

FAVORITE PAINTINGS ON AN INNER WALL

2 Corinthians 2:12–3:3

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2 Corinthians is such a powerful book, because Paul shares with us in it something of his inner life and struggles. There are times in our own life in which we need to live with inner realities. Because the outward pressures are so great, if we didn't have inward realities to live with, we wouldn't last. As you read Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, you'll find him mentioning, a number of times, the tremendous pressures that are against him. There have been some very bleak days, some very hard concerns.

This passage of Scripture we have for today shares with us that he lives by some inward realities. In fact, I've called this message "Favorite Paintings on an Inner Wall." I got the title from this text as well as from looking at my office walls, which I've been in for over a year and still doesn't have paintings up. The walls are bare. I got to thinking, "Although the office walls are bare, my mind has plenty of paintings hanging on the inside." It's like if you could scope out what was in there and put a slide screen up around the cranium, you'd find all kinds of pictures that I live with and pictures I live by.

It struck me that what we have here in 2 Corinthians, in the passage of 2:12–3:3, is three favorite paintings that hung on Paul's inner wall. The inner wall of his mind. In the midst of outward stress and outward complexities, he was living by inner realities. If when you and I face difficult times we can anchor our life to inner realities, have some inner pictures on the wall, that'll give us help to go through those times. As we look at the three objective paintings today—and isn't it wonderful we have an apostle that tells us the story in pictures, something concrete?—as we tell

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these pictures, and visualize them, I pray that each will become a favorite painting in your own mind.

I. The first painting is the painting of an open door that cannot be entered (verses 12–13).

Paul had gone to the ancient city of Troas. Troas was near the old city of Troy, known throughout ancient history. At Troas he had found an open door. Picture with me a painting that has a large city, a city wall, Mid-eastern in composition, Grecian in flavor. Paul is a traveler and he's outside and there's a large door in the wall that is open. He knows if he could go in that door, that there would be an incredible response to the gospel. Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands would come to the Lord. Certainly a great segment of the population would come to the Lord if he went inside that door.

Scripture tells us, in a number of occasions, the importance of the open door in Acts 14:27, when Paul is done with the first missionary journey and reports back to his home church, the sending church of Antioch. It'd been a great trip and evidently thousands of people had come to the Lord. So when the church gathered together at Antioch, Paul reported all that God had done through him and Barnabas and how God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. That's why they had had such success. God had opened a door.

In Acts 18:9–10, when Paul had initially gone to Corinth and was very troubled because of physical threats against him, the Lord spoke to him in the middle of the night in a vision and said, "Don't be afraid, keep on speaking, don't be silent, for I am with you. No one is going to attack and harm you because I have many people in this city." Why did Paul have the results at Corinth that he had? Because God had many people—He was opening the door.

Later, when Paul writes the Corinthians from Ephesus—the queen city of the Roman province of Asia, one of the great cities of antiquity—he says, "I will stay at Ephesus until Pentecost because

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a great door for effective work has been opened to me” (1 Corinthians 16:9). Multitudes were coming to the Lord. There was a riot in the town because of the Christians who were coming to the Lord. They were affecting the economy of the town.

Later, he’s imprisoned, and from that prison cell he says to the Colossians, “Pray for us too that God may open a door for our message so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ for which I am chained” (Colossians 4:3). “Open a door, O Lord.” In Revelation 3:8—the message to the church at Philadelphia—the Lord tells it, “Behold I have placed before you an open door which no one can shut.”

Why do I make reference to these? Because an open door to an apostle is like saying “Sic’ em!” to a dog! When the door’s open, that’s what every missionary is working for all over the world. There are many missionaries that are working in closed-door situations, where it just doesn’t seem like there is any response. My uncle was a missionary to Tibet for a solid ten years before he saw the first conversion. My parents exhibited the same kind of difficulty. Then there are missionaries working with cracked doors that sit only slightly open. But when a door is all the way open, it is God that has opened the door. And the increase is great. The same thing when we’re witnessing for the Lord. It’s God that opens the door to the community. That’s why prayer is so important. If we don’t pray as individuals, if we don’t pray as a church, God cannot have the kind of soil that He needs to work through so that the door will be open.

So here was an open door. You’d think any apostle, especially the apostle Paul, would go through the open door. But he’s writing to the Corinthians and telling them why he had to stay on the outside and leave the door open. The reason why he couldn’t go through was that Titus hadn’t met him. What’s the significance of that? Titus had been sent to Corinth to try to straighten out a difficult situation. Paul had not yet heard word. Titus had not yet come back and

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said what was going on at Corinth. Paul says, “My anxiety was so great, I had no rest, no ease in my spirit, so I went to Macedonia” (2 Corinthians 2:13). He said goodbye to the open door and went to Macedonia.

This Scripture has become so fresh and new to me this week—it’s like I’d never read it before. Here’s an apostle walking away from an open door. How hard it must have been. Yet there are two lessons that flow out of that. One is simply that there was a responsibility for Paul to finish at Corinth what needed to be done. It’s one thing to found something. It’s quite another thing to make sure it stays on the foundation it was built upon. It’s always more exciting to go do something new. Have you found that it’s a lot easier to start something than to finish something? Even though Paul had an open door—wouldn’t it have been wonderful if God put him in a different place and he didn’t have to worry about all those problems he’d been wrestling with? But the Lord sticks him in this place of responsibility and says, “Don’t go starting things left and right and then not finish what I’ve given you to do. You have to finish. You have to finish what I’ve given you to do. You have to leave the open door.”

But another great thing that came to me out of this text is that God himself knows when we cannot go through open doors, because we do not have ease or relaxation in our spirit about some matter. I had a very strong conviction in prayer from the Spirit that there would be someone listening to me today who is facing an open door. An unparalleled time of opportunity. You sense the door is open in the wall, but your anxiety over a family matter prevents you from walking through the open door. You feel great guilt—like you’re failing God and letting Him down because you must take care of that family obligation before you go through that open door. You can’t go through that open door because it will close by the time you’ve taken care of the family obligation. And you feel guilt. The Scripture is saying that the apostle of the Lord knows

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exactly how you feel and the Spirit of the Lord guided him to take care of the situation over which he had anxiety, take care of the family situation, and to do it without guilt. Go in the direction where your concern is and not where the open door is. And God will guide you and bless you and He will take care of that situation you're having to leave.

II. The second painting that Paul gives is the painting of life as the procession of triumph.

Paul has had to walk away from the open door. Perhaps the devil wanted to paint a picture on his mind that he was just an aimless wanderer, a migrant, a vagrant. The devil does that to us when we feel like we've had to walk away from opportunity or we feel like we've been pressed down by situations.

But the Spirit projects onto the screen of the apostle Paul's mind another painting. It's the painting of the Christians in a march of triumph. He is in that march. Not as some aimless wanderer, having to creep away from Troas and go to Macedonia across the Aegean sea. But he's painting a different picture, a picture of triumph and not a picture of defeat. This second picture is not a still—it's a moving picture of a triumph.

William Barclay tells us the Roman practice behind such marches of triumph. They were given infrequently in Rome. There were certain qualifications that a person had to have in order for a triumph march to be given for them. They had to be an actual commander-in-chief of an army that was in the field. Their campaign had to be completely finished and the region pacified. The victorious troops had to have been brought home. Five thousand of the enemy must have fallen in one battle. Positive extension must have been gained for Roman territory, and not just a disaster reprieved or an attack repelled. In other words, there had to be something positive and not just a defensive action. There had to be a victory over a foreign foe and not a victory in a civil war. If a general met those qualifications, then months were spent in preparing the march of

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triumph, which would be comparable with drawing a crowd like the Rose Bowl parade in Pasadena. There was a specified order of march—from the outskirts of the city of Rome through the streets of the town, into the capital. The parade began with state officials, the senate and dignitaries. Then the trumpeters followed them. The trumpeters were pictures and models of defeated peoples, of defeated ships. All modeled like a Rose Bowl parade, a float, a defeated ship or battle scene, some conquered citadel. All of these tremendous models were in effect advertising who and what had happened. Then following the floats, there was the white bull that was to be used for sacrifice. Following them, the walk of the captives in chains. Many of them, on their way to execution that very day. Walking to their own execution.

Probably none of you have witnessed a street scene where people are being marched to an execution. As a child, on the streets of Shanghai, I stood one day and watched two guys in a metal-armored truck being led out to be executed. Two Japanese generals. I'll never forget the impression I had as a five-year-old, seeing these two generals through the slits of the armored car windows, as they were being driven out to be executed. Here were hundreds and hundreds of captives that were marching in the parade, many of them on their way to being executed that day. Following them, were their guards bearing rods. Following them were musicians. Following them, were priests, swinging censors of incense, sweet smelling incense. The wind would blow one direction and waft the incense to the captives. To them, it was the smell of death. But if the wind would blow another way—behind the priests with the censors was the commander-in-chief, the general of the army, riding in a chariot, dressed in his purple tunic and toga, and behind him was his family, and behind his family was the army that he commanded—when the incense blew the other way, it was the sweet smell of triumph; when it blew forward, it was the awful smell of death.

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Paul takes this photograph, this living montage of events, and puts it up as a second painting that encouraged him to realize that he was in a march of triumph which involved Jesus as commander-in-chief and he, Paul, was the priest in the crowd, carrying the gospel. To those who were on their way to death, the gospel was the smell of death. But to those in the body of Christ who were on their way to eternal life and victory, the gospel was the sweet smell of triumph. He says that we as Christians are this aroma of Christ in the world. To those who are perishing, we are the smell of death. But to those who are going toward life, we are the smell of life. The gospel is either life or death. The gospel is more than simply how to become a better person. Yes, it tells us how to become a better person. But the gospel is about heaven and hell. It's about eternal life. It's about the fact that God loved us so much He sent His only Son to die for us, that we would not perish but have everlasting life.

God cares so much for us. Salvation is found in no one other than Jesus—there is no other name given under heaven whereby we must be saved. The gospel is either good to you or it is sounding your doom, as you head your own way. As a Christian, Paul knew he was in a march of triumph. He encourages every Christian to think that we as well are all in a march of triumph with him, if we belong to Christ.

III. The third painting that Paul projects on the screen is the painting of false apostles.

On the one hand, on one side of the painting, they had scrolls of recommendations in their hands, letters of accreditation. Versus a true apostle himself, who had living people in his hands, rather than empty letters. The scene is this: There were those at Corinth who were saying, “Where are Paul’s credentials? Where are his degrees? Where are his diplomas? Look at our letters of recommendation.” And we know from Acts that the Early Church used letters of recommendation. Judas and Silas, in Acts 15, were sent with letters of recommendation to the

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church at Antioch. Phoebe was given a letter of accreditation by Paul (Romans 16:1). There are other references to this, which we won't get into. Letters of accreditation are still important when you want to certify someone that's going to a group that so that they might know where the person came from. But these false apostles were using their phony credentials and saying, "Paul doesn't have anything in writing like us." This is always a pressure upon those who preach the gospel. There is a certain kind of demand within the body that somebody have a particular letter or credential.

I'm amazed at how many of my colleagues are seeming to need to be supported by phony degrees, plastic diplomas, all this kind of thing, as though our focus of ministry is the fact that we have a "Dr" in front of our name or a "Ph.D." behind it, or "Rev." or whatever. That's garbage. Education is fine and all that—but it's not education, it's not training, and it's not degrees that make anyone an effective minister of the gospel. It's the power of the Spirit resting in our life.

Paul says, "These phonies have come to you with their letters and you've bought into their pitch. But you've got to recognize that you are the living letter. You are our credentials. It is through our ministry that you came to know the Lord and grew in the Lord. So what other letters therefore do we need?"

In fact, he says that these phony-letter persons are really peddlers of the Word. "Peddlers" is a very harsh term to simply say they were in their ministry simply because it was a profitable business for them.

Has that died out? Is that in the contemporary church? Of course it is. It's still here. The name of Jesus sells. Jesus is big business—so secular companies even buy out Christian publishing

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houses, not because they love the Christian message, not because they love Christian songs, but because they love the money of Christians. Peddlers.

Paul says, “You know we weren’t peddlers.” I think it’s the desire—certainly within me and I hope within every honest pastor—that their people could say that of them. “We know, pastor, that you’re not a peddler of the Word.” Paul says, “You are our letter. You are our letter from Christ. You are a letter written by the Spirit. We are the living letters.”

What kind of letter are we? It’s remarkable that Paul would call the Corinthians, “living letters of God” in light of the fact that they had so many failures in their life, a lot of strike-overs, a lot of mistakes. But they were still God’s letter. If the Corinthians could be God’s letter, you could be God’s letter. You don’t have to be perfect to be God’s letter. You have to love God. Are you willing to keep coming to Him to correct and edit your letter? Letters. We’re all sending people letters, aren’t we? Every letter has a sender. It has somebody it’s addressed to and it has a content. Our prayer, O Lord, ought to be, “We are a letter from You to someone else. Help us to be a well-written letter.”

Letters that are sent to mass audiences are not read very much. Do you get mimeographed letters, word-processed letters that, at a certain point in the paragraph, have your name in them? I place them in “File 13”! What’s one of the most effective letters? Letters that come from people you love and know. That’s how we are most effective as a letter to someone else. We are most effective with the people that we know.

I’m intrigued with letters. All during the years, in college and seminary, I saved the letters my parents wrote me. I don’t know why I did at the time. Now that mom’s with the Lord, those letters from her have a special value. It’s as though she’s still speaking through them. I’d encourage people who get letters from family members, don’t throw those away. Save those.

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There will come a day when you look back and they'll be refreshing to you. I took that 2-inch stack of letters and read them again. It was great. I was laughing and crying, and laughing again and crying again, and thinking about how much—as I read those letters—they reflected the living qualities of my parents and the message they sent to me with their lives and also with print. What they were writing in ink was what they had also written in the spirit.

An encouragement from the apostle; an encouragement from my own example. God wants us to be really meaningful letters to the people around us. You may not reach the world with your life, but God sent you to reach somebody.

Several questions as we close. Is there a door open that you cannot go through because of some pressing concern or circumstance? God knows that. Are you in the parade of triumph? It would be tragic to only know the triumph of Christ when it is too late. Get in the parade now. Spread the sweet smell of incense of the news of Jesus. Don't be a halfhearted Christian. Don't even be an observer on the parade route. Get in the parade and spread the knowledge of Jesus. As Christians we're not on the road to defeat. We're on the road to victory. You may feel like you're tracking today through meandering desert sand. Get a new picture in your mind. You're in a procession of triumph. Who is the letter of your life being read by? What does your letter say? Do some things need to be erased, maybe? Do some things need to be crossed out, maybe? Do some things need to be forgiven? Maybe a paragraph needs to be written over again. Maybe the whole letter needs a new start. Live with the pictures of letters coming from the Lord. Parents, what letter are you leaving your children? What example are you leaving for your children? What relationship with God are you bequeathing them? I ask you—be a living letter from God.

Closing Prayer

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O Lord, thank You for this time with Your Word. Thank You that You speak kindly to us. Thank You that You address inner needs in our life. Lord, there are people here today who feel very much, as I shared these last few minutes, that their letter is not what they want it to be right now. Sometimes, Lord, it's as though we wander off from You. Not meaning consciously to do that. But just through an accumulation of things that occurs over a period of time, we suddenly look at what our life is in writing, and we say, "Lord, I never intended to write it that way." Father, would You, in this service, come into hungry hearts that are feeling that and praying that? And bring them a whole new thing. Bring them, Lord, a whole new letter. May this service today be a quiet revolution in their hearts. As they enter this service, sort of as a distant follower of Yours, and leave it to be—for the rest of their life—a warm-hearted partisan of Yours. Deeply devoted to You, with their whole heart. Do that kind of change in people today. Thank You for all the persons, Lord, that are looking within their life and thanking You for Your grace and saying, "Thank You, You're helping me to write letters that are having influence." Have mercy, O Lord. And give strength to those who have so deeply wanted to go through an open door, tasted it, wanted it with all their hearts, but a concern in another area and has taken them away from what they would really love to pursue. Help them to feel, as they go away from that door, that they're not slinking away in defeat. But they're in a triumphal procession. Thank You, Lord, for leading us in Your triumph. In the name of Jesus, Amen.