

**SERMON TITLE-** "Closing The Letter"

**TEXT-** 2 Corinthians 12:7-15

**PREACHED AT-** Neighbourhood Church

**BY-** James Toews

**DATE-** April 25, 2010

We have been on a journey through the story of a relationship between Paul and a church that he loved. It is a story that is supposed to resonate with our own relationships as church and members of this church. Because it is a real story it is complex and necessarily we have had to touch only selected aspects of it- but if there is an overriding message I hope you get- it is that the challenge of being Kingdom people is remarkably the same as it was 2000 years ago. In other words- read the Bible attentively. Our times are obviously somewhat unique since this is the first 2010AD that ever happened- but overwhelmingly the joys and sorrows, the struggles and the victories of life are just the same today as they when the church in Corinth was taking shape.

Today we close off this particular story as Paul brings this letter to a close. He has covered a great deal of ground. The most complex part and the most wearisome parts are at the end of the letter, where he deals with the personal challenges to his authority and person. These challenges were the occasion for the letter in the first place. That is really complex and messy- just like real churches today. But it is not about despair- God's people have been given a way to walk through challenging times. That is Good News.

So now as Paul closes off he wraps up and ties up the loose ends. As we close off, with him, we will do the same.

The first wrap up statement contains one of the truly famous statements in the Bible- it is the "thorn in the flesh."

Who hasn't heard of that? Even people who have never read the Bible will probably recognize the phrase- and because of its evocative power will even understand something about it.

If someone calls you a "thorn in the flesh" you won't have to wonder too hard what they are getting at.

But this phrase has a very specific context and is part of Paul's message to the Corinthians about how they are to live as Kingdom people.

So let's begin by reading the text unit.

**To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. 2 Corinthians 12:7**

So what is the "thorn in the flesh"?

First, we do need to understand the simple mechanics of the picture. Anyone who has even ever had a sliver can understand this picture. When a foreign object gets embedded in our skin, our bodies react by trying to rid themselves of it. The natural healing mechanisms of our bodies go to work to extract that object. Even infections are healing processes by which a foreign object is surrounded and expelled.

At the first level this tells us that-

### **#1. We Have Pain That We Live With**

But there is another level to the thorn imagery.

There are some foreign objects, however, which are particularly problematic, illustrated by the thorns. These are objects specifically designed to increase the pain and suffering of the host. The whole purpose of the thorn is keep animals away and so when a thorn enters your body it will torment you until it is removed.

A thorn is not a passive enemy- it is active.

There are all kinds of pains and discomforts that we live with in the course of life. At the most trivial level it is a pain when we go on holidays and it rains. At a slightly less trivial level it is a pain when the economy collapses and we lose our jobs.

The reason that it is "slightly less trivial" is that in both cases the cause of our misfortune is not personal. If we lose our incomes because of the failure of the Cdn or US banking systems there is no reasonable attack on who we are.

Even most health challenges have little or nothing to do with what we have personally chosen- they are just the lottery of life.

But the thorn represents a whole other type of pain- it is pain that is personal.

The most vivid personal pain is that within families. Every parent who has suffered the "thorn in the flesh" of a child that causes grief knows that this is personal and at times it is intensely personal.

When family pain starts to spill over words and actions that are intended to cause suffering start to fly.

To call this “a messenger of Satan” is not an overstatement.

And this too is a type of pain that we live with during seasons of our lives. Paul was very familiar with it.

And what did he take from that? There is a lesson and purpose in this pain-

## **#2. We Are To Learn Humility**

There is nothing to make us conceited like “knowing” things. There is an exhilaration that comes from standing on top of a mountain and being able to survey the land below. It is why people climb to the tops of mountains. Anyone who has ever climbed Mt Benson knows the feeling. For hours you clamber up rocky paths-surrounded by trees and rocks. You could be anywhere in a forest-but once you break out on the ridges the feeling is wonderful. Things that didn’t make any sense, when you were surrounded by trees are now visible.

As a parent I remember that feeling. Our children were growing up and life was wonderful. We were the greatest parents and we had fairly decent children. We could pack them up and go on family adventures.

And we could easily see what parents who struggled were doing wrong.

And then Natasha became a teenager. Suddenly we didn’t “know” all the things we thought we “knew.” It was very, very disconcerting.

It was not immediately that the real lesson sank in to my being- but I became much more humble.

Paul realized this lesson with his “thorn in the flesh.” Wonderful insights are very nice- but until they have been with you during a season when a “messenger of Satan” is taunting you- they are just nice ideas.

The great revelations that Paul shared with the Corinthian Church are not just “nice ideas”, they are the revelations of God Himself and because of this they are best suited to those who actually know what practical humility is.

Paul learned this lesson.

But surely, God’s people should not have to live with “a messenger of Satan” tormenting them. Aren’t we God’s people? Aren’t we members of the Church? Didn’t Jesus crush Satan when He rose from the dead?

That is all true. And we do well to appeal to God for relief from such a torment. And Paul does exactly that. Paul makes his appeal for relief.

**Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." 2 Corinthians 12:8-9**

But what is God’s answer?

The answer is clear.

## **#3. There Are Times When The Torment Does Not Go Away**

This is a truly tough lesson to get our heads around. We can probably accept that the struggles of life in the real world are part of a Kingdom reality.

But surely we don’t need to put up with messengers of Satan haunting us. Surely this is one area where we have the right to command Satan to get his hands out of our lives?

There was a season in our faith journey that we spent some time doing exactly this. After all when Jesus encountered evil spirits- He “rebuked” them. ie-

**Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment. Matthew 17:18**

It seemed so logical. Jesus has triumphed over Satan- we are His servant- we don’t have to take the torments of Satan. We can just exercise our position as Jesus’ representatives.

You would think so- and to some degree- I believe we do. After all we have no power over whether or not a volcano will erupt-but we do have the power to bring healing into the life of our family.

It felt quite good to go around rebuking Satan- but Paul didn’t do that when it came to his thorn in the flesh.

God does not tell Paul that he should stop battling against the forces of evil in the world he lives in. Satan and Satan’s work are the opposite of God and God’s work. Evil is evil and we are to engage the battle against these forces of destruction.

But God’s response to Paul is to turn the matter of the evil in the world into a focus back on Paul’s own challenges. God promises to look after Paul and in doing so God’s is not limited or even

activated by Paul's skill set. God works where He is given access to work.

It seems that it is not as simple as merely rebuking Satan. We don't have the blank cheque power to do this. There are times when we are powerless in this regard.

And this is where Paul is trying to get an important lesson across.

God has the greatest access where we don't think that our talents are the keys to His work. In fact, God tells Paul, He is strongest in those places where His power is given the greatest leeway.

When we are stumped, when we don't have the solution- then, ironically God has the greatest ability to use us for His glorious work.

This is one of the profound but foundational paradoxes of the Kingdom of God.

This is a fresh new revelation for Paul and he recognizes it in true Pauline fashion-

**Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Corinthians 12:9-10**

Paul turns his torment into a celebration.

#### **#4. There Is Actual Strength In Suffering**

I think that this one area where Paul should inspire us all. Paul takes this paradox and turns it onto its head.

We are to be champions in humbly delighting in the fact that it is God's power and not our skills that make the difference.

Of course everything we humans put out minds to has a twist to it and even this has been misused.

In the Mennonite tradition, as in others that have tried to live by the principle of our weakness and humility, a kind of false humility can emerge. There is no denying this fact and from the beginning there has been a critique against Christians that they glory in being pathetic rather than taking the courageous course of fighting their way to freedom and dignity.

Recently I read it expressed this way-

**“. . . Christianity represents a slave's morality, or slave's perspective. It offers the poor a way to feel superior and the generous rich another way to feel superior – through the enjoyment of pity.” Ken**

It is the same thing that Karl Marx famously said when he called religion, “the opiate of the masses.” His premise was that as long as people had a pleasant myth to cling to they would be less inclined to take real action.

While Paul's statement can certainly be taken that way- and while in the Mennonite world there have been times when a kind of false humility has been part of life- this is NOT what Paul is getting at.

Paul does not passively let life roll over him. He throws his full effort and energy into everything he does- but along side of this Paul is very, very aware of the fact that for Kingdom people- it is God's work and God's work alone that is at the heart of who we are.

The great summary of Paul's insight is contained in his letter to the Philippians-

**I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. Philippians 4:11-13**

That is a life long lesson that I believe each of us needs to keep in the very top of our personal “To Do List.”

As we close off this letter to the church in Corinth there is- **And One More Thing . . .**

At the end of Paul's letters he puts a series of quick points that he wants his readers to remember. In this case he finishes with this conclusion-

**Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you. After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. 2 Corinthians 12:14-15**

Why is Paul spending his time and effort writing and wrestling with the issues of the church in Corinth? because he loves them as a parent. Paul has taken the time to write out his concerns.

There are 2 points here that we need to take in- especially in a self-centered culture like our own.

[Obviously, Paul's day was no different, as he does have to write this reminder to the church in Corinth.]

**#1. Parents Are Responsible For Their Children- Forever**

This will come as a shock to many parents today. Get them out of the house so that we can spend our hard earned retirement- is the normal way of thinking. This is not Biblical thinking. We are to look to do the responsible thing, for our children, grandchildren and the generations to come.

**#2. We Are Parentally Responsible For Each Other**

As the family of God- we are to look out for each other the way that Paul cared for the church in Corinth. We need to spend out time and energy looking out for the family of God that has been placed under us.