's work. At least that's what he thought he was doing. We also know that Satan can use circumstances. Paul described some difficulty in his life, very possible some kind of physical ailment, as a thorn in the flesh and then called it a "messenger of Satan" in 2 Corinthians 12:7. He saw Satan as involved in a physical problem that in his mind was limiting his effectiveness.

In Ephesians 6:12 Paul wrote, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." He did not deny that there were real flesh and blood people who were creating difficulty for him and other believers. But he said the real battle is going on in the unseen world. There

are “spiritual forces of evil” who actually are affecting events in this world. That battle is going on every moment of every day. In fact, in everything you do, at every moment that battle is raging behind the things we physically sense.

Wait, you can't really believe that, can you? Satan using people, evil spirits, come on! It's all right for unsophisticated people living in a jungle somewhere to believe that stuff, but that's just silly. It's in the category of the monsters that lived under your bed when you were a kid, right? The Bible insists that it is true. There are real spiritual forces out there that are bent on destruction, and they are at work in our world. We can't prove that to be true. This is something you have to accept by faith, but it is not unreasonable.

Our lives are constantly affected hugely by things we cannot see. We are told the earth is spinning at nearly 1000 miles per hour. I won't ride the teacup ride at Disneyland because I don't relish throwing up and feeling nauseous the rest of the day. Those cups don't spin at the dizzying speed of 1000 miles per hour. How is it that earth is spinning and I feel fine? If it is spinning so fast why don't I get dizzy and nauseous? I can't see or feel the earth's spin, but I believe it. We are told that the reason we don't fly off into space as the world is spinning is due to some force called gravity. Um, have you ever seen gravity? Have you heard it or smelled it? No, but we believe it without any difficulty. Do you see the sound waves that allow you to hear or the electronic signals carrying cell phone messages, television and radio transmissions? No, but we believe in them and live accordingly.

The interesting thing is when you accept the idea of some spiritual forces at work seeking to do us harm a lot of things come into focus. It makes sense. Why does it seem like Murphy's Law is real? Why does it seem like every time you try to do something good there is resistance to it? Why is it that the natural drift of life is toward the negative? We don't get better, stronger, become more of a good person, just by going along with the tide. If we just drift, we tend away from God, away from being unselfish and giving toward others, and we become weaker. Don't these things suggest that something is going on that we can't see?

Back in the early 1990's a series of US intelligence operations went bad. A joint team from the CIA and the FBI was formed to investigate why that happened. They quickly figured out there had to be a mole in the US intelligence agencies somewhere. They could see the effects, and the logical conclusion was there was someone behind those effects. Their investigation eventually uncovered not one, but two moles. One was a CIA employee named Aldrich Ames who was arrested in 1994. The other was an FBI agent named Robert Hanssen. At one time he was

assigned to counterintelligence and given the task of finding a Russian mole in the FBI. He was assigned to look for himself! In the end he was arrested in 2001 with incontrovertible evidence of his spying against the United States.

My point here is that both the CIA and the FBI saw things going wrong in their operations, and after it happened often enough they concluded there was a hidden person who was behind all the difficulty. After you look at all the mischief and hardship that goes on in this world it is reasonable to conclude there is a hidden person at work creating it.

U Thant, a former Secretary General of the UN once said, “What is it that inhibits us from going forward together to enjoy the fruits of human endeavor and to reap the harvest of human experience? Why is it that, for all our professed ideals, our hopes, and our skills, peace on earth is still a distant objective seen only dimly through the storms and turmoils of our present difficulties?”

In his book, *Spirit Warriors*, Stu Webber wrote, “Earth is a battlefield, quite literally the designated fight sight between God and Satan, good and evil, right and wrong, life and death, heaven and hell. Battlefield Earth roils with the smoke, pain, shock and disorientation of warfare.” It requires faith to believe in God, it also requires faith to accept that Satan exists. But assume there are, in fact, spiritual beings bent on our destruction, waging a war against us. What should we learn from this?

IMPLICATIONS

WE CAN KNOW WHAT THE ENEMY IS DOING

We can know his strategy

In movies the brilliant, megalomaniac, evil villain who teeters on the edge of total insanity then finally goes over the edge is almost a stock character because it is so common. Satan is that maniacal villain. He is brilliant, but insane. He has convinced himself that he can somehow defeat God and replace him. He has lost touch with reality, and in so doing has become obscenely warped. He hates God and everything about him. God is the source of good, joy and love. Because those are God things Satan despises them and seeks to demolish them. He is so filled with hatred that he opposes and seeks to destroy anything that God is doing, or that he loves and approves of. That means that if you are loved by God, and you are, then Satan despises you and will do anything in his power to destroy you.

Chief among his strategies is creating doubt. He wants you to doubt God. When you trust God it is a total defeat for him. The classic example of this is in Genesis 3

where he says to Eve, “wow, did God really say you’re not allowed to eat of the fruit of *any* of the trees of the garden?” God did not say that, but he’s already suggesting that God is an ogre who is utterly unfair. Eve correctly states there is one tree whose fruit is off limits, but then she reveals she’s already chafing under that command when she claims God had forbidden them from even touching it. She claimed God unreasonably said if they touch the tree they’ll die. Then in verses 4-5 Satan says, “You will not surely die. For God knows when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

He’s claiming God lies because he doesn’t want you to know what he knows. He’s trying to keep something good from you and is using scare tactics to keep you in line. He is not good, he is a self-centered liar who doesn’t want good for you. Satan always tries to get people to doubt God. God is not real, he’s not present, he’s not good, he doesn’t love you, and he’s not able to make any difference in this world. That is at the heart of everything the enemy does.

We can know his tactics

Did you ever play the board game Battleship? Both players place their fleet of ships on a grid, then the opponent calls out points on the grid, like E8. If there is anything there he gets a hit and knows a few more shots in that area will sink his enemy’s ship. Imagine that you know that your opponent always puts his biggest ships in the same places. Wouldn’t that make the game a lot easier? That’s what our enemy does. We can know where he puts his ships.

One of this classic tactics is frontal attack. That was what Satan employed against Paul and the Thessalonians. He would throw pain, difficulty, hardship, the opposition of people against them to try to get them to give up. The goal often in this kind of attack is discouragement. The enemy will try to beat us up in an effort to destroy our spirit and our faith. A classic example of this is Job. Satan was sure that he could get him to rebel against God if he could just hit him hard enough. So he destroyed his wealth, killed his children and even took away his health. It didn’t work, but we need to be aware that this in fact happens, and it happens a lot.

Another familiar tactic of the enemy is temptation. As we saw in Eden the idea was to get Eve to doubt that she could trust God in order to then entice her into doing something that God had told her not to do. This is the most familiar of all the enemy’s tactics. Matthew 4 tells us that Satan used this one against Jesus. Jesus had been in the desert for 6 weeks with nothing to eat. Satan came along and said, “Hey, you’re the Son of God, right? You have divine power. How come you’re starving out here? You need something to eat don’t you? A simple fact of human

existence is that if you don't eat you die. How are you going to accomplish your mission if you starve to death out here in this dumb desert? Obviously your Father doesn't care about you. He's left you out here on your own. It's up to you. If you are to survive you'd better do something. Use a little of that power of yours to turn some rocks into bread."

Jesus would later use that divine power to impact nature. He'd turn water into wine, he'd miraculously expand two fish tacos into a feast for thousands of people, he'd make a storm stop with a word. But in this instance he was relying on the Father to supply what he needed. Would he trust the Father, or would he launch out on his own and take care of himself?

Satan cannot read your mind. He's not omniscient, but he is extremely smart and he knows human nature very well. He studies us to find our vulnerabilities. Then he will play upon those vulnerabilities, dangling the temptations before us at our weakest points.

Another tactic is accusation. Here again the enemy is aiming at discouragement and doubt. The Greek word *diabolos*, which is translated "devil," meant "slanderer." Revelation 12:10 calls Satan "the accuser of the brothers and sisters." The enemy wants us to believe that there is no way God could really love us. He wants to shine a beacon on every weakness, every failure, every sin until you can almost see nothing else. He wants to pound you over and over with those accusations, "you call yourself a Christian? Are you kidding? How could God love you? You're totally unfaithful. You ought to be way better. Look how obsessed you are with yourself. Look at how angry you got at your kids. Your prayer life is a joke. When's the last time you actually read the Bible and got anything out of it? You're just a joke."

We all hear those thoughts. It often happens when I pray. I start hearing that voice that says, "what right do you have to ask God anything? Look at how faithless you are. There is no way you can expect God to be anything but irritated by you." And you hear that voice that keeps whispering in your ear that God really doesn't love you. He couldn't, because you're unlovable. Oh, you think you have eternal life? Forget that. However that happens it sure hasn't worked for you. There have been numerous nights when I've been awake at 4 in the morning and been assailed. What a hopeless foul up you are. You have completely failed as a pastor. You should never have been a pastor. You think you have anything to offer people? I can't believe they've put up with you this long.

Do you ever hear those kinds of thoughts? Of course you do. Do you think God is throwing those at you? Those are straight from the guy who runs the domain of darkness.

What does the Bible say is at the heart of the character of God? God is love. The thing he most produces among his people is love. Given that what do you suppose is Satan's feeling about love? He hates it and seeks to destroy it. One of his most persistent tactics is to divide people. He wants to obliterate love, sow dissension, cause people to be angry, be prejudiced against each other, hate each other, separate from each other and go to war.

WE CAN FIGHT THE BATTLE

Recognize

One of our biggest problems is that we don't recognize what's going on when we are under attack. It is natural for humans to be focused on what we can see and sense. In our culture that is even more pronounced for our society says that's all that exists. The result of that is that we can easily be attacked by the enemy with impunity without us ever realizing what's actually going on.

Perhaps you have heard about the F22 fighter jet. It is called an air dominance fighter because it is extremely fast, nimble, and stealthy, meaning radar mostly can't see it. In one of its initial tests an F22 was deemed to have shot down 8 F15 fighter jets in a practice battle before the other jets even saw it. In other words, they weren't even aware that it was there until it shot them down.

If you were a pilot imagine the difficulty of being attacked by an aircraft without even knowing it is present. What would you say your chances of winning that fight are? They obviously are terrible, and those are the same odds we face when we are attacked by the enemy without even knowing what's going on.

When everything seems to be going wrong, when life is so discouraging it seems completely hopeless, or when some seemingly irresistible temptation is dangling right in front of you, or when you are hearing those thoughts that you are worthless, useless, hopeless and impossible for God to love, you need to look behind the curtain. You need to see what cannot be seen. You need to see that the enemy of your soul is present and he has you in his crosshairs.

As soon as your eyes are opened and you see what's going on your odds of defeating the enemy go up dramatically. His strategy depends on you not seeing an attack for what it is. Had Eve understood that the jerk trying to get her to have the

taboo fruit for lunch was out to destroy her do you think she would have been dumb enough to buy what he was selling.

Many years ago playing football I was playing cornerback tasked with covering the other team's wide receiver on my side. At one point they ran a series of plays where he mostly did a quick out, meaning he would run 5 yards then cut directly toward the sideline. At one point, thinking he was going to do it again I anticipated his route and knocked down the pass, but I was within a foot or so of being able to intercept it. I thought the next time they tried that I would get it and be able to return it for a touchdown. As they were lining up for the next play it suddenly hit me. They were setting me up. They kept running that play with the goal of drawing me in, and pretty soon the other guy was going to start that same route but then break up field. I'd get sucked in and leave him wide open for an easy big play. Sure enough the next play he started the same route, the quarterback faked like he was going to throw that short out, and the receiver suddenly broke straight up the field. I was there waiting for him. Had I not recognized what they were up to I'd have been a dead duck, but because I saw it coming their whole plan blew up.

If we can see what's going on, what the enemy is trying to do, his plan will fail. We won't be taken in by the discouragement, or the accusations or the temptations he's throwing at us. When you feel the discouragement, when everything is going wrong, when you are tempted to doubt God and ignore his commands, when you feel the anger at others and see the division, understand what is behind it all. The enemy is at work.

Resist

1 Peter 5:8 says, "your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." That's kind of a problem. A couple of months ago we went to the San Diego Safari Park. It actually was a less than overwhelming success, because it was cold and the animals seemed to mostly be hiding and just trying to stay warm. But at one point we did walk past the lion's area. At one location there was a thick glass partition to keep the lions in the area. There was a lion sleeping, lying right up against the glass. The thing was enormous. It was one huge bundle of muscle and razor sharp teeth and claws. If that thing was coming after me it wouldn't have to kill me because I'd just die of fright. I'd have zero chance against that killing machine. Satan, Peter says, is like that.

Uh oh. What can we do? There's no glass partition keeping Satan from us. He's all over us. This looks like a massacre in the making. Peter says in verse 9, "resist him." Oh, yeah, thanks Peter. That's a great idea. If that lion came after me I'd just

resist him. I'd fight him off. Yeah that would go real well. I'd end up being dinner. Yes, Leo the Lion is having filet of Myatt tonight with a nice gorgonzola sauce. Resist Satan. Isn't that a recipe for utter disaster? No, it isn't. James 4:7 says if we resist the enemy, if having recognized his presence and his attack we just say no to him, he will flee. In 1Peter 5:10 Peter said, "And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you firm, strong and steadfast." Yes, you might get a little bloodied in the fight, but God will make sure you win.

Here's an example of how to resist. Imagine that the enemy is attacking you with accusations. Unfortunately he's got plenty of ammunition to use against you. You see all too well how far short you are of the glory of God. You see the sin, the lack of faith, the selfishness, the inconsistency in your walk with God. It sure looks like Satan is right, God cannot possibly love you and accept you in his kingdom. What can you do? Let me try a little scenario on you. Imagine two Jewish men in Egypt the night before the first Passover. Let's call them Levi and Joseph. Joseph says to Levi, "I'm really worried about what's going to happen tonight." Levi says, "Why? You sacrificed the lamb and put its blood around your door didn't you?" "Yes, I did." "Well what are you worried about?" Joseph says, "What if it doesn't work? I mean, this thing of the angel of death coming is scary. I love my son, I'm afraid something will go wrong and he'll die. What if I didn't do the blood right? Or what if it just doesn't protect us?" Here's the question: when the angel of death came that night, which family of those two men would be protected? The answer is, the families of both of them. That's because it wasn't the quality of their faith that protected them. It was the blood of the lamb. God promised if the blood of the lamb was on the door the family would be spared. Even if they had doubts, even if they worried, the blood of the lamb on their door would protect them. When the enemy accuses us and painfully points out every little sin and every bit of unfaithfulness, when we are assailed by doubt, we need to remember that scenario. You've put your faith in the blood of the Lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. You are safe from the worst that the enemy can do to you, not because you are so strong, your faith is so great and you are so faithful to God, but because of the blood of the Lamb. When you go back to that truth the enemy will flee.

Rely

1 John 4:4 says, "greater is the one who is in you than the one who is in the world." So is that like saying, "my dad is bigger than your dad?" Pretty much. The Spirit of the Almighty God is in you. Satan may be strong and hellishly clever, but he's not God. He is a created being whose best weapons cannot threaten God in the least.

We were taking care of Toby and Anna's dogs, Doc and Banjo. While we were on a walk Banjo was startled by a bird flying by and he ran like he was threatened by some fearsome beast. He was scared by something that was no threat to him. That's what happens to us. God is far more powerful than Satan, so we need not run away when the enemy startles us.

This is a truth we need to go back to. We need to be aware of our enemy. We should respect his abilities and our vulnerability to him. But we do not need to fear him when we rely on God to defeat him. When we recognize his attack that's time to turn to the Lord and ask him to strengthen us, open our eyes, and give us victory. Do you think God will answer prayers like that? Unless it is his will that we become Satan bait and get totally ruined by the enemy, then of course God will answer that prayer. Do you think if God answers that prayer that Satan will be able to defeat him in your life? There is simply no way. This is a battle that can be won, that will be won, when we rely upon our God.