

The Challenge of Separation

Series: I Thessalonians: A Message For Our Times

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The summer of 1972 was a summer of separation from Brenda. We were dating. It was the end of our freshman year of college. She was spending most of the summer in Costa Rica and I was in Holland on a mission internship. I don't think I ever wanted to see someone as badly as I did her. She and I wrote dozens of letters (yes real paper letters). It was a long summer until that day I caught sight of her again in the New Orleans airport. Happy reunion.

We have a term in counseling called "separation anxiety." Children are especially susceptible to this and it can become a disorder. Here are some of the symptoms:

Fear that something terrible will happen to a loved one. The most common fear a child with separation anxiety disorder experiences is the worry that harm will come to a loved one in the child's absence. For example, the child may constantly worry about a parent becoming sick or getting hurt.

Worry that an unpredicted event will lead to permanent separation. Your child may fear that once separated from you, something will happen to maintain the separation. For example, they may worry about being kidnapped or getting lost.

Refusal to go to school. A child with separation anxiety disorder may have an unreasonable fear of school, and will do almost anything to stay home.

Reluctance to go to sleep. Separation anxiety disorder can make children insomniacs, either because of the fear of being alone or due to nightmares about separation.

Physical sickness like a headache or stomachache. At the time of separation, or before, children with separation anxiety problems often complain they feel ill.

Clinging to the caregiver. Your child may shadow you around the house or cling to your arm or leg if you attempt to step out.

Back in March the world began to experience the need to separate from one another, stay inside, lockdown, quarantine, and social distance. All these measures, though necessary for public health, carried with it the consequence of anxiety. Families were prevented from seeing their loved ones in nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and hospitals, even if they were extremely sick or dying. Children couldn't play with friends, and church members had to rely on seeing others through a screen.

Paul wrote about separation anxiety in the first letter to the Thessalonians 2000 years ago. The occasion of the separation was persecution and sheer physical distance. Paul was like a parent who was separated from his young children in the Lord. From his writings we can learn a thing or two about dealing with separation. Today I want to apply

this to the separation of members within our local body at Central. Here are four questions:

What Does Separation Feel Like? (Is this what it feels like to you?)

- Like being orphaned (or like a parent who has lost a child)
 - 2:17 17 But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you.
- Like an intense longing
 - 2:17
- Like you just can't stand it any longer
 - 3:1, 5 1 So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. 5 For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith.
- The bell curve of separation. At first we didn't know how long we would be separated assuming it would be a short time-not producing much anxiety; then as time went on our separation anxiety grew as we were not sure when and how we could come back to together-we missed each other. But, as time goes on and we become accustomed to being apart we might begin not to miss each other as much. This is human nature.

What do we do to change the separation? (Is this what you are doing?)

- Make every effort to connect (again and again)
 - 2:18 18 For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan blocked our way.
- Get reports from others
 - 3:2, 5, 6 2 We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, 5 For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labors might have been in vain. 6 But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you.
- Central's leadership put systems in place to stay connected (zones, zooms, online teachings, posts, and texts. But none of these are substitutes for each person making their own efforts to stay in touch with others. Now that we can come back together with precautions for Sunday services and in our homes (inside or out), in small groups, we encourage each one to do so.)

What do we need to know about one another? (What are we concerned about?)

- Certainly we want to know about each other's physical wellbeing, as we should.
- About a person's faith and love
 - 3:5-6 5 For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labors might have been in vain.6 But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you.
- About pleasant memories
 - 3:6
- About what is lacking
 - 3:10 10 Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.
- WHY? To see that our labor is not in vain
 - 3:5
- The spiritual health and cohesion of the church is everyone's business. Each person is a connecting ligament that holds things together. We need to know that each person is spiritually okay, and that their heart is still with us.

Who does and does not want us connecting? (Are we aware of what is happening behind the scenes of the separation?)

- Satan blocked Paul from seeing the Thessalonians
 - 2:18 18 For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan blocked our way.
 - 3:5 (the tempter)
- But God can clear the way
 - 3:11 11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you.

The History of a Sight for Sore Eyes

The phrase has been around a lot longer than most people realize. The first recorded use was penned by Jonathan Swift for the book *A Complete Collection of Genteel and Ingenious Conversation* (also known simply as *Polite Conversation*) in 1738. There are hints that it was in use prior to publication of *Polite Conversation*. At the time, the wording was a little different. It read: "The Sight of you is good for sore Eyes."

The simplified modern version was first used by William Hazlitt in *New Monthly Magazine* in 1826. He wrote: Garrick's name as proposed on condition he should act in tragedy and comedy... What a sight for sore eyes that would be!"

The Meaning of a Sight for Sore Eyes

Sore eyes sound painful, but when this phrase is used it typically means something different. The word "sore" usually refers to feelings of fear, worry, tension, or sorrow. The person or thing being viewed brings relief or is a welcome sight to the beholder.